



## **WEED OUT DOUBT AND WATER THE SEEDS OF CREATIVITY AND CONFIDENCE**

**GUIDING SCRIBE:  
NANCY JOHNSON**

**AUTHOR PROFILE:  
MARGARET (KITTY) JOHNSON**



**FOUR NEW COLUMNS!**

**+ CROWDSOURCED:  
MEMBERS WEIGH IN**

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## 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:  
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Connecting With Readers

### 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.

# Embracing Courage in 2025

**A**s I write this, I'm two years into a novel that's finally taking shape. After wrestling through doubt, I'm finally seeing a finish line. During those two years, the characters I created felt alive one day and flat the next. I have second-guessed every plot twist, every word choice, and even the entire premise. "Why is this taking so long?" I have asked myself, as though there's a ticking clock judging my progress. Doubt, of course, feeds on those questions. It thrives in the spaces where creativity falters.

Leading the Women's Fiction Writers Association comes with its own unique set of doubts. As president of a 2,000-member organization, I've faced moments when I've wondered, "Am I the right person for this job?" Organizing our ambitious strategic plan, balancing volunteer efforts with professional demands, and navigating unexpected challenges can make even the most confident leader feel uncertain. And yet, here I am—still writing, still leading.

So, how do I manage doubt? I've learned that it's impossible to eradicate it completely. But managing it seems more true, more realistic.

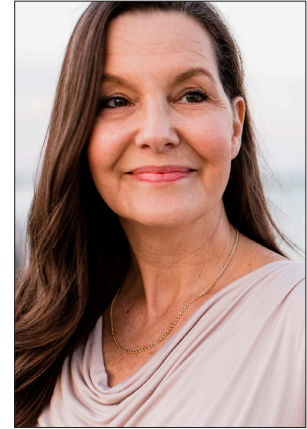
First, I acknowledge it. Pretending doubt doesn't exist only gives it more power. When I'm stuck, I name the feeling: "This is doubt. It's normal." That small act of recognition prevents doubt from controlling me.

Second, I focus on small, actionable steps. If I can't write an entire chapter, I write a single sentence. If a leadership challenge feels too big, I tackle one piece of it. Progress, no matter how small, is a powerful antidote to doubt.

Third, I lean on my community. As writers, we're fortunate to have one another. Sharing my struggles with trusted friends or colleagues often reminds me that I'm not alone. When doubt feels overwhelming, connection provides perspective.

But the most effective strategy I've discovered is the 15-second rule. When doubt tells me I can't do something, I challenge myself to muster just 15 seconds of courage. Whether it's hitting "send" on a difficult email, stepping up to lead a tough meeting, or rewriting a chapter of my novel (again), those 15 seconds are often all I need to get past the hardest part. And once I'm through, I find the next 15 seconds easier. Every time I face doubt and hold on to courage for those fleeting moments, it's a win. And as those wins accumulate, doubt starts to shrink.

As we enter 2025, I'm choosing to make it the year I conquer my doubts and embrace courage. I hope you'll join me. Let's commit to those 15 seconds of bravery, over and over again. Together, we can turn small moments of courage into big victories. Every sentence we write, every risk we take, every doubt we overcome is a step forward. And with each step, we build a future where our stories—and our dreams—can thrive.



**PRETENDING DOUBT DOESN'T EXIST ONLY GIVES IT MORE POWER. WHEN I'M STUCK, I NAME THE FEELING: "THIS IS DOUBT. IT'S NORMAL." THAT SMALL ACT OF RECOGNITION PREVENTS DOUBT FROM CONTROLLING ME.**

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kristi Leonard".

Kristi Leonard

# TURNING THE PAGE



**W**hen Sharon Ritchey invited me to join *WriteOn!* last January as managing editor, I couldn't have imagined the sense of connection, community, and purpose the role would deliver. In the span of a single year, *WriteOn!* has helped me become more deeply and meaningfully involved in WFWA, connected me with dozens of members in a variety of capacities, and opened doors I didn't even know I was looking for. Not to mention all I've learned about running a magazine, juggling projects, writing, revising, and all the rest.

The magazine has also been a welcome reminder of the joy we share in writing, the perseverance it takes to write what we love, and the ways in which support, dedication, and purpose work in communion to help us move past doubt.

Today I'm writing for the first time as *WriteOn!*'s executive editor. I'm stepping in to lead a publication built on years of dedicated commitment to delivering high-quality nonfiction writing, fostering community, and celebrating member accomplishments. I am thrilled to build on that tradition and bring more members' voices, experiences, and expertise into the fold of the magazine.

This year we have a suite of members contributing as writers, and our door is always open for more.

We're launching a column called "Inside the Industry," which will feature professional voices in publishing, ranging from literary agents and editors to headshot photographers and book coaches. In a separate column, writing partners will share the ins and outs of working together and how they built effective (and rewarding) writing relationships. Another new segment called "Crowdsourced" will feature member answers to quirky questions relevant to the issue's theme. This issue we explore doubt and uncertainty, topics all of us know well; later in the year we'll tackle the business of writing, author identity, and starting new projects.

With Sheri Taylor-Emery returning as art director and Sharon Ritchey shifting to editorial advisor, Katie Tammen as senior editor, Diane Riley as copy editor, and a dedicated group of proofreaders, we have a fabulous team, and we're expanding our horizons. I invite you to join us as we take these next steps and continue to grow. Keep an eye out for interview calls and questions from our staff in WFWA's weekly newsletters, the Online Community, and the WFWA Facebook page. We want to hear from you. We're ready to step forward, evolve, and turn the next page. Thanks for reading, and *WriteOn!*

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

# Emotions Bind Us Together

By Marie W. Watts

Our minds make speedy judgments based on first impressions, and when we have few reference points regarding those who are different from us, we grow increasingly uncomfortable. Frequently, we make unconscious associations about others based on our upbringing, jokes we hear, or the social media we consume. This tendency is called "affinity bias." Basically, our brains are lazy; we prefer shortcuts and do not want to work too hard to assess other people and situations.

We depend on body language for about 55 percent of communication. Tone of voice accounts for approximately 38 percent of any given interaction. Spoken words contribute roughly 7 percent of the message. This means we must work harder to communicate with people different from us and learn the nuances of their culture. For example, is direct eye contact a sign of confidence and sincerity or aggression and disrespect? It depends on your cultural upbringing.

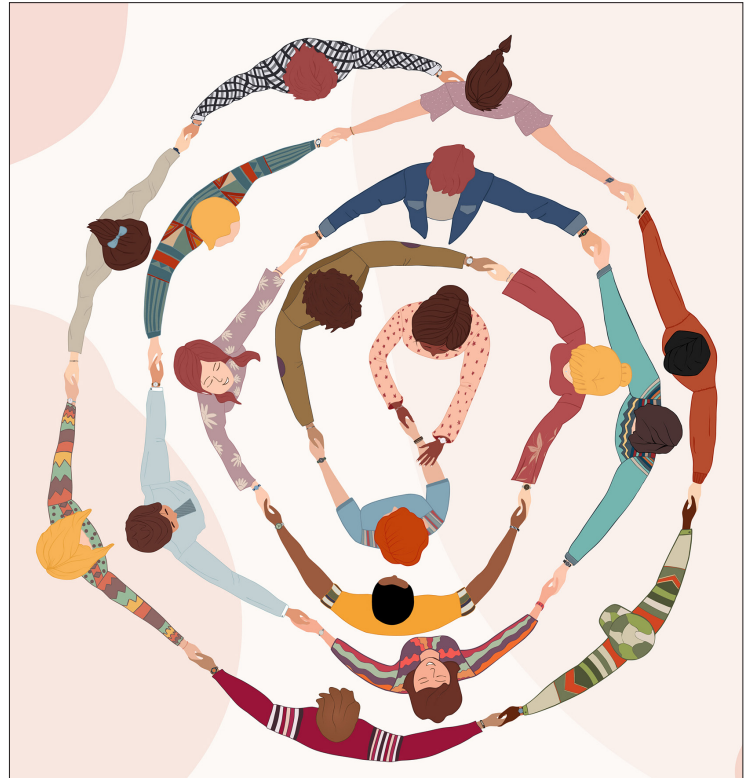
Another issue is confirmation bias, our need to seek out information that supports our own belief system. We seek those who resemble us to reinforce our feeling that our points of view are valid.

No wonder we are prone to practice affinity bias without even realizing it!

While we are different in many ways, emotions unite us as humans. The six basic emotions of all *Homo sapiens* are sadness, happiness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust.

As writers, we all know fear especially well. And one type of fear that draws us together is self-doubt. At times in our writing careers, all of us have had these moments:

- My first draft is a disaster. I don't know how to fix it.
- Will others criticize my work?
- Will anyone want to read this story?
- I'll never get an agent. I'm not good enough.
- I'm an imposter, not a real writer. I should just quit.
- Will I ever make a profit?



Self-doubt never ceases, even with success. Maya Angelou said, "Each time I write a book, every time I face that yellow pad, the challenge is so great. I have written eleven books, but each time I think, 'Uh-oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody and they're going to find me out.'"

Next time you are in a group of people unlike you, fight that natural tendency to pull away. Lean in. Focus on what you have in common rather than your differences. This practice enhances relationships by promoting understanding and increasing a sense of belonging. And nowadays, we all need acceptance.

You will be glad you did.

