

# The Florida Writer

August 2020 | Volume 14, Number 4

**6 Secrets to Creating and  
Sustaining Suspense**

**How to Use Pinterest  
to Market Your Book**

**FWA Streaming Media**





# Grant Approved For The Mount Dora Library!



The Florida Writers Foundation is pleased to announce our recent grant to the W.T. Bland Public Library. The grant aims to serve the city of Mt. Dora through “1000 Books Before Kindergarten.” The project, designed to ready one-third of Mount Dora’s kindergarten-bound children for reading success by instilling a love of and family routine of reading through the nationally-renown program, will run for three years. The successful completion of this program exposes children to nearly 1.4 million vocabulary words, compared to less than 5,000 words for a five-year-old child who is never read to.

Our \$1,500-grant will be used to provide a free new book when children reach the 600th book read milestone in the library’s ‘1000 Books Before Kindergarten’ project under the supervision of Cathy Lunday, Library Manager. The grant is expected to help 300 children and their grown-ups.

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Know a qualified organization in Florida, engaging in educational activities and projects that are compatible with the FWF mission of promoting literacy? Urge the leader to contact Melody Dimick, Florida Writers Foundation President at:

**[dimickmelodydean@gmail.com](mailto:dimickmelodydean@gmail.com)**

Qualifying organizations may include public or private schools, PTA’s, nonprofits, or other institutions whose projects and activities fit the parameters, values, and mission of the FWF.

# The Florida Writer

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# The Florida Writer

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS REQUIREMENTS

### Celebrations

We publish announcements for members who have good news to share.

- Submit a one-paragraph announcement written in third person.
- Maximum word count 100
- You may include one headshot or a photo of the front cover of your book to accompany your announcement, but it is not required.
- One entry per issue, per person
- Type “Celebrations” and month of the issue you’re submitting to in the subject line of your submission email.
- Follow all “Additional Requirements” listed below.

### Paragraphs

We publish selected creative writing by members who respond to the issue’s prompt.

- Prose, poetry, and excerpts from longer works that can stand alone are welcome.
- Maximum word count for prose, 700; maximum line count for poetry, 50
- You may include a headshot to accompany your entry, but it is not required.
- One entry per issue, per person
- Type “Paragraphs” and month of the issue you’re submitting to in the subject line of your submission email.
- Include a one line bio, no more than fifteen words including your name.
- Follow all “Additional Requirements” listed below.

### Additional Requirements

1. To be eligible for publication, you must be a member of the Florida Writers Association
2. Send your entire text submission as an attached Word doc. Do not embed any of the text that is part of your submission in the email.
3. Include your name and contact information within the attachment.
4. Photo image files must be high resolution, 300 ppi, jpg or png format, and sent as an attachment, not embedded in a document.
5. Email your submission to *tfw@floridawriters.net*

### Prompts & Deadlines

**October 2020 Issue** – Deadline September 1, 2020

The sense of smell is the most evocative. Write a piece that revolves around an aromatic encounter.

**December 2020 Issue** – Deadline November 1, 2020

The year is coming to a close. Write about something ending and beginning, a metaphorical goodbye and hello.







# How to Be a Writer

Mary Ann de Stefano  
Editor

Fairly frequently, I get a phone call or an email from someone asking me this question: How do I become a writer? I'm always touched by the timorous nature of their queries. Are they asking for permission to write? Do they think there is some special key for admittance to an exclusive writers club? A secret handshake?

Even more mysterious, once I get into a conversation with questioners, they usually tell me they've been writing poems, stories, or nonfiction for a while. Then they say, "But I'm not really a writer."

"Oh yes you are!" I say. And then I tell them: If you want to write, just write. Don't wait for anyone's blessing or endorsement. Just do it. But if you want to develop and grow as a writer, there are three things you can do.

## 1. Make Writing Your Habit

- Exercise your writing muscle regularly. The more you write, the easier it will be to write, and the better you'll get.
- Know that you will never find time to write. You can only make time to write.
- Carry a notebook with you at all times and jot down observations, bits of dialogue, or whatever attracts your senses. Writers pay attention and notice things. Practice paying attention.
- Know that writing can be messy. You won't get it right the first time (or the second or third). No one does. Don't be afraid to make a mess. You can always clean it up later. (Write like no one is looking over your shoulder.)
- Know that learning to write is a lifelong practice. Writing is easy. Writing well isn't.
- Know that most writers have self-doubts—even the pros. Don't wait for the doubts to go away. Write on in spite of them.

## 2. Read, Read, and Read Some More

- Read inside and outside of your genre.
- Read poetry (even if you don't write it). It will inspire you to play with language.
- Read for the pure joy of it, and read like a writer noticing how when the craft works and doesn't work.

- You cannot be a writer without also being a reader. You can learn from classes, books about the craft, and your own writing practice, but there's absolutely no substitute for experiencing for yourself how other writers do it.

## 3. Seek Skills & Support

- Be around people who support your desire to write.
- Sharing the writing journey within a community can lift you up when self-doubt sets in. But remember that writing is not a social activity. Talking about writing is not writing.
- Join and actively participate in a professional group such as the Florida Writers Association.
- Learn about writing from experienced teachers and writers. Attend writing workshops and conferences.
- Read books on craft.
- Don't hide your light under a bushel. Submit your work for peer and professional critique. Enter contests and submit your work for publication.
- Dream big, but be smart. Educate yourself about how the publishing industry works and beware of scams.
- Support your fellow writers. Attend readings and signings and buy books!
- Seek out online opportunities to do all of this during this time of COVID-19 and self-quarantine.