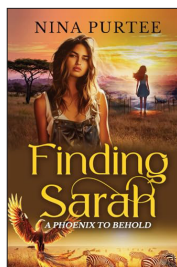
Please visit the *D&I Headquarters on the WFWA Community Platform* for more information about being a good literary citizen.



**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.

# MEMBER RELEASES

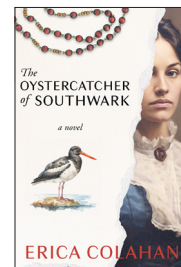
As WFWA continues to grow, so have our members' accomplishments. To be fair to everyone, all new women's fiction releases featured in the magazine must have been published within the past one year. If you are a new member with an older title(s), please still submit your books to be included on the WFWA Goodreads shelf and continue to take advantage of other opportunities to share your work with the membership, including the weekly newsletter and *Read ON!*.



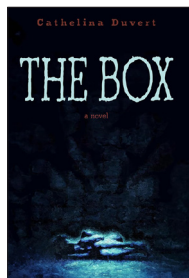
**NINA PURTEE**  
Finding Sarah:  
A Phoenix to Behold  
3/22/24



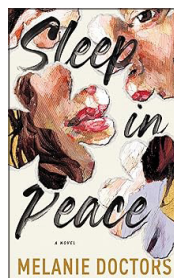
**MELISSA CLARK BACON**  
Through Her Lens  
4/2/24



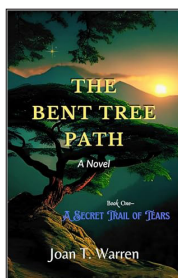
**ERICA COLAHAN**  
The Oystercatcher  
of Southwark  
7/1/24



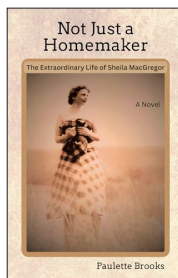
**CATHELINA DUVERT**  
The Box: A Novel  
7/2/24



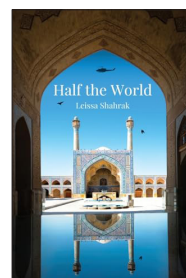
**MELANIE DOCTORS**  
Sleep in Peace  
8/27/24



**JOAN T. WARREN**  
The Bent Tree Path,  
Book One: A Secret  
Trail of Tears  
9/7/24



**PAULETTE BROOKS**  
Not Just A  
Homemaker: The  
Extraordinary Life of  
Sheila MacGregor  
9/17/24



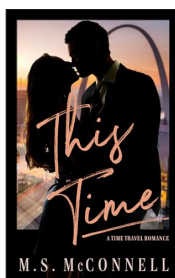
**LEISSA SHAHRAK**  
Half the World  
9/25/24



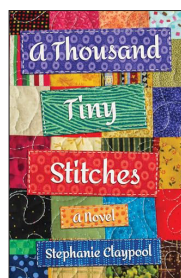
**L.C. DAVIS**  
The Secret Daughter  
9/26/24



**JACKIE KANG**  
Flamingo Cafe  
10/16/24



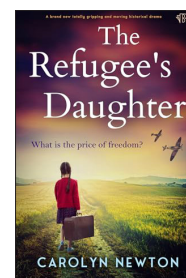
**M.S. MCCONNELL**  
This Time, a Time  
Travel Romance  
11/1/24



**STEPHANIE CLAYPOOL**  
A Thousand Tiny  
Stitches  
11/12/24



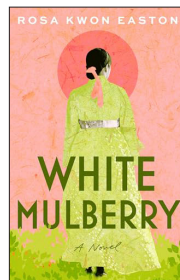
**RHONDA ZIMLICH**  
Raising Panic  
11/15/24



**CAROLYN NEWTON**  
The Refugee's  
Daughter  
11/21/24



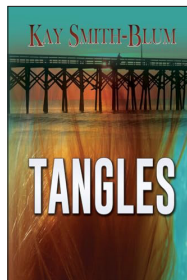
**ANGELICA R. JACKSON**  
Stay, Girl  
11/26/24



**ROSA KWON EASTON**  
White Mulberry  
12/1/24



**J. MARIE RUNDQUIST**  
This Isn't Everything  
You Are  
12/3/24



**KAY SMITH-BLUM**  
Tangles  
12/3/24



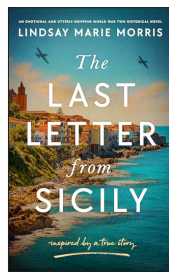
**SYLVIE KURTZ**  
The Christmas Star, Love  
in Brighton Village Book 4  
12/3/24



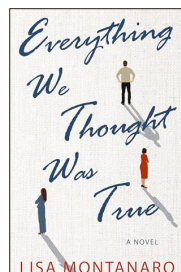
**SARAH K. TRAINOR**  
Time is a Room  
12/31/24



**CASEY DEMBOWSKI**  
The First Love Myth  
1/6/25



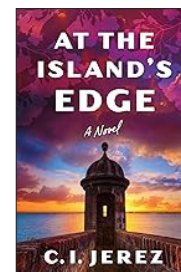
**LINDSAY MARIE MORRIS**  
The Last Letter from  
Sicily  
1/16/24



**LISA MONTANARO**  
Everything We  
Thought Was True  
1/27/25



**ANGELA DOUGLAS**  
Every Fall  
1/28/25



**C.I. JEREZ**  
At the Island's Edge  
3/18/25

# CROWDSOURCED

Welcome to Crowdsourced, *WriteOn!*'s newest regular feature! Each segment will showcase member responses to a question framed around that issue's theme. Whether it be funny, serious, pragmatic, or something else altogether, every question will be crafted as a quick way to commiserate, laugh, and share our stories. We can't wait to hear from you! For the first issue of 2025—which is focused on doubt and writing—we wanted to know:

## Back in the days of snail mail submissions, I

received a standard pre-printed "thanks-but-no thanks" rejection for a short story. But handwritten in the margin of the slip of paper was an unsigned note: "I fought for this story. Keep submitting!" That note buoyed me for years (and the story eventually published).

– Rebecca Hodge

**The strangest rejection** I ever received on a full manuscript was due to an unfortunate line break, so it started with, "This writing really sucks" before continuing with "you in!" on the next line. The agent was mortified when I told her later but we had a good laugh.

– Angelica R. Jackson

**What's the strangest rejection you've ever received?**

## Here's the oddest agency rejection

I received when I was querying the manuscript of my historical fiction, *The Invincible Miss Cust* (published by Landmark Sourcebooks in 2022): "Thank you for your query. It's an intriguing tale and the writing is excellent. You conjure up the historical period evocatively and authentically. The story is well structured, with charming characters and you have a very natural, fluid writing style. Hasten to say, I'm not infrequently wrong about what will and will not work in today's marketplace for this kind of fiction, but I'm going to pass. Remember, this is but one agent's opinion." The rejection reminded me that even when everything seems right with the work, it can still be wrong for an agent. Fortunately, I signed with someone who did feel it was right for her list. We've sold four books together since.

– Penny Haw

**Back when it was all snail mail**, I got my query letter back with a rubber stamp "not for us." That was it. Now the strangest is when an agent asks for a partial then just ghosts me. Frustrating!

– Leslie Hall

**In response to a query letter** for my debut novel, *Rewrite the Stars*, I received a three-word, misspelled reply from an agent: "Not for nus." I still laugh when I think about it.

– Christina Consolino

**I recently got a rejection** from a literary journal and they addressed me as "Dear Gary." My name is Guylaine, so they didn't just rename me, they re-gendered me as well. LOL. It did make me wonder how much attention they pay to our stories, though.

– Guylaine Spencer

In the next issue, we'll be exploring the business of writing, and we want to know:

## How do you motivate yourself to tackle business-of-writing tasks you dread?

Send your 1–2-sentence responses to [writeon@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:writeon@womensfictionwriters.org) for a chance to be featured in the magazine. Please use "Crowdsourced–Business" in the subject line, and include your full name along with your 1–2-sentence response in the body of the email. If you prefer anonymity in the magazine, please indicate this as well.



# I'M NO IMPOSTER, AND NEITHER ARE YOU

By Nancy Johnson

## **EVERY SINGLE DAY, DOUBT SHOWS UP, STARES ME DOWN, AND THREATENS TO STEAL MY JOY.**

It can be very convincing, rising to confront me at my lowest moments when I'm most susceptible to its lies. *The success of my first novel may have been a fluke, and I just might be a one-trick pony. My book isn't really that good, and I'm not all that talented.* As I usher my second book into the world, those are the words that taunt me. Instead of finding reasons to believe the best, I sometimes look for evidence to support my doubts.

In the first round of edits for *People of Means*, my editor at the publishing house said, "We need to make this one the best it can be. You know what they say about sophomore novels." I understood exactly what she meant. They don't call debuts the darlings of the industry for nothing. Book two is often compared to the first, and it doesn't always get the glow-up of a novel that is shiny and new. I get it, and what I got then was a dose of self-doubt that could have been crippling at every stage on the road to publication.

Let's back up a few steps. When I turned in early pages of this novel to my editor, she asked, "What's your process?" I choked momentarily because I didn't have a clearly defined process that would make sense to anyone but me. I explained how my characters speak to me, how they reveal themselves little by little, leaving breadcrumbs of a story that I will puzzle together in the end. While true, my words rang hollow because the story felt episodic to her with scenes that were loosely connected at best. "I need you to outline," she said. How would I do something that felt so antithetical to my organic process for creating?