Bottom line, in order to be a writer, you don't necessarily need the classes or the writing groups or the writing friends or even publication as much as you need to write—and read. No special equipment needed. Only paper, pen, and a book. As *Stephen King says in On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, "If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut." ✍️

**Mary Ann de Stefano** has been the editor of *The Florida Writer* since 2013 and publishes MAD's *Monday Muse*. She's an independent editor with 30+ years' experience. Besides working one-to-one with writers who are developing books, she designs websites and organizes writing workshops. Visit [madaboutwords.com](http://madaboutwords.com).





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*Writers Helping Writers*

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Networking: [fwanetwork.ning.com](http://fwanetwork.ning.com)  
Questions: [ContactUs@floridawriters.net](mailto:ContactUs@floridawriters.net)

# News in Brief

**Remote Conference Open for Registration**

Join us October 15th to 18th for valuable workshops, a "send me submissions" agent query panel, the Royal Palm Literary Awards Ceremony, and more—a four-day conference from the comfort of your home for only \$57!

**Promote Your Books or Business**

You can be featured in our Remote Conference Exhibit Hall and conference program. Look for details about sponsor and advertising opportunities on the FWA website.

**Award Nominations Close August 31**

If you know a member who embodies the motto of the Florida Writers Association, "Writers Helping Writers," nominate them for the Kaye Coppersmith Award.

**Volunteer Opportunities**

Join our team and get hands-on experience in social media and marketing. Contact Arielle Haughee at [marketing@floridawriters.net](mailto:marketing@floridawriters.net).

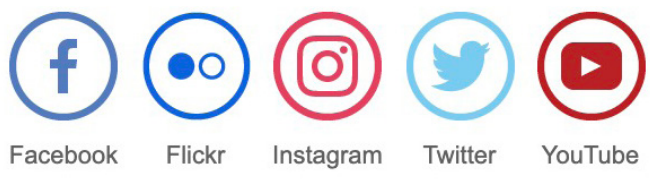
**Regional Directors needed to work with Writers Groups**

To learn more, contact Paul Iasevoli at [piasevoli@yahoo.com](mailto:piasevoli@yahoo.com).

**Welcome New Members: May & June**

Kayla Brown, Deborah Canaday, Jean Coleman, Judy Covarrubias, Deborah Dalton, T Dixon, Cheryl Dougherty, Jane Falkner, Ricardo J Fernandez, Carol Folsom, Lucy Forsting, Rachel Glover, Paige Gorrell, Janice Hardy, Jewell Harwood, Rebecca Johnston, Lucy Lipari, Richard Lipari, Kate McClare, Alicia Morrison, Diane Neumann, Karina Paape, Diane Marie Perrine, Julia Reed, TJ Roark, Warren T. Sedar, Barbara Singer, August Specht, David Spielgel, Betsy Stoutmorrill, Joanne Taillele, Heath Thompson, Laura Thompson, Beverly Tjarks, Lizianny Toth, Betty Viamontes, Ann Wallace, Robert West, Sara-Kay West

**Follow Florida Writers Association & Florida Youth Writers on Social Media**



Website: [floridawriters.net](http://floridawriters.net)





# A Letter from the President

Rick Bettencourt

Dear FWA Member—

Some of you may remember me from chairing agent interviews, speaking at last year's mini-conference, or recall that I managed the association's financials as treasurer and vice president of finance from 2018-20. Additionally, I am a published author—having written several fantasy and LGBT novels. Now, it is my distinct honor to serve as your president for 2020-21.

As your leader, I shall be laser focused on building FWA's infrastructure to sustain us for the long haul. My goal is to expand upon our membership benefits and broaden our outreach so that writers and publishing insiders—at all levels—find maximum value within our organization.

We have a lot of exciting changes in store for you, and I'm thrilled to steer them your way as part of your valued FWA membership.

Here are just a few of the many things going on at FWA:

## New Website

Earlier this year, we signed a contract with MemberClicks—a software provider that works with nonprofits and small organizations—to help us streamline member operations and introduce a new, state-of-the-art website. In January of 2021, we plan on launching a new, secure site that will allow us to provide you more exclusive content, excellent training opportunities, and better network forums. MemberClicks is a flexible, easy-to-use tool. I think you'll love it!

Stay tuned for more. In fact, you will get a peek at our new site during our remote conference in October, which leads me to the next big thing going on at FWA...

## Our First All-Remote Conference

To say 2020 has been trying is the epitome of an understatement. Due to the coronavirus, we had to cancel our in-person conference that a lot of you have come to know and love. However, all is not lost. This year we're hosting an all-remote venue. From the comfort of your home, you can click a button and join us. It'll be packed with the great content you've come to expect from us.

Some benefits you'll get over hiking to Altamonte Springs are:

- Well, not having to hike to Altamonte Springs
- Ability to replay workshops that you were unable to attend or want to see again
- Download presenter notes
- Watch after hours for an extended period after the conference ends
- Not only will you have no hotel and travel expenses to shell out, but we have significantly slashed our prices—only \$57 to attend all four days!

Since the cost of putting this conference on is considerably less, we have passed on a break-even price to you.

If you haven't had the chance to attend one of our conferences before, this year it's time. Check our website for details.

## FWA's 20th Birthday

2021 will mark twenty years that we've been helping writers write, and I could not be more thrilled about the direction we are heading.

We plan on providing many more benefits to you all. Never has your FWA membership been so valuable. The writing industry is continually evolving, and we aim to keep our finger on the pulse and help you prosper. We will offer more tools and opportunities to enhance your craft and build your career whether you're just starting out or have published multiple books.

I look forward to your support and encourage you to reach out to me with your thoughts about FWA. Thank you.

I LOVE this organization!

Regards,  
Rick Bettencourt, President  
Florida Writers Association  
*FloridaWriters.net*

*rick.bettencourt@gmail.com*

**Rick Bettencourt** is an award-winning author and an Amazon bestselling novelist who has published several books, including *Summerwind Magick*, *Building Us*, *Tim on Broadway*, and *Marketing Beef*. He also conducts business and data analysis, speaks on book marketing, writes technical documentation, and manages software projects to help businesses grow profitably.



# 19th Annual Florida Writers

# Remote Conference

Join us remotely on **October 15th - 18th** for a variety of valuable workshops, a "send me submissions" agent query panel, raffle prizes, and a writers' lounge you won't find anywhere else!

The best part?

You get a four-day conference from the comfort of your home for **only \$57!**

- Workshops include:
  - Query Letters That Worked
  - Why You Need an Audiobook & How to Create One
  - Four Marketing Webtools That Get Results
  - How to Create a Dual Timeline Narrative
  - Scrivener 101
  - And SO MUCH MORE!
- RPLA awards ceremony will be Saturday evening
- Conference price for members only
- Sessions will be available to watch at a later time

*Featuring  
Greg Pincus  
and  
Robert Macomber!*

Register at [floridawriters.net](http://floridawriters.net), check website for updates





# Florida Writers Association

## Streaming Media

by Alison Nissen

“**W**hat do you hope to learn from this workshop?” *New York Times* Best-Selling author John Gilstrap asked the audience at Florida Writers Foundation’s Celebrity Workshop one year. He positioned his marker in front of a whiteboard and pointed to the person nearest him.

“How to write a better fight scene,” they answered.

“How to write a thriller.”

“How to write a scene with an explosion.”

Gilstrap solicited each person in attendance for an answer. By the time he pointed to me, I added, “To learn more about writing.”

I am a philologist, a life-long student of writing in all its forms. It’s a topic I never tire of and one I chat about frequently. I’ve even talked about the craft of writing while my hygienist was cleaning my teeth—although she probably didn’t understand much!

I have a philosophy: Give a writer a book, and they will read. Give a writer a platform to share their writing journey, and they will fill an entire conversation! Do you feel this same way? I bet you’ll say yes!

FWA has answered this call to share writers’ journeys with two streaming-media platforms: podcasts and webinars.

*The Florida Writer Podcast: A Discussion about Writing and Other Things* is an audio program (similar to talk radio) that you can listen to from your computer or smartphone whenever it’s convenient—like walking your pet turtle or building a Lego rocket ship. Our podcasts are dialogues between the host (me) and a variety of guests who share their journey, words of wisdom, and writing tips and techniques.

During one, Michael Farrell, the FWA Youth Liaison and our youngest board member, chats about his works-in-progress. In another, last year’s RPLA Book of the Year author Mark Newhouse recounts his winning evening in 2019. There’s even an interview with Florida Poet Laureate Peter Meinke, who shares one of his favorite poems aloud.

Want to share your journey? *The Florida Writer Podcast* is open to all members of FWA (as well as others) who “stop by” and discuss all things writing. Regardless if you are a best-selling author or a beginner, the conversations

are always fun. We end each show with three rapid-fire questions that have nothing to do with writing—questions such as: Do you have any stickers on your refrigerator? Should chocolate have its own holiday?

Complementing the podcast are FWA Webinars that provide continued learning for all writers in an online format. We’ve covered topics such as “Amazon Marketing: A Three-Part Webinar Series,” with Penny Sansevieri, “Get a Clue: How to Write a Great Mystery Novel” with Shannon Winton, and “How to Pitch to a Literary Agent,” by Monica Odom. While these webinars are live for one hour, they are recorded and offered to FWA members (and nonmembers) for later viewing.

During the live webinars, attendees ask the guest presenter questions or make comments that pertain to their own works-in-progress. All from the comfort of their own living rooms! Want to show up in a robe and bunny slippers? Go for it! Nobody’s going to know. Don’t bother binge watching the latest reality show, devour a few of our webinars instead—many of them are even free!

As I mentioned before, I am a geek for all forms of writing and love my time interacting with other writers. If you want to join me on my quest to discover more, both of these platforms can be found on [floridawriters.net](http://floridawriters.net).

Have a topic you want to know more about? Tell me, and I’ll try to find a way to make your wish come true with a webinar. Email [FWAWebinar@gmail.com](mailto:FWAWebinar@gmail.com).

Would you like to participate in *The Florida Writer Podcast*? Send an email to [FloridaWriterPodcast@gmail.com](mailto:FloridaWriterPodcast@gmail.com).

I look forward to hearing from you!

**Alison Nissen** is an FWA board member and the streaming media chair, as well as author of the 2016 RPLA Winner for Unpublished Memoir, *Year Resolve, Courage, Hope*. She is the president of Revel Coach, an inspiration platform for women, a professor at Southeastern University, and writers’ coach. Follow her *Tales from the Laundry Room* at [alisonnissen.com](http://alisonnissen.com).



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## CLEARLY LEGAL

# Public Domain and Proust: A Cautionary Tale

by Anne Dalton, Esquire

Using material from other American writers without permission is problematic. Fair use laws are ambiguous. Court cases often conflict about what is okay and what is not okay. No clear road map exists. Is quoting foreign writers a safe solution to this dilemma?

Let's use the example of a quote from *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust. I recently chatted with a writer on this very subject. Their comment was, "Marcel Proust died in 1922 so his work is in the public domain. I can use it without permission." Were he an American writer that might be true (excluding subsequent translations).

However, American law rarely (if ever) applies to copyrights created and published by French writers, Dutch writers, Russian writers or, indeed, writers of any other nationality who choose not to copyright their work under American law. It is unwise to assume that public domain laws in America cover works created and published in other countries. The law of that country controls.