## GUIDING SCRIBE

Alison Hammer from the WFWA community shared her outline method with me. After resisting for quite some time, I used it to plot my novel, and my editor was happy again. Still, I wondered if I could write an entire book from an outline, which had always seemed suffocating and creatively stifling. But I found a way to let the outline guide me while I dreamed the rest of the way. I did it, and the in-house team raved about it. Even I, my toughest critic, fell in love with the book.

Then came time to see how the reviewers and tastemakers would respond to my second book. The trade reviews trickled in slowly and I started to fret when I didn't see *People of Means* on the same lists as my first novel, *The Kindest Lie*. I obsessed over every metric, refreshing Amazon to check my sales ranking. Did other books releasing in the same month as mine have more reviews on Edelweiss and NetGalley?

I often hear about imposter syndrome and how we, as authors, sometimes believe we're frauds in our own lives. We never measure up in the narratives we tell ourselves. Just when I was ready to succumb to this big lie, I had another talk with myself because it takes just as much energy to believe as it does to doubt.

### WE ARE UNIQUELY CALLED AND QUALIFIED TO TELL THESE STORIES.

That sounds spiritual, but it's something I truly believe. When you get an idea for a book that grabs hold of you and won't let go, there is no one else but you who can bring it forth. We fall prey to comparisons all the time, but there is no comparison when it comes to purpose-driven work that evolves from our lived experience and perspective on the world.

### UNDERSTAND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF YOUR NOVEL.

Who needs to read your book and why? I hope *People of Means* will inspire readers to consider their own capacity to show up in large and small ways to change our world for the better. One of my favorite moments was a book club meeting for *The Kindest Lie*, when a white reader said she and her father had never once had a civil conversation about race in America. She planned to read my novel with him to spark a meaningful dialogue. No sales numbers or reviews can top that measure of success.

### PLAY THE LONG GAME.

Publishing will always have its ups and downs, just like the markets. We thrive when we can ride the highs and lows, staying the course through it all. Just when I was convinced that the trade reviews for *People of Means* would be nonexistent or disparaging, Kirkus, which can be a discerning, harsh critic, called my book "a powerful second novel" and described it as "a heart-wrenching story of love, family, racism, and resistance across the decades."



A native of Chicago's South Side, **Nancy Johnson** worked for more than a decade as an Emmy-nominated, award-winning television journalist at CBS and ABC affiliates in markets nationwide. Nancy's second novel, *People of Means*, a story of race, class, and legacy in 1960s Nashville and 1992 Chicago, was published by William Morrow/HarperCollins. People Magazine named it one of its most anticipated books for 2025, calling it "beautifully crafted" and "propulsive." Nancy's debut novel, *The Kindest Lie*, was a Target Book Club Pick. It has been reviewed by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*, and was highlighted on *Entertainment Weekly's* Must List. Nancy lives in downtown Chicago where she manages communications and brand journalism for a large health care nonprofit.



## I OFTEN HEAR ABOUT IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND HOW WE, AS AUTHORS, SOMETIMES BELIEVE WE'RE FRAUDS IN OUR OWN LIVES.

### EVOLVE WITH THE INDUSTRY.

I learned from my publishing team that readers are not preordering well in advance of publication in the same numbers they once did. I needed to pivot to tailor more of my publicity and marketing efforts toward tactics closer to on-sale day. Influencers on TikTok and Instagram can be as pivotal as earned media in brand building. Instead of bemoaning change and fearing we can't keep up, let's embrace it and learn how to maximize the impact of digital channels and other innovation.

### BELIEVE AND CONTINUE DOING THE WORK.

In the months leading up to publication of my second book, I've been planning for what comes next. I'm a career author, which means I will continue to write books. Right now, I'm getting ideas on paper for book three and will begin drafting early pages. I will continue to build and create, believing that my work will find its audience and transform lives.

In spite of all those things, I was worried about the right people finding my book and showing it plenty of love. *People Magazine* named my novel one of the most anticipated books of 2025, calling it "beautifully crafted" and "propulsive." So you see, when you're writing from a place of authenticity and do the work you were destined to do, the bounty will come.

I know doubt will still show up like an unwanted guest, whispering in my ear that I'm an imposter. But you know what? I plan to be too busy writing and meeting my readers to pay that nonsense any attention. Doubt, be damned in 2025. We got this. Let's go!



## TACKLING THE WORDS, “I’M JUST...”

One of the most detrimental words in the English language is “just.” We’ve all used it, often about ourselves. “I’m not a real writer; I’m *just* an English teacher.” Or “I like to write, but I’m *just* a barista.”

Our thoughts and words become our reality. Instead of minimizing who you are and what you do, reframe the way you think about yourself, and you’ll notice that your life begins to change for the better.

I once heard someone say, “Imagine all the bad things you think about yourself and how you talk to yourself when you’re feeling down. Would you let someone speak to your best friend that way?” Hell no! If someone said to your friend, “You’re not good at anything,” you’d be furious! It’s time to start showing ourselves the love and respect we show our closest friends.

That insight changed the way I think and speak to myself daily. Instead of thinking *I’m not good enough*, I think, *I can do that. I might need training, but it’s something I can learn.* That’s how I became a writer and went even further to start my own business. I had to retrain my brain to stop listening to those people who referred to me as “just a mom.”

Now, I know it’s not always that easy—everyone has moments of self-doubt. But it truly is all about how you flip the script and change your inner dialogue that will change your life.

**If you want to become a writer, start with one story.** It can be fan fiction, or a 25-word poem, or maybe a 200-word story. Then work your way up to a novel, or a book of poetry. **As long as you’re writing, you’re a writer.**

## INSIDE THE INDUSTRY

However, if you want to be a *professional* writer, you need to put yourself—and your writing—out there and *accept feedback*. Repeat: Accepting feedback and making revisions is crucial! Once you complete a manuscript and send it out, then get your first response, good or bad, *that* makes you a writer. Because it means you put it out there, and shared it with someone, someone professional who gave their opinion. They may not offer to publish your work, but they *read* it, and got back to you. So congratulations! You did it.

Once that initial excitement wears off, it's common to start feeling a sense of imposter syndrome. And understandably so. It's hard to feel optimistic and confident when you've received 100 rejection letters.

As an agent, I hate sending out rejection letters, so I try to put a nugget of feedback in them when I can. Accepting a manuscript I'm not 100% in love with would do a disservice to both the author and me, so that's why rejection letters are a necessary evil. It's vital to understand that finding an agent is a bit like dating—every agent has their own interests and preferences. Because of this, a rejection does not mean your story is “bad,” or that it will never be published. You simply need to keep submitting your work (or keep “dating around”) until you find the agent who will give you the best shot at getting published because they passionately believe in your story. (**Note:** if you receive an offer of a “Revise & Resubmit,” it's a legitimate offer to try again. Agents don't give these out lightly, so take advantage.)

When you're feeling like you're *just* not good enough, try one of these tactics:

■ **Switch up what you're working on.** For example, if you write novels, work on a “how to” article for a magazine, or enter a short story contest. Do something *different* that will get you out of your funk.

■ **Don't let your doubts define you.** Take that doubt, wallow for, say, 10–20 minutes, then shrug it off. Reset. Believe in yourself! If you aren't your No. 1 cheerleader, who will be? You need to believe in yourself first. If you're an introvert, you still have to toot your own horn.

■ **Celebrate your accomplishments.** Be proud of yourself and consider getting a new journal and pen, signing up for a class, or browsing a bookstore.

■ **Practice confident self-talk.** There's an old *Saturday Night Live* comedy skit with a character named Stuart Smalley. He'd end each show looking in the mirror while saying, “I'm good enough. I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!” You don't realize that positive affirmations can help you make your dreams a reality. Start with something simple like, “I am a writer.”



**TAKE THAT DOUBT, WALLOW FOR, SAY, 10–20 MINUTES, THEN SHRUG IT OFF. RESET. BELIEVE IN YOURSELF!**

■ **Share your goals.** Another helpful tip is to tell people your dreams—be *specific* and say them out loud. I promise you, people will hold you to it, whatever you say you will do.

Almost 20 years ago, I told people I was writing a reference book for teens about organ transplants. Many friends questioned me, because it was far from *Harry Potter* and *Goodnight Moon*. But I believed in it, and I believed in myself. It was close to my heart because, although my father eventually passed away from cancer, he had received an organ transplant that gave him 17 extra years of life.

I wrote specifically for teens and older kids, since that was my authentic voice at the time. My goal was to write the book I needed to read. And you know what? I was the first of all my writer friends to get published. And 19 years later, that book still earns royalties.

Follow your heart and *believe* you can do it. Make your own opportunities. What really kept me going was telling people about my WIP because whenever I'd see someone they'd ask, “How's that book you're writing going? Did you finish it yet?” You'd better believe I went home and wrote before the next time I saw them. People will keep you honest!

So when you're having those doubts, remember to reset yourself . . . after you've wallowed for *just* a few minutes!



**Tina Purcell Schwartz** spent twelve years writing and marketing her work, along with helping several others get published. After a career in advertising, radio sales and marketing, she turned to her true passion, selling manuscripts. In 2012, she opened The Purcell Agency. For women's fiction, Tina seeks contemporary fiction, romance, and inspirational. While some light speculative is okay, she is not looking for any fantasy or sci-fi. You can submit to her as a WFWA member by using the link [www.QueryManager.com/tinapschwartz/WFWA2025](http://www.QueryManager.com/tinapschwartz/WFWA2025) while she's open for submissions.