Another writer chimed into our same discussion, "Well, French law provides that copyright rights expire seventy years after the author's death, so his original copyright ownership must have ended no later than 1992."

Unfortunately for both writers, the truth is that, under some circumstances, proprietary copyrights in France expire 100 years following the writer's death. Further research and exploration would be necessary to determine if Proust were in that category of copyright protection. In addition, since Proust's brother Robert finalized the last three volumes of this work, Robert would be credited as a joint copyright owner under French law. His date of death (1935) would be counted for purposes of copyright determination as to those volumes.

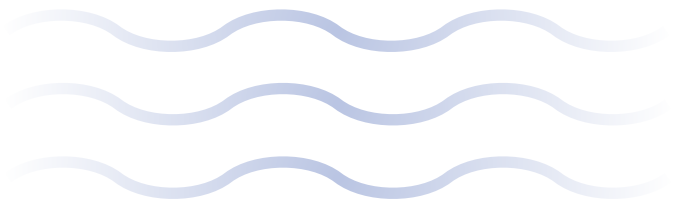
Were an author to mistakenly believe that American copyright law supersedes the law of a foreign country as to writers in that foreign country, the author could be sued under the laws of that foreign country. This is especially troublesome in these days of international availability of published books through Amazon and other sources.

While it is beyond the scope of this column to discuss collectability in America for a foreign judgment and injunction rendered in a copyright violation case, suffice it to say that such collection action would be painful and expensive for the violating American writer. In addition, it could seriously affect that writer's future relationship with entities such as Amazon and other distribution outlets.

At the end of the day, quoting foreign writers is NOT a solution here. Asking permission is always the safest route, no matter what the origin of that other work. ✎

**Comments contained in this article are informational only and do not constitute legal advice. Please seek the advice of an attorney of your choice regarding specific factual issues.**

**Anne Dalton**, Esquire, has provided business and personal legal services to writers and other creatives in all phases of their creative development for 43 years. She proudly serves as General Counsel and Director Emerita to the Florida Writers Association and is an FWA Lifetime Member. She is licensed in Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania, and her credentials can be viewed at [daltonlegal.com](http://daltonlegal.com). Contact her at [adalton@daltonlegal.com](mailto:adalton@daltonlegal.com).



# How to Use Pinterest to Market Your Book (and Why You'd Want To!)



by Penny Sansevieri

**W**ith the growth of other visual social media sites like Instagram, it seems like the buzz about Pinterest has really died down, but that doesn't mean its popularity has waned.

Pinterest continues to grow. In 2019 Pinterest became a publicly traded company and in Q2 of 2019, it reported higher than expected earnings—62% higher than the previous year. Still not convinced you should spend time on Pinterest? Let's look at the average user demographic.

- According to Pinterest, two thirds of all active users are female and 43% of people online (in the US) are on the platform.
- Here is where it gets really interesting: 8 out of 10 (US) moms are on Pinterest—and we know that women are often primary book buyers.
- Got a book directed at the millennial market? Pinterest has you covered there, too. More than half of US millennials are on Pinterest.
- 68% of Pinners have discovered a new product on Pinterest. That discovery could be your book.

Convinced? Great! Let's look at where to start.

## Setting up Your Pinterest Page

If you've already set up your page to market your book, stay with me because there are some pieces you may have neglected to include like your bio, website URL—all of which are important. Make sure your bio matters and keep it short and to the point.

Once you've established your profile page, connect your account with your other social media sites like Instagram and YouTube. Make sure you validate your website URL (Pinterest calls it "claim your URL") so folks can pin stuff from your website, which, as you'll see, is super important.

## The Secret Formula for Great Pinterest Boards

There isn't a magic number of boards you should have to get better visibility, but I'd recommend starting with five. For nonfiction authors, the idea for these boards might come easy. Fiction authors always find this harder. Regardless of your genre, here are some ideas to get you started (or to add to what you already have):

**About your book.** A great place to showcase your cover and maybe other covers that didn't make the cut. You might include an unboxing picture of you opening up your first box of books. You could add pictures from book events, speaking events, etc.

**Tips from your book** for nonfiction authors this is pretty simple and an easy add. This is also a great place to pin blog posts that are directly related to your book.

**Book creation:** Readers are always interested in the creative process. Try pictures of your workspace, pictures of your manuscript through the editing process, research you did, etc.

**Settings/costumes/historical stuff.** I've pulled these into a one-line item, though they can each be separate boards. I've seen historical fiction authors especially have some real fun with this. Even if you haven't written anything historical, you can always fill the settings board with images of the town or city the story takes place in—even if the town is imaginary (as many are). Use your creativity.

**Fun/inspirational quotes/other books/favorite things.** This is where the boards can get more personal; you're sharing a bit about yourself. One thing we know is that users on Pinterest love quotes, so I'd for sure have a quotes board. But you could also do book recommendations and some of your favorite things—really let your personality shine!

The idea behind creating is to invite readers into your world. By doing so, you let the reader get to know you better. We buy stuff from people we like, so make the





boards and the pins a true reflection of yourself and your work.

## Optimizing Your Pinterest Boards

One thing I really love doing is using keywords in my board names and my pins. I'll use trending hashtags, too, of course—but trending hashtags may fall off the reader's radar screen, whereas keywords have a longer shelf life. Using keyword-specific boards and pins to market your book is a great way to come up in searches, too.

The dominant feature of Pinterest is the visual nature of the site. Up your image game so that users will love and want to share what you share.