# MARKETING TO AN UNEXPECTED AUDIENCE

I'm a soup party enthusiast and the proud owner of eight slow cookers, so it should come as no surprise that those savory hugs-in-a-bowl have found their way into my three historical novels. It started with one recipe per book and grew to 20 recipes for a cookbook.

While I was conducting research for a novel set during the French Revolution, I discovered that soup was likely the first form of fast-food, and a new marketing idea bloomed. Rather than targeting historical fiction fans alone, was it possible to use my soup passion to capture a wider readership?

### STEP 1: ENGAGE AN AUDIENCE

I gathered foodie fans by starting a Pinterest board and creating Instagram stories based on soup tips and recipes. I solicited comments from taste testers and quoted and thanked them in social media posts.

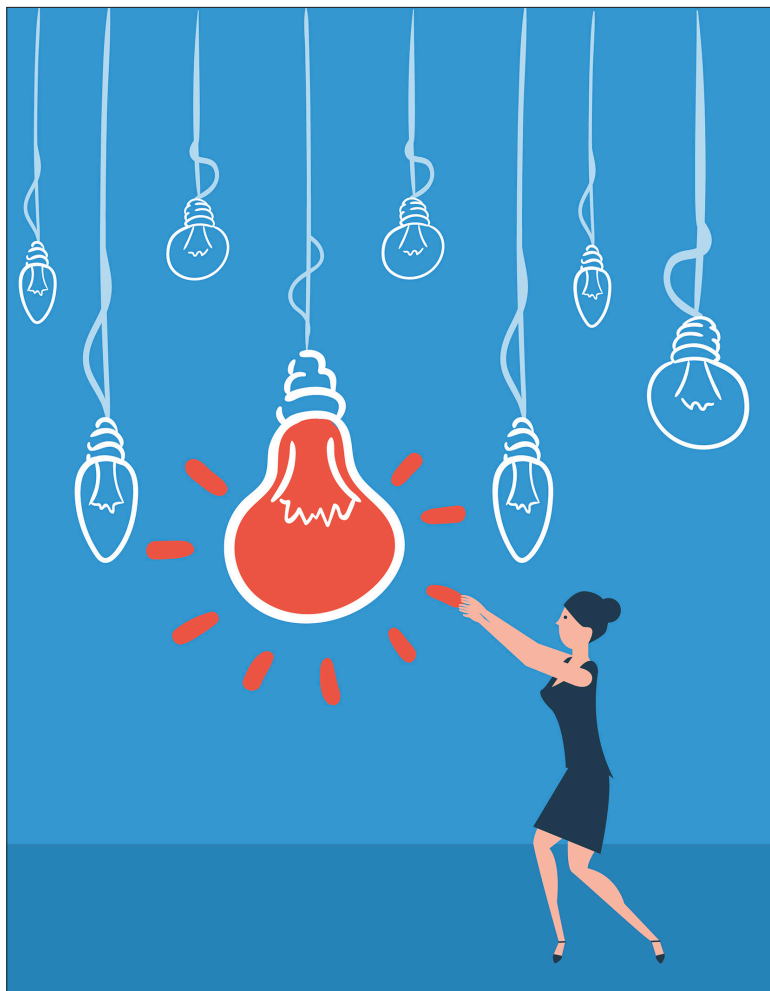
The engagement was so satisfying that I started a tribute cookbook to the French Revolution filled with my characters' recipes and scenes from all three of my novels. I also thanked and acknowledged all the taste testers. Finishing *Soups of Château de Verzat* opened opportunities to market my novels in consumer magazines, cooking websites, and podcasts.

### STEP 2: MARKET WIDELY

Placing excerpts and recipes in those outlets gave me the foundation I needed to pitch bigger audiences. After mentions in *A Taste of France* and *Costco Connection*, I sent an email to an NBC-affiliate television morning show, and within 17 minutes, the producer responded.

The producer said, "I don't normally have authors on, but your characters' recipes sounded like [they] would be fun. Thanks for thinking of the show." He asked to see my books and booked me for an episode. It taped and aired only two months after my initial email.

Did I mention my historical novels in all those interviews? You bet I did. Did I tell funny stories about the characters' creations? Absolutely.



It was a yearlong journey, filled with lots of doubts and plenty of rejection, but eventually my theory worked. My cookbook sales spiked the day of the television broadcast, and, as I had hoped, my novels' sales picked up too.

### STEP 3: EMBRACE THE MOMENTUM

My current work-in-progress is a contemporary romance set in the Christmas Markets of France.

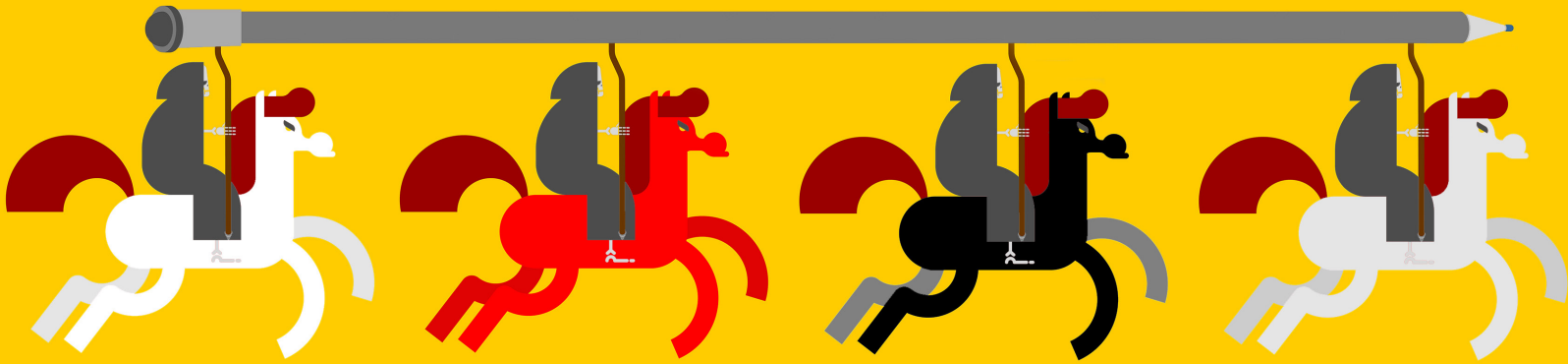
I've already begun touting *Sister Georgette's Fruit & Nut Holiday Cookies* and posting taste testers' feedback on social media for a holiday romance that will launch a year from now.

Just like writing a book, you need to take marketing one step or chapter at a time. Nail down what makes you unique—make it your "hook"—and use it to drive sales.

Do you have a passion or expertise you've used to market your books? Please share it at [debra@debraborchert.com](mailto:debra@debraborchert.com)



**Debra Borchert** is the author of the *Château de Verzat* series, its companion cookbook, *Soups of Château de Verzat*, and *Give 'Em Something to Talk About: Word-of-Mouth Drives Book Sales, A Marketing Workbook for Spreading the Word*.



# WINNING THE BATTLE AGAINST DOUBT HOW TO VANQUISH THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF WRITING

By Jen Sinclair

Throughout time, the symbols of Four Horsemen have been used as a graphic depiction of what will precede or herald the end of something—threats we must overcome to survive. This got me thinking about what might come into a writer’s life to snuff out the flickering desire to continue along what is admittedly a hard road. What are the Four Horsemen of the writing life, and what happens if we allow them to gallop up beside us at our kitchen table, the coffee shop, or from the sidelines of our kids’ softball games? By definition, they signal the end of our writing ambitions.

But it doesn’t have to be that way.

You can send these horsemen packing by acknowledging what you’re up against and actively fighting back.

## OPPOSITION

Naysayers lurk around every corner. These are people who normally support everything you do. But when it comes to your writing, these same people can wear you down and make you believe you’re wasting energy, time, and money chasing your dream. Before you let them get too far, try these suggestions:

- Define your purpose. In a [2009 TED Talk on leadership](#), Simon Sinek said, “People don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it.” This also applies to your writing goals.

- Educate yourself on the business of writing. Follow thought leaders in the publishing world, like Jane Friedman. Up-to-date and accurate information can give you resilience against even the most negative of people.

- Be selective. You don’t have to share your goals with everyone. Choose only those who genuinely support you. Check out titles like *The Book of Boundaries*, by Melissa Urban, for specific ideas.

**THE BEST WAY TO OVERCOME NEGATIVE PEOPLE IS BY SETTING BOUNDARIES AND KEEPING YOUR PURPOSE THE FOCAL POINT.**

## FEAR

Alongside doubt, fear is probably the single biggest threat to your writing aspirations. It can manifest as resistance, frustration, or even writer’s block. Identifying where it’s coming from can go a long way to overcoming it:

- **Change:** Whether this means rewriting a chapter or pivoting on the pathway to publication, change often brings a rush of fear. Keeping yourself focused on the end goal can help you push past this.

Continued on page 15

## FEATURE

■ **Insecurity:** You may never feel ready to query that agent or hit “publish” on KDP. Distance yourself from the action for a short time, and revisit it with fresh eyes.

■ **Failure:** The most common root of fear is failure. Instead of jumping to the worst-case scenario, flip your mindset and think about the *best* thing that can happen.