You can get fairly inexpensive images at sites like Adobe Stock Images and Canva. You can use Canva to create some beautiful branded images, too. Every single image you post should be branded to you, your book. At the very least it should have your website address so when the image is getting repinned, all roads lead back to you!

Now let's talk about the number of pins per board. While each board will vary in terms of content, it's been my experience that boards with 10-12 pins do better than boards that have only a few images. Keep that in mind as you're setting up boards.

## How to Create a Pinterest Presence that Converts Users into Readers

As with anything you do to market your book, it's important to understand what your reader wants. And by that I mean, what they really want. What drives reader engagement? What are your readers looking for, and moreover, what are they searching for?

Understanding this is the first step to crafting a Pinterest page readers will love and gravitate to.

Do your research and learn from the experts. Identify other authors in your genre, follow them on Pinterest, and get a sense for what they're doing. This will help you identify what might work for your readers.

I'm not suggesting you copy anyone here, but rather learn from great examples and go to enough pages to get the creative juices flowing. When you're ready, experiment with your own page and see what's pulling in readership.

You can also gauge this by the number of repins and shares for any particular image/post you have up, too.

Once your boards are up and populated with images, you'll quickly be able to see what's working and what isn't.

## How Often Should You Pin?

The good thing about Pinterest is that it doesn't require as much care and feeding as, let's say, Facebook, though I suggest getting on a few times a week to put up new content—more if you are getting ready to release a book or during book launch week.

## Does Any of This Sell Books?

That's always the million-dollar question, isn't it? Does any of this stuff really matter to readers?

The short answer is yes. Building community with your reader, drawing them into your knowledge base or your stories, is a great way to build a relationship with your reader.

People buy from people they like. Pinterest (like any social media site) is one piece of the pie, one way to drive more interest to your message by using colorful, great (branded) images and content that's of interest to your audience.

The reality is that no one particular marketing strategy always sells books—book sales are more the result of a carefully woven tapestry of all the things your readers engage with, and that will drive more readers to you and more sales to your book. We know that exposure (the right

kind) does sell books, and Pinterest is a great way to build not only exposure, but great reader relationships as well! 📖

**The dominant feature of Pinterest is the visual nature of the site. Up your image game so that users will love and want to share what you share.**

**Penny C. Sansevieri**, Founder and CEO of Author Marketing Experts, Inc., is a best-selling author and internationally recognized book marketing and media relations expert. She is an adjunct professor teaching self-publishing for NYU and was named one of the top influencers of 2019 by *New York Metropolitan Magazine*. To learn more about Penny's books or her promotional services, visit [amarketingexpert.com](http://amarketingexpert.com).



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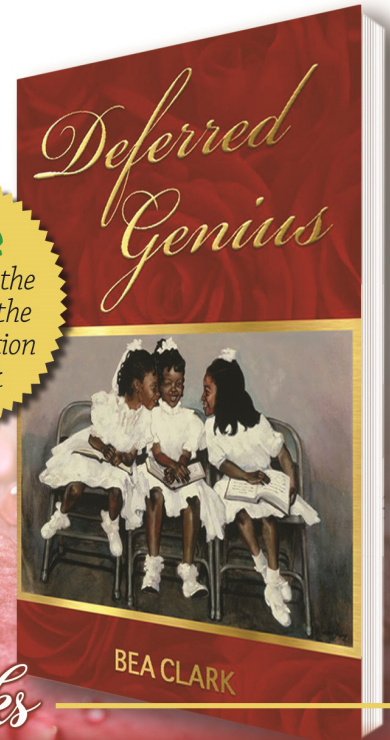
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# 6 Secrets to Creating and Sustaining Suspense

by Steven James

**T**hriller writing? Mystery writing? Literary fiction? It's all the same: Building apprehension in the minds of your readers is one of the most effective keys to engaging them early in your novel and keeping them flipping pages late into the night.

Simply put, if you don't hook your readers, they won't get into the story. If you don't drive the story forward by making readers worry about your main character, they won't have a *reason* to keep reading.

Think: Worry equals suspense.

The best part is, the secrets for ratcheting up the suspense are easy to implement. Here are six of the most effective.

## 1. Put characters that readers care about in jeopardy.

Four factors are necessary for suspense—reader empathy, reader concern, impending danger, and escalating tension.

We create reader empathy by giving the character a desire, wound, or internal struggle that readers can identify with. The more they empathize, the closer their connection with the story will be. Once they care about and identify with a character, readers will be invested when they see the character struggling to get what he most desires.

We want readers to worry about whether or not the character will get what he wants. Only when readers know what the character wants will they know what's at stake. And only when they know what's at stake will they be engaged in the story. To get readers more invested in

your novel, make clear: 1) What your character desires (love, freedom, adventure, forgiveness, etc.); 2) what is keeping him from getting it; and 3) what terrible consequences will result if he doesn't get it.

Suspense builds as danger approaches. Readers experience apprehension when a character they care about is in peril. This doesn't have to be a life-and-death situation. Depending on your genre, the threat may involve the character's physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, or relational well-being. Whatever your genre, show that something terrible is about to happen—then postpone the resolution to sustain the suspense.

We need to escalate the tension in our stories until it reaches a satisfying climax. Raise the stakes by making the danger more imminent, intimate, personal, and devastating. So, if the moon explodes in Act 1, the entire galaxy better be at risk by Act 3. If tension doesn't escalate, the suspense you've been developing will evaporate.

It's like inflating a balloon—you can't let the air out of your story; instead, you keep blowing more in, tightening the tension until it looks like the balloon is going to pop at any second.

Then blow in more.

And more.

Until the reader can hardly stand it.