**FEAR PARALYZES EVERYONE AT SOME POINT OR ANOTHER. BUT DON'T LET THAT KEEP YOU FROM MOVING FORWARD WITH YOUR WRITING GOALS. SOMETHING WONDERFUL MAY BE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT LAST SCARY THING.**

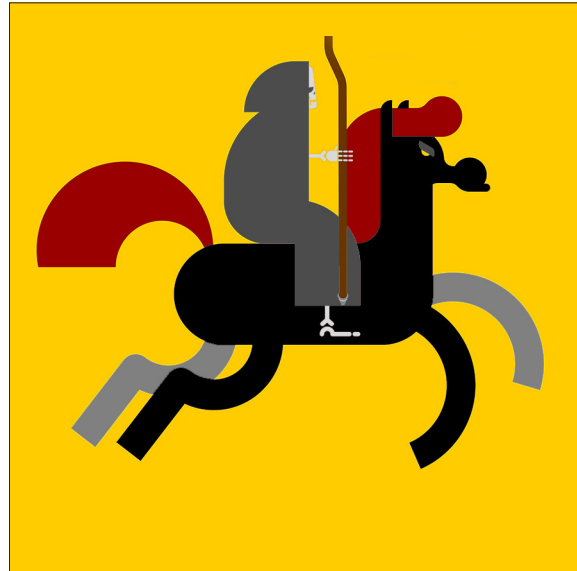
## REJECTION

Putting so much of yourself into a piece of writing, only to be met with brick walls time and again, can chip away at even the thickest skin. So how does a writer overcome this?

You can't. Not completely. Rejection comes with being a writer and doesn't go away, even after you're published. But you can shift your mindset to focus on the things you can control. [Judy Blume](#) offers some of the best advice about rejection:

- Don't take it personally. Keep telling yourself you will be published.
- Don't stop learning. With each piece you write, you get better.
- Don't stop writing. When you send something to an agent or publication, start a new project.
- Don't give up. As Blume says, “Determination and hard work are as important as talent.”

**WHILE YOU CAN'T CONTROL OTHER PEOPLE'S OPINIONS, YOU CAN CONTROL YOUR MINDSET AND THE QUALITY OF YOUR WORK. FOCUS ON THOSE, AND THE REST WILL COME.**



## ISOLATION

Writing is a solitary endeavor that offers lots of time alone inside a creative bubble. While that may be part of the process, it's not always conducive to success. When we isolate ourselves, we miss out on something that is crucial to this whole journey: community.

The good news is, you've already found a community in WFWA. But being here is only the first step. You must choose to take full advantage and tap into the power of this creative and supportive community.

- Participate in workshops.
- Interact with other members on Facebook or in the Online Community.
- Get matched with a critique group.
- Join one of the write-ins (they run seven days a week!).

**LEANING INTO THIS DIVERSE COMMUNITY OF LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE WILL GIVE YOU THE RESILIENCE TO BEAT BACK OPPOSITION, FEAR, REJECTION, AND ISOLATION.**

Your future readers are waiting for the stories only *you* can tell. So forget those threatening horsemen and instead ask yourself, What's the *best* that can happen?



**Jen Sinclair** is a freelance writer who pens personal essays and contemporary fiction that explore complicated relationships, love, loss, and all the messiness of life. She lives in Saint Augustine, Florida, with her husband, kids, and spoiled puppy. When she isn't working out story elements, or belting out songs from one of her many Spotify playlists, she enjoys walking beaches and trails, paddling waterways, or driving around with the top off her Jeep. Her second novel, *According to My Science*, comes out March 11, 2025. Visit [jensinclairwrites.com](http://jensinclairwrites.com) for more information.

# BUILDING CONFIDENCE:

## WRITING IS ABOUT MORE THAN WORDS ON THE PAGE



By Lynne Golodner

I've been teaching writing since the 1990s, and while I teach craft, structure, and the business side of book publishing and marketing, I've realized that I am mostly teaching confidence.

After hearing from too many writers who doubt their voice is strong enough, good enough, or compelling enough, I created a class called Finding Your Voice at Midlife. It was intended to help people gain enough confidence to put pen to paper. Writers from age 30 to 85 signed up, so I dropped the "Midlife" part and now just call it Finding Your Voice.

But it's turned into so much more.

### RECONNECT WITH THE JOY OF WRITING

When we begin the class, I encourage writers to explore times in their life when they felt most like themselves. They often go back to childhood and write about that younger self—which opens the door for many rich stories. It's powerful to reconnect with the part of the self that was confident and clear on its mission.

About halfway through the six-week Finding Your Voice class, a student inevitably remarks, "This is like therapy!"

I'm no therapist, but delving into the *why* behind self-doubt and lack of confidence is hard, deep work—excavating the soul, you might say, to get back to who we've always been. The first weeks are focused on remembering a time when students loved writing and it was easy and fun; the latter weeks move into free-writes and the stories that students have yearned to write.

In a supportive community, anything a person writes is valid—and this is critical to my students' outcomes. At some point, a switch flips: Writers have an aha moment where they reconnect with the person they are at their core.

"I second-guessed my writing for fifteen years, thinking I didn't have a story to tell," said Laura Lee Ellen Johnson, a student of mine. "This past year has been my discovery of confidence. I finally sent an essay out, and it has been published. The feedback has been phenomenal, and I have touched many lives. That's an honor that has boosted me even more."

**FINDING YOUR VOICE TAKES TIME**

When I first envisioned the Finding Your Voice course, I focused on the pivots and realizations many people make at midlife, inspired by my own experience. Although I'd always called myself a writer, it was something I did on the side, when I had time, which was not often. Even after publishing eight books between 1996 and 2013, I had to focus on other efforts—marketing, journalism—to earn a living. In teaching, I wanted to help others gather the courage to do what they'd always wanted—and to be the best version of themselves that had been silenced to please other people.

Another of my students, Barb Summers, from Uxbridge, Ontario, Canada, suffered from self-doubt even after completing a creative writing certificate at the University of Toronto. She left her full-time job to write novels and now focuses “on realistic goal-setting and expectation management.”

“The best way for me to build confidence is to just keep writing,” she said. “Going into writing knowing that it isn't always going to be easy has helped with my confidence because then I don't think it's only me struggling.”

**CONFIDENCE IS A LIFELONG PURSUIT**

I teach a lot of classes—Demystifying Show Don't Tell, Perfecting Line Breaks in Poetry, Building Your Author Brand, and more—and in each one, I teach technique, craft, and how-tos. But under it all, these are courses in self-belief—for me as much as for my students.

“Confidence and desire are absolutely essential to becoming a successful writer, to sustaining the work,” said Barbara Jones, a literary agent with the Stuart Krichevsky Agency.

Jones was an editor at Harper's when I met her at the Iowa Summer Writers Workshop 30 years ago and has been a mentor and friend ever since.

“From a business perspective, agents and publishers and readers are all hoping for writers who are athletes of the word,” Jones said, “who will play a great game and get up and play it again and with increasing mastery. That long-game quality of desire—and having enough confidence to sustain it—are everything.”

Of course, gaining confidence is not an overnight pursuit, and once writers get there, they must nurture their newfound confidence. The best way to do that is to surround yourself with supportive writing peers, mentors, and teachers who appreciate what you're trying to accomplish—on the page and in your career as an author.

This process is powerful and never-ending, but then finding your voice—and your people—is a treasure and one worth hanging on to.

**GAINING CONFIDENCE IS NOT AN OVERNIGHT PURSUIT, AND ONCE WRITERS GET THERE, THEY MUST NURTURE THEIR NEWFOUND CONFIDENCE.**



**HERE ARE SOME FREE-WRITE QUESTIONS I SHARE WITH MY STUDENTS. USE THEM TO START YOUR CONFIDENCE-BUILDING PROCESS:**

- Where does your origin story depart from its origins and become your own? What is a pivotal moment that allowed this to happen?
- How has your origin story hindered the coming forth of your voice?
- What pieces of your origin story do you want to keep? What pieces might you discard?
- Why do you write?
- What do you hope will be the impact or outcome of your writing?
- What are your writing superpowers—that is, what can you originally and uniquely bring to people from your perspective, experience, expertise?



**Lynne Goldner** is the award-winning, bestselling author of 11 books, a writing coach and retreat leader, and a marketing entrepreneur. Learn more at <https://lynnegoldner.com> or subscribe to her Substack at <https://lynnegoldnerauthor.substack.com>.



## **WRITING PARTNERSHIPS: 10 TIPS FOR TACKLING RESENTMENT AND DOUBT**

In the publishing world, there's a lot of talk about finding agents, publishers, and readers. But before any of that, the most fortunate writers find something else: a writing partner.

There's no telling who this person will be or how you'll connect, but once you find them, your whole writing experience will change. Here at *WriteOn!* we've decided to spend the year highlighting the different aspects of these vital partnerships. Each column will be written by people who met and connected while writing, and every pair will tackle a different aspect of writing partnerships.

In this installment, I've volunteered myself (Katie) and my writing bestie, Christy Matheson, to explore one of the trickiest elements a writing duo can face: sticking together when one of you is finding more success.

Christy and I met through WFWA's Facebook critique group a little over two years ago. At the time, I already had a pile of rejections, and she was revising her manuscript. The relationship was moving along fine until we both applied for the RISING STAR Award, and she was selected as a finalist. I saw the news before she did, and I called her, elated. However, once I hung up the phone, I basically curled up in a ball and cried. From there, Christy's experience just got better, and mine . . . did not.

Today, she's on submission with traditional publishing houses, and I'm still gathering agent rejections (got one while typing this), yet our partnership is better than ever. Want to know how? Keep reading.

## WRITING TOGETHER

1

### RESPECT EACH OTHER

The outside world may point its finger at one or the other of us being “better,” but it doesn’t mean the writing relationship itself is lopsided. I (Christy) have had some external luck, but one million percent believe that Katie is just as talented—and know for a fact that we have both become better writers since we paired up. Ultimately, it’s important to remember your writing partner is finding success because you’re in it together.

2

### CELEBRATE EACH OTHER’S SUCCESSES

Katie already talked about my success, so let’s take a minute—as you all should with your writing partners—to celebrate some of Katie’s. This fall, I attended two writing conferences, but since I already have an agent, I pitched Katie’s manuscripts. It was a gamble, but both agents I spoke with requested pages. After that positive reaction, Katie decided to chance pitching a dream agent and ended up receiving a full request—I screamed almost as loudly as she did!

3

### LEARN HOW TO GIVE/RECEIVE FEEDBACK

The first time I (Katie) sent suggestions to Christy—hundreds of them—I was certain she’d tell me, “Thanks but no thanks.” Instead, Christy was delighted, and we started a conversation that has lasted two years and counting. Now she jokes, “Oh, only eight-four comments for this scene? That’s nothing.” The absolute best part? We send each other ugly drafts without fear, and I cannot overstate how freeing it is to reach this stage of trust.

4

### MAKE EACH OTHER BETTER

Here’s a secret: Before we started this, I was a pantsner and Christy was a plotter. Today we’re both chatters—aka we write nothing without days, sometimes months, of conversation. It’s possible we’re totally codependent now, but it also means we spend a lot less time spinning our wheels and resorting to page-one rewrites. The key? We’re willing to put time and energy into the other’s writing career, keeping the partnership balanced.

5

### MOURN EACH OTHER’S REJECTIONS

We’re going to make two points here. First, going back to *RISING STAR*: At the time, we were newer critique partners, and I (Christy) had no idea how much Katie struggled with my success.

However, just the other night we were casually talking and Katie mentioned how devastated she would be if I got a publisher before she got an agent. I didn’t flinch at the admission, and instead teared up, saying I would cry along with her.

Now, point two (Katie again). Christy has gotten a few passes from publishing houses, and it stinks. Fortunately, with my vast rejection experience, I’ve been able to help Christy focus on the positives the editors noted, which as it turned out, were things we fixed together. So the passes are still disappointing, but they’re what we call confirmation rejections—replies that tell us our partnership is making our writing stronger.



**THIS FALL, I ATTENDED TWO WRITING CONFERENCES, BUT SINCE I ALREADY HAVE AN AGENT, I PITCHED KATIE’S MANUSCRIPTS. IT WAS A GAMBLE, BUT BOTH AGENTS I SPOKE WITH REQUESTED PAGES.**

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## WRITING TOGETHER

### 6 **ACCEPT IT WON'T ALWAYS BE SUNSHINE AND RAINBOWS**

Some days will be hard. Period. If one of you receives amazing news at the same time the other is staring down another rejection, it's okay to say you need a minute. As writing besties, we made sure to create a safe space to express our disappointment and anger. A favorite trick to prevent doom spirals? We let the other read our external feedback first. This tiny change (usually) allows our focus to stay on the positive and actionable feedback we receive, instead of the negative.

### 7 **READ TOGETHER**

We write in different styles and subgenres, so we don't ever feel like we're in direct competition, but we enjoy reading the same spectrum of books. This not only gives us endless fodder for discussion but it also allows us to offer insights for improvements with examples the other understands. Bottom line: We don't write the same thing, but we are both each other's ideal reader.

### 8 **TALK TO EACH OTHER**

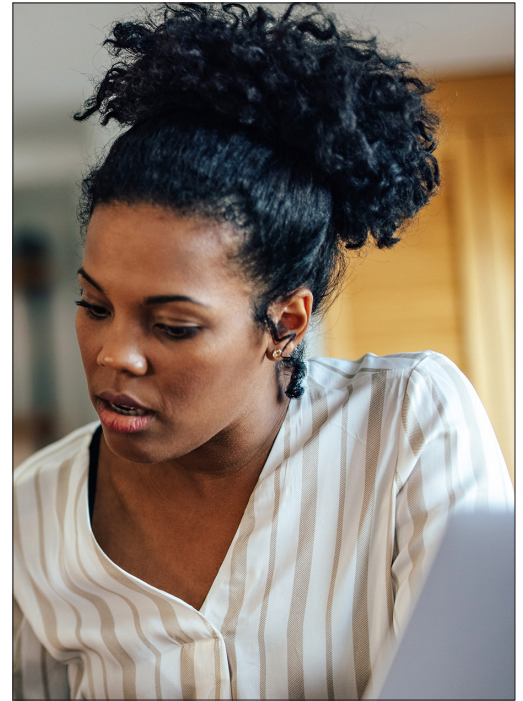
Our relationship isn't restricted to writing. We know the finer details of each other's lives, and if we don't exchange at least a dozen texts in a day, we assume the other is dead (or at least in a coma). These non-writing conversations are vital not only to understanding each other, but for making the worst feedback easier to swallow because we're hearing it from a friend.

### 9 **MAKE PLANS**

So all those rejections? They've made us realistic. We've given ourselves another year to make it in the traditional world, but if that fails, we're developing a plan to combine our talents and shift our attention to self-publishing. We're so certain there are readers for the manuscripts we're writing that we've launched a joint Substack, which, like our books, highlights the unspoken stories of women.

### 10 **WRITE ON! (PUN ALWAYS INTENDED)**

If you haven't found your writing partner yet, don't despair. Just like that "yes" from an agent or publisher or reader, your game-changing person is probably right around the corner. You just need to keep watching the WFWA critique page, writing what you love, reading books, checking out the Substacks or Instagram accounts of other WFWA members, and, of course, attending writing events.



**OUR RELATIONSHIP ISN'T RESTRICTED TO WRITING. WE KNOW THE FINER DETAILS OF EACH OTHER'S LIVES, AND IF WE DON'T EXCHANGE AT LEAST A DOZEN TEXTS IN A DAY, WE ASSUME THE OTHER IS DEAD (OR AT LEAST IN A COMA).**



**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.



**Christy Matheson** writes uplifting romantic fiction about friends, family, and finding one's place in an ever-changing world. While she is waiting for the slow traditional publication process, Christy has self-published several novellas in the "Castle in Kilkenney: Fairy Tales" series, and is a contributor and editor for the award-winning anthology *Feisty Deeds: Historical Fictions of Daring Women*. None of it would be worth reading without Katie.



## **FOUR QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN OUTLINING YOUR NOVEL**

**N**ovelists often disagree about the best way to envision and draft a novel, and that’s because there’s no one correct answer. But based on my experience as a developmental editor, there is a *best* starting point: a big-picture outline.

By starting wide and working your way in, you can avoid the common pitfalls I see with pacing, character arcs, and story. Outlines ensure writers have a direction and a purpose for each scene, resulting in a quicker, more polished draft and fewer wasted pages. When I’m working with clients at this stage, here are some questions they use to guide them in developing an outline.

### **WHAT’S YOUR IDEA? WHY DO YOU NEED TO WRITE THIS BOOK?**

Book coach and founder of Author Accelerator Jennie Nash has stated, “Every book is, at heart, an argument for something.”

When you’re in the brainstorming and outlining stages, you’re at the outset of a long journey—you’ll spend months, if not years, with your characters and their world—so what’s driving you to write this book? Why are you willing to give so much of yourself to *this* story? (On those days when the writing’s tough or when you think you’ve taken a wrong step, remember your answer to these questions. They’ll propel you forward.)

Your reasons for writing might come in the form of a question, a lesson, an argument, or a curiosity. When *Entertainment Weekly* asked author Leigh Bardugo about her inspiration for *Shadow and Bone*, she said it started with one question: “What if darkness was a place?” Alternatively, you may have a point you’re trying to make, as Jane Austen did in *Pride and Prejudice* (“don’t judge people so quickly”).

Or maybe you’ve been wondering about a curious situation or a particular narrative moment. I recently worked with an author whose book was inspired by a twist that came to her in a dream—her entire manuscript was built to reveal a family betrayal—and it was a moving, stunning twist, one that inspired the book and kept the author writing.

Whatever your reason, write it down and keep it where you can see it, so you can always remember what pushed you to start this journey. As you outline, make sure every part of your novel connects to this rationale—it’s the throughline that will make your story cohesive.

**WHAT DOES YOUR PROTAGONIST WANT? WHAT DO THEY NEED?**

In *Finding Nemo*, a reticent Marlin desperately wants his son Nemo to stay home and be protected, and for good reason—Marlin has lost the rest of his family to a predator. This motivation is an effective launching pad for the story, but it turns out, keeping Nemo home is not what Marlin actually *needs*. What he needs is to learn how to trust that he taught Nemo how to be independent.

In your book, your protagonist must want something specific: a new job, an acceptance letter to Harvard Law, to win back their spouse—it’s what sets the story in motion. But your protagonist also *needs* something, and usually, they’re unaware of this need. Marlin is unaware that he needs to learn to trust his son, for example. So ask yourself, what is the life lesson your protagonist needs to learn?