Incidentally, this is one reason why adding sex scenes to your story is actually counterintuitive to building suspense. By releasing all the romantic or sexual tension you've been building, you let air out of the balloon. If you want to titillate, add sex; if you want to build suspense, postpone it.



## 2. Include more promises and less action.

Suspense happens in the stillness of your story, in the gaps between the action sequences, in the moments between the promise of something dreadful and its arrival.

When I was writing my novel *The Bishop*, I began with the goal of letting the entire story span only 52 hours. I thought that by packing everything into a tight time frame I would really make the story suspenseful.

As I worked on the book, however, I realized that there was so much that needed to happen to build to the climax that if I kept to my 52-hour timeframe, events would need to occur one after another so quickly that there wouldn't be space for suspense to happen among them. Finally, I added another 24 hours to the story to create the opportunity for the promises and payoffs that would make the story suspenseful.

If readers complain that “nothing is happening” in a story, they don't typically mean that no action is occurring, but rather that no promises are being made.

Contrary to what you may have heard, the problem of readers being bored isn't solved by adding action but instead by adding apprehension. Suspense is anticipation; action is payoff. You don't increase suspense by “making things happen,” but by promising that they will. Instead of asking, “What needs to happen?” ask, “What can I promise will go wrong?”

Stories are much more than reports of events. Stories are about transformations. We have to show readers where things are going—what situation, character, or relationship is going to be transformed.

Of course, depending on your genre, promises can be comedic, romantic, horrific, or dramatic. For example, two lovers plan to meet in a meadow to elope. That's a promise.

But the young man's rival finds out and says to himself, “If I can't have her, no one can.” Then he heads to the field and hides, waiting for them, dagger in hand.

The lovers arrive, clueless about the danger ...

Milk that moment; make the most of the suspense it offers.

And then show us what happens in that meadow. In other words ...

## 3. Keep every promise you make.

In tandem with making promises is the obligation of keeping them. The bigger the promise, the bigger the payoff. For example, in my first novel I had the killer tell a woman whom he'd abducted, “Your death will be remembered for decades.” That's a huge promise to readers. I'd better fulfill it by making her death memorable or terrifying. In another book I had a character say to the hero that the villain had “a twist waiting for you at the end that you would never expect.”

Another huge promise. Readers think, okay, buddy. Let's see if you deliver.

That's what you want.

So you'd better deliver.

A huge promise without the fulfillment isn't suspense—it's disappointment.

Every word in your story is a promise to the reader about the significance of that word to the story as a whole. This is where so many authors—both of suspense novels and of fiction in other genres—fumble the ball. If you spend three paragraphs describing a woman's crimson-colored sweater, that sweater better be vital to the story. If not, you're telling readers, “Oh, by the way, I wasted your time. Yeah, that part really wasn't important to the story.”

Never disrespect your readers like that.

When stories falter it's often because the writers didn't make big enough promises, didn't fulfill them when readers wanted them to be fulfilled, or broke promises by never fulfilling them at all.

Here's a great way to break your promise to the reader: Start your story with a prologue, say, in which a woman is running on a beach by herself, and there are werewolves on the loose. Let's see if you can guess what's going to happen. Hmm ... what a twist this is going to be—she gets attacked by the werewolves! Wow. What a fresh, original idea that was.

How is that a broken promise? Because it was predictable. Readers want to predict what will happen, but they want

**Think:  
Worry  
equals  
suspense.**



## Creating Suspense Using Genre Elements

	<b>MYSTERY</b>	<b>HORROR</b>	<b>SUSPENSE</b>
<b>Time of Crime or Crisis Event</b>	The violence occurs before the story begins.	Readers see it happening.	Readers anticipate that it will happen.
<b>Narrative Question</b>	Who was responsible for the crime?	How will the character die?	How can the crisis or impending crime be averted?
<b>Reader Orientation</b>	Readers may lag behind the detective in understanding the clues.	Readers view the action; they're in on the secret.	Readers know about danger that the characters do not.
<b>Reader Appeal</b>	Head (intellectual curiosity)	Gut (visceral reaction)	Heart (worry and concern)

to be wrong. They're only satisfied when the writer gives them more than they anticipate, not less.

I'm always annoyed when an author introduces a character, gives me background information on where she went to college, what she studied, her love interests, her favorite snack food and so on, and then kills her off right away or fails to give her any significant role in the story.

When readers invest their time, they want that investment to pay off.

Make big promises.

Then keep them.

### 4. Let the characters tell readers their plans.

I know, this seems counterintuitive. Why would we want readers to know what's going to happen? Doesn't that give the ending away?

I'm not talking about revealing your secrets or letting readers know the twists that your story has in store. Instead, just show readers the agenda, and you'll be making a promise that something will either go wrong to screw up the schedule, or that plans will fall into place in a way that propels the story (and the tension) forward.

Simply by having your characters tell readers their schedules, you create a promise that can create anticipation and build suspense:

- "I'll see you at the 4 o'clock briefing."
- "Let's meet at Rialto's for supper at 8."
- "All right, here's what I have lined up for the rest of the morning: Follow up on the fingerprints, track down Adrian, and then stop by the prison and have a little chat with Donnie 'The Midnight Slayer' Jackson."

A story moves through action sequences to moments of reorientation when the characters process what just happened and make a decision that leads to the next scene. We do this in real life as well—we experience something moving or profound, we process it, and then we decide how to respond. Problem is, in those moments of reflection, a story can drag, and the suspense can be lost. During every interlude between scenes a promise must be either made or kept.

And, if you resolve one question or plot thread (that is, you keep a promise you made earlier), introduce another twist or moral dilemma (in other words, make another promise).