**Tip:** If you’re writing a story with multiple narrators/protagonists, you need to answer these questions for each of them.

**HOW DO YOU CONNECT YOUR CHARACTER’S INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ARCS? HOW DOES YOUR CHARACTER OVERCOME THEIR INNER STRUGGLES AND MOVE PAST THE EXTERNAL OBSTACLES THEY FACE?**

Let’s continue with the *Finding Nemo* example. Marlin, an overprotective homebody, must cross the ocean to rescue his son. Along the way, he faces a series of obstacles that gradually lead him to gain confidence surviving outside his comfort zone. Simultaneously, he realizes that he can’t keep Nemo from experiencing the world. Here, the external arc is the challenge of safely crossing the ocean, while the internal arc is the lesson Marlin learns about trusting that he’s taught his son enough to thrive on his own.

As you’re thinking through your novel, make sure that the external arc and the internal arc are connected. If your character needs to learn to trust himself, what events can you include that teach him the lesson he needs to learn?

**WHERE IS YOUR STORY GOING? WHAT WOULD BE A SURPRISING WAY TO GET THERE?**

In my fiction classes, I often give an assignment to students: The next time you’re reading a novel or watching a movie, stop halfway through. Make a list of the elements you want to be present in the ending in order to be satisfied. The beginning of every story makes promises, and as you sink into it, try to identify what those promises might be. Will we find out who killed the mechanic? Will our main character save her bookshop from being taken over by a venture capitalist? Will our character succeed in law school? Take a moment and imagine the elements of a satisfying ending for the story you’re consuming: the answers to questions, the relationships that get mended or broken, the problems solved or not solved.

**If you’re looking for more ways to conceive your novel’s structure, I recommend one of two approaches: starting with a beat sheet (usually following a hero’s journey arc) or starting with the character’s fatal flaw.**

**FOR THE BEAT SHEET APPROACH:**

■ Read Jessica Brody’s *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*. I really like this book for its unique discussion of genre.

■ To go further, check out John Yorke’s *Into the Woods*, which breaks a story into five acts, and invites the writer to consider symmetry in their planning process.

**FOR THE CHARACTER-FIRST APPROACH:**

■ Read through Lisa Cron’s *Story Genius* and *Wired for Story*. I find her approach to be especially useful at the outlining stage of the process. Cron has the writer excavate the source of the character’s misbelief, what it is that’s driving them to act in a certain way, and a key part of the character arc.

■ The “inside outline” approach Jennie Nash discusses in *Blueprint for a Book* is also wonderfully generative, reminding writers to track how every story event affects the protagonist, making sure the novelist is tracking both internal and external arcs.

Next ask yourself, how do you think this story is going to end? When you get to the end, check your list. What’s there? Was the ending put together in the way you expected? What were the surprises? Often, the most satisfying endings contain the expected elements combined in unexpected ways.

Audiences want an ending that feels both surprising and inevitable, so we, as writers, must begin to lay that groundwork on page one.

Over the years, I’ve been a plotter, and I’ve been a pantsier. These days, I find myself somewhere in between. On those days when I’m struggling to write, I come back to the same questions I ask my thesis students: Why am I writing this? What does my character need to learn? How does the story teach them this lesson? Finally, I consider what elements need to be in the ending, and how I can combine them in a surprising way.



**Nancy Wayson Dinan** is a native Texan who lives in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Her work has appeared in *The Texas Observer*, *LitHub*, *The Paris Review Daily*, and more. She earned her MFA from the Ohio State University in 2013 and her PhD from Texas Tech University in 2020. Her first novel, *Things You Would Know If You Grew Up Around Here* (Bloomsbury) was longlisted for the Center for Fiction’s First Novel Prize. She currently directs the MFA program at Western Kentucky University.

# AUTHOR PROFILE:

## KITTY JOHNSON

By Brittany Clair

**C**ongratulations to Margaret Johnson (writing as Kitty Johnson), winner of the 2024 STAR Award in the general category for her novel *Five Winters*. We caught up with Margaret to learn more about her writing process, how doubt fueled her career, and what it's like to start a new project.



**Kitty Johnson** is the pen name for **Margaret Johnson**. Margaret lives in Norwich, Norfolk, in the UK, with her partner and teenage son. She began her writing career writing romances which were published by small publishers. She then went on to be published extensively by Cambridge University Press in their series for readers learning to speak English. Margaret has also self-published women's fiction and, more recently, her novels *Five Winters* and *Prickly Company* have been published by Lake Union Publishing. *Closest Kept* is to follow in May 2025. A nature lover, Margaret enjoys walking in the local woods and by the sea in Norfolk with her dog. Also an artist, she paints and makes collages in her studio when she has time. Margaret has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia.

**WO:** Tell us about *Five Winters*. What was your greatest challenge in writing it, and how did you overcome it?

**Margaret:** The structure of returning to the same season over a five-year period really helped with the writing, I think. It was a fun challenge! Having this structure did mean I had to find ways to let the reader know what had happened in the intervening months, though. I used some flashbacks and conversations between characters to deliver some of this information. But I also enjoyed thinking of ways to startle the reader into realizing what had happened at the beginning of a new winter with a line of dialogue or a brief, matter-of-fact thought from Beth, the viewpoint character of the book. I imagined the reader thinking, *Oh, wow! Did she really do that?*

**WO:** Tell us about a moment of doubt in your writing journey. How did you respond to it?

**Margaret:** I'm ashamed to admit that around eight or nine years ago, I succumbed to a severe dose of writer envy. It felt as if everyone but me was achieving the success I craved, and I ended up giving up writing for a few years to concentrate on teaching others to write. While I enjoyed doing this, I also felt lost and depleted—not quite me. Writing is a way of life and a large part of my identity. Eventually, I decided I wanted to write—whether I was successful or not—because I loved doing it. Maybe this conscious decision to write for the love of it made a big difference. Perhaps I'd been too focused on getting published before. Anyway, plunging into writing in this way proved to be a game changer for me.

**WO:** In addition to writing, you're also an artist. How does creating artwork serve your writing?

**Margaret:** I'm currently nurturing the habit of creating art more regularly than I've done over the past few years—writing always takes precedence over spending time in my studio. And yet making art is a joy for me, especially when I'm just playing and experimenting without trying to make something "good." I think my art can benefit from the way I approach my writing, and my writing can benefit from the way I approach making art. It's fun—and fruitful—to experiment and try things out with the attitude—*I wonder what would happen if . . .*

## FEATURE

**WO:** How do you transition from one project to the next, and what are your first steps when you begin working on a new manuscript?

**Margaret:** I have been known to write more than one book at a time. After Lake Union Publishing accepted *Five Winters*, I was struck down by panic (imposter syndrome), asking myself, *What can I follow that with? What if I can't follow that? What if? What if?* I had two different ideas—*Prickly Company* and *Closest Kept*—and couldn't decide which was the best one to focus on, so for several months I wrote them both. After around 40,000 words each, I decided to focus on *Prickly Company* (published May 2024). Then I returned to *Closest Kept* (forthcoming in May 2025). But I don't intend to make a habit of writing two novels at once! I'm not sure I have a standard way of approaching a new project or, indeed, of finding ideas for a new project. I don't even seem to have a fixed way of writing itself. It varies for each book! It's a process of collecting puzzle pieces and clues in my mind and letting them mill around until the alchemy kicks in, and they start to fit together. Some of the pieces don't arrive until quite late in the process! At some point the characters speak to each other inside my head, and then I'm good to go.

**WO:** Do you have a favorite craft book?

**Margaret:** I have dipped into various craft books over the years but have rarely read them cover to cover. I learn the most from reading—and rereading—other people's novels. That's much more inspirational to me than any craft book, as are books about creativity, like *Big Magic* by Elizabeth Gilbert. Maybe I prefer to figure out what the learning is myself rather than to be told what I should be doing.

**WO:** How did you become involved with WFWA and what has your experience with the organization been?

**Margaret:** I think I first found out about it—many years ago—through Google. I mentioned it to a friend who was a member, and she didn't think I needed to join such an organization (because I was already published), but I joined anyway, and I'm so glad I did. I wouldn't have my agent without it, as she found me through a pitch event. I've taken part in workshops run by Donald Maass, formed enduring friendships, and watched loads of webinars. It's great to feel part of a supportive community, and I even traveled from the UK to attend the wonderful 10th anniversary conference in 2023! I occasionally attend WFWA Writing Dates too, which I really enjoy, although the time difference means it's the afternoon for me, and mornings are best for me for writing.



### Page 1

It is a truth universally acknowledged that if you have a crush on your best friend's brother when you're aged eleven—flat-chested and too shy to say boo to a goose—he is always going to see you that way. I'd been in love with Mark for as long as I could remember, but now here I was, at his wedding reception in a posh hotel in East London, and Mark was officially off the market.

Mark, with his jumpers that always go bobbly because he keeps them far too long.

His "fun" facts about maths – Beth, did you know, if there are twenty-three people in a room, there's a fifty-fifty chance two of them will have the same birthday?

Mark, with every bit of his lovely dad's kindness, but absolutely none of his practical, DIY skills.