When a story lags it's almost always because of missing tension (there's no unmet desire on the part of the characters) or not enough escalation (there's too much repetition). To fix this, show us how deeply the character wants something but cannot get it, and escalate the story by making it even more difficult to get.





## 5. Cut down on the violence.

The more violence there is, the less it will mean.

This was a problem I faced with my thriller *The Knight*. In the story, a killer is reenacting 10 crimes from a 13th-century manuscript that was condemned by the church. If I showed all 10 crimes, the story would have certainly included lots of gruesome violence, but the murders would have gotten boring after a while. Instead, my investigator finds out about the killings partway through the crime spree, and he has to try and stop the killer before the final grisly crime.

A murder is not suspense. An abduction with the threat of a murder is.

If you want readers to emotionally distance themselves from the story, show one murder after another, after another, after another; but if you want to build tension, cut down on the violence and increase the readers' apprehension about a future violent act.

The scariest stories often contain very little violence.

And, of course, different genre elements dictate different means of suspense. In a mystery you might find out that a person was beheaded. This occurs before the narrative begins, so the focus of the story is on solving the crime. If you're writing a horror story, you'll show the beheading itself—in all of its gory detail. If you're writing suspense, the characters in the story will find out that someone is going to be beheaded, and they must find a way to stop it.

Reader expectations, and the depth and breadth of what is at stake in the story, will determine the amount of mystery, horror, or suspense you'll want to include. Nearly all genres include some scenes with them. As a writer, it's vital that you become aware of how you shape those sequences to create the desired effect on your reader—curiosity, dread, or apprehension (see the chart on this page).

Also, remember that valuing human life increases suspense. Because readers feel suspense only when they care about what happens to a character, we want to

heighten their concern by heightening the impact of the tragedy. Show how valuable life is. The more murders your story contains, the more life will seem cheap, and if it's cheap, readers don't need to be concerned if it's lost.

## 6. Be one step ahead of your readers.

When I write my novels, I'm constantly asking myself what readers are hoping for, wondering about, or questioning at each point in the story. Our job as writers is to give them what they want, when they want it—or, to add a twist so that we give them more than they ever bargained for.

Here are some ways to amp up the suspense.

As you develop your story, appeal to readers' fears and phobias. (Phobias are irrational fears, so to be afraid of a cobra is not a phobia, but to be afraid of all snakes is.) Most people are afraid of helplessness in the face of danger. Many are afraid of needles, the dark, drowning, heights and so on. Think of the things that frighten you most, and you can be sure many of your readers will fear them as well.

Make sure you describe the setting of your story's climax before you reach that part of the story. In other words, let someone visit it earlier and foreshadow everything you'll need for readers to picture the scene when the climax arrives. Otherwise you'll end up stalling out the story to describe the setting, when you should be pushing through to the climax.

Countdowns and deadlines can be helpful but can work against you if they don't feed the story's escalation. For example, having every chapter of your book start one hour closer to the climax is a gimmick that gets old after a while because it's repetitious and predictable—two things that kill escalation. Instead, start your countdown in the middle of the book. To escalate a countdown, shorten the time available to solve the problem.

As you build toward the climax, isolate your main character. Remove his tools, escape routes and support system (buddies, mentors, helpers, or defenders). This forces him to become self-reliant and makes it easier for

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(there's too much  
repetition).**



you to put him at a disadvantage in his final confrontation with evil.

Make it personal. Don't just have a person get abducted—let it be the main character's son. Don't just let New York City be in danger—let Gramma live there.

No matter what you write, good prose really is all about sharpening the suspense. Follow these six secrets, and you'll keep your readers up way past their bedtime.

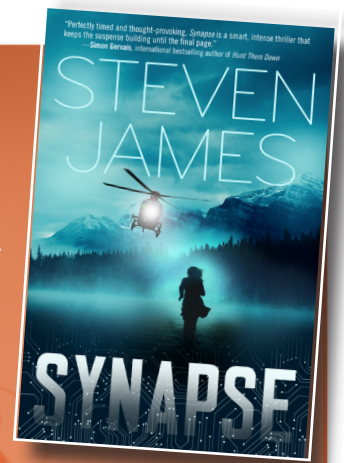
*This article originally appeared in *Writer's Digest Magazine* and is reprinted here with permission.*

**Steven James** is the critically acclaimed author of seventeen novels. He has served as a contributing editor to *Writer's Digest Magazine* and is the author of the groundbreaking book *Story Trumps Structure* as well as the award-winning guidebook used by thousands of novelists, *Troubleshooting Your Novel*. *Publishers Weekly* calls him "[a] master storyteller at the peak of his game."

When he's not working on his next novel, Steven teaches Novel Writing Intensive retreats across the country with *New York Times* best-selling author Robert Dugoni.



Steven James's latest book is a near-future sci-fi thriller called *Synapse* that received starred reviews from both *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal*.