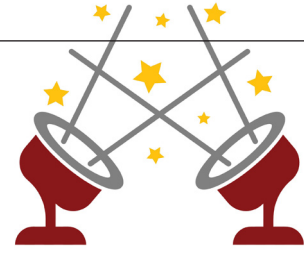
Hooked up. Hitched. Espoused.

Married.

'She looks cold,' Rosie, said of her new sister-in-law.

'A shoulderless, backless dress in December will do that to you.'

I was acting my poor, pathetic butt off in an attempt to convince the world, Mark, and my best friend on earth that I was okay. Trying not to glug my champagne too fast while I watched Grace fitting into Mark's side like a jigsaw piece.



## **LU PONTE FACES ADVERSITY HEAD ON**

Lu Ponte has always known the value of community support when tackling difficult moments, and that's why she was drawn to WFWA's Diversity & Inclusion team.

"I believe that a community becomes stronger and more vibrant when it listens to and supports all of its members with a seat at the table," said Ponte, a retired attorney and law professor.

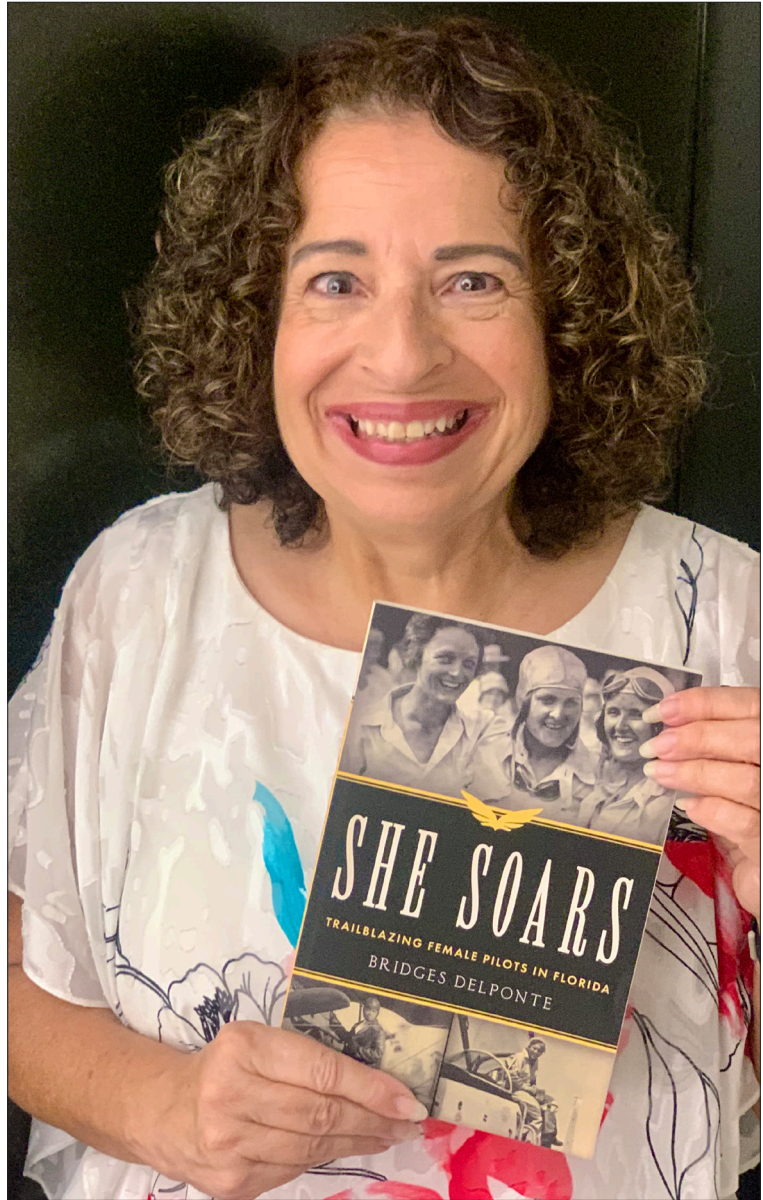
As the former chair of her law school's Multicultural Affairs Committee, Lu is no stranger to dealing with hot button issues—a skill set she's applied often during her three years volunteering with D&I.

Lu helps seek out diverse instructors and collaborates on WFWA training workshops with host Lisa Montanaro. She also ensures D&I-related consistency across the organization, from WFWA's bylaws to website materials. Lu said she's "glad to help strengthen our literary community and to work with other writers in an organization that seeks to hear all voices and provide a seat at the table for all members."

Lu encouraged other writers to remember that although writing is a "very solitary pursuit and you can be in your own head a great deal," fear shouldn't slow you down.

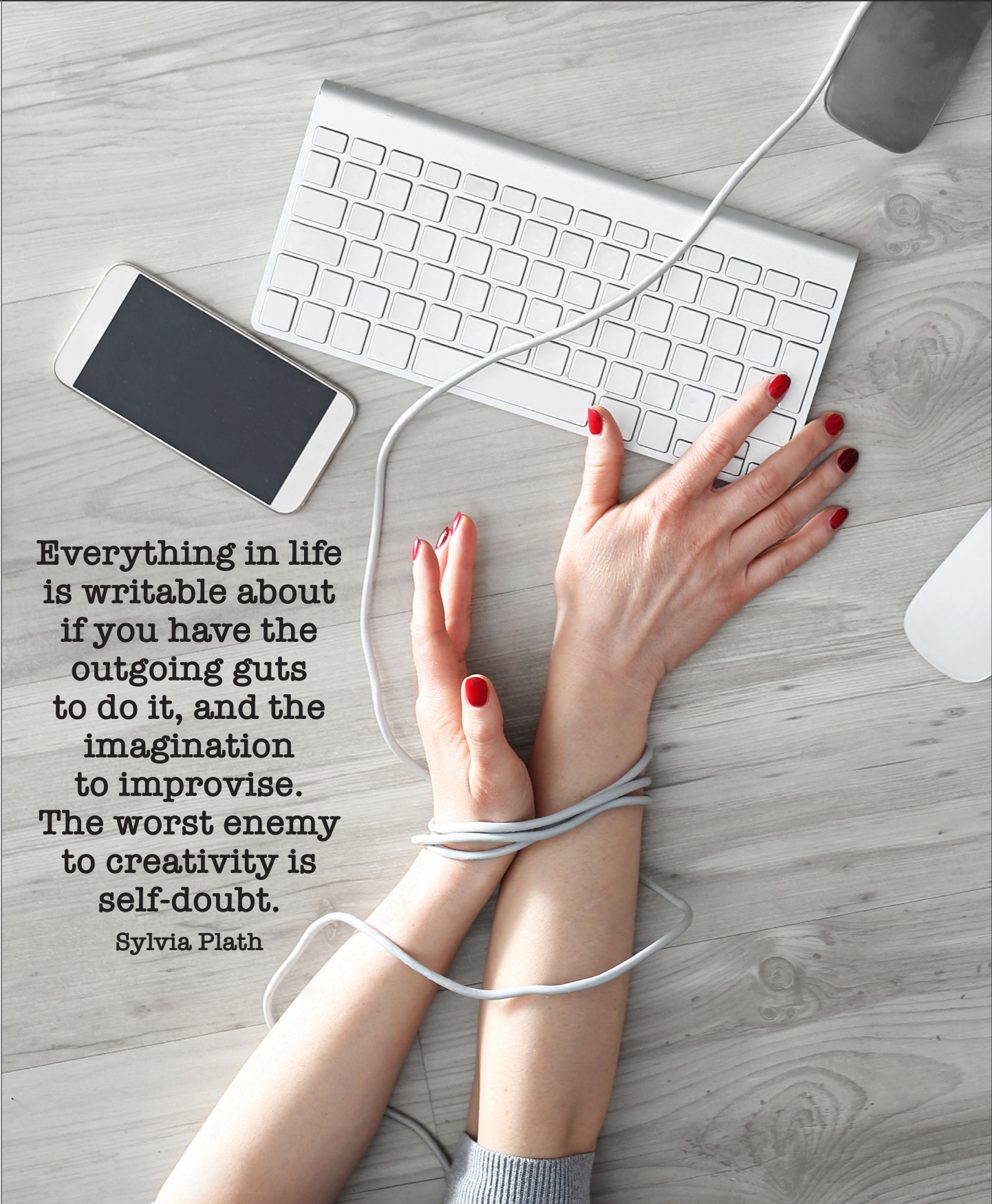
"If you enjoy writing, don't let the naysayers prevent you from expressing yourself," she said.

When she's not helping others tackle the difficult subjects in their writing, Lu works on her own. She's published a variety of award-winning nonfiction and fiction works, but the Southwest Florida resident doesn't spend all her time writing and volunteering. Lu enjoys several outdoor activities, from kayaking and pickleball to stargazing with her telescope. Her indoor hobbies include visiting local art museums and planetarium shows, loom knitting gifts for family and friends, and making art and craft projects out of palm bark sheaths and fronds, an activity she describes as "quirky, but so fun."



**Lucille Ponte**, who writes as Bridges DelPonte, is an award-winning author of fiction and nonfiction. She's written nonfiction, legal mystery, a fantasy novel, and a children's book, in addition to numerous fantasy and science fiction short stories in anthologies.

## FINAL THOUGHT



Everything in life  
is writable about  
if you have the  
outgoing guts  
to do it, and the  
imagination  
to improvise.  
The worst enemy  
to creativity is  
self-doubt.

Sylvia Plath