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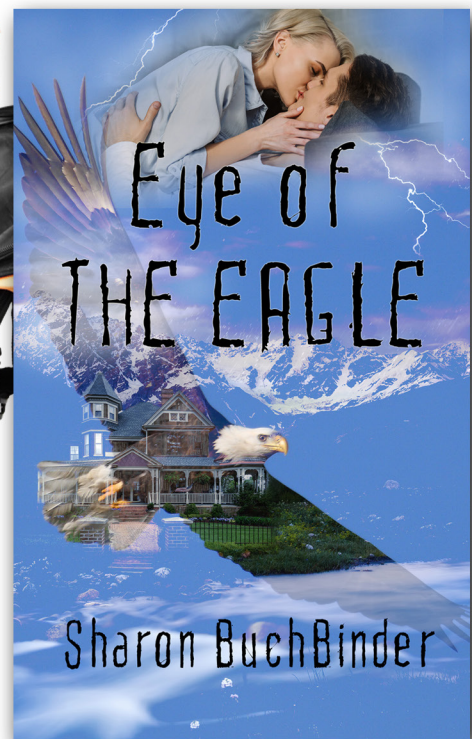
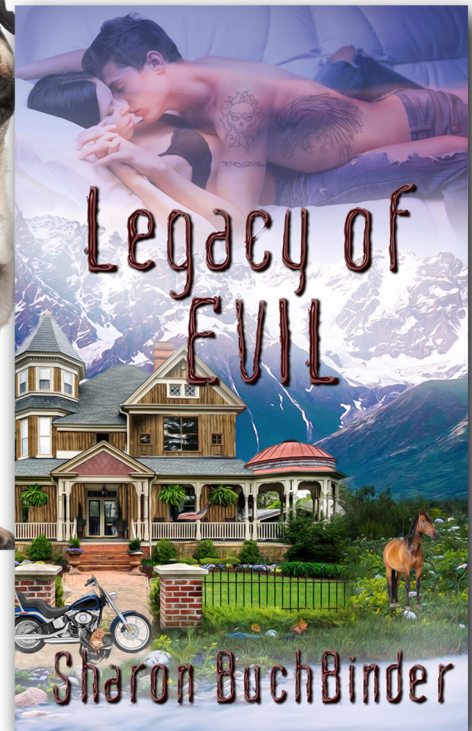
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# Training to Be a Good Writer

by Leo Babauta

I'm not going to claim to be the world's greatest writer, but I do think I'm reasonably competent. I've been training for 25 years, and I make a living as a writer.

For those who are just starting out as writers, I'd like to share my training. I didn't wake up and suddenly know how to write—I've been training for most of my life.

A short background on my writing career: I started out as a sportswriter as a senior in high school and eventually became a full-time reporter and then editor for my local paper on Guam. I went on to do freelance writing for magazines and other publications and worked as a bill writer for lawmakers and a speechwriter for the Guam governor. Eventually, I started my own blog while doing freelance blogging for about 5 different blogs. Finally, I've written my blog for almost 10 years now, and have written numerous books and courses.

Here are the most important aspects of my training, in no particular order:

**Write every day.** I write pretty much every single day. Not just once or twice a week, but every day in various forms: for my blog, for my Sea Change Program, or for a new book or course I might be creating. This is perhaps the most important thing I've done in these 25 years, because constant practice has smoothed out the rough edges a bit and made the difficult obstacles a lot less scary. I recommend doing a daily or every-other-day blog.

**Learn to overcome the resistance.** Every writer faces the resistance that keeps them from writing, the procrastination urge that pushes them toward distraction and busywork. I'm not immune, but I've learned to face the resistance instead of running from it. I've learned not to be so scared of it. I've learned to just get started without thinking too much about it. If resistance is stopping you from writing every day, face it down and don't back away.

**See writing as a mindfulness practice.** I see writing as a form of meditation where I can let everything else fall away for a few moments and just stay with this one activity. That means I need to get my mind into the writing space, notice when the urge to go to distraction comes up, and not just automatically follow the urge. I can look within myself and let feelings flow out through the written word or see the truths within me and try to channel those onto the page.

**Do timed writing sessions.** Just as you might set a timer for meditation, it's beautifully helpful to set a timer for writing sessions. You might do a 10-minute session just letting the words flow and trying to stay mindful during that 10 minutes. Knowing it's a limited time allows you to let go of some of your fears and just be present with the writing.

**Learn to deal with the fears.** All writers grapple with fears: fear of failure and not being good enough, fear of discomfort, uncertainty, and going into places that scare us. Some let fears stop them from starting or running to distraction. But I've found it useful to learn to stay with the fears and write anyway. Yes, you can be very uncomfortable and filled with uncertainty but still write. You can sit with the fear for a minute, and then start writing. Fears aren't so bad when you allow yourself to face them.

**Care about the basics.** That means trying to get good at spelling and grammar, the basics of writing. When you're done writing, run it through a spellcheck and try to learn the words you missed. Look up words often in a dictionary. Let a friend proofread your work and try not to make the same mistakes over and over again.

**Learn to write on deadline.** One of the most valuable skills I learned as a newspaper reporter was how to write



on deadline. Every day, we had to submit one or more articles (sometimes five or six of them!), and we had an editor trying to meet her own submissions deadlines breathing down our necks. There's pressure, but what you learn is that you can get the article done on time if you focus. You learn not to worry about perfection, not to let the fears get in the way, and just to get the words out. You learn how to revise quickly. If you don't work for a newspaper, set a deadline for yourself, tell it to someone else, send them your writing by the deadline or suffer a consequence.

**Read a lot.** The best writers (those far better than me) read voraciously. I read all the time. Fiction is my favorite, but I also read nonfiction books and long-form articles online. Reading good writing shapes your own writing, giving you inspiration and expanding your use of language. Read a lot!

**Learn from others.** When you find a writer who does something beautifully, try to mimic them in your own writing. Mix their style in with what you already do, remix it with what you find elsewhere, and make it your own.

**Keep notes on writing.** When you find something worth stealing, add it to a text doc or put it in a writing notebook. When you have ideas for a novel, a blog post, a character, an insight ... add it to the notebook. Mine it regularly.

**Find fellow writers.** If you're having trouble sticking to a writing schedule, find other writers in your area or online, and meet with them regularly. Share your writing with each other, discuss problems you're having, read other writers in your genre. A small writing group is a time-tested tool, and helps you see that you're not in this alone.

**Understand the reader.** Another of the most important things I learned as a newspaper reporter was to understand the mindset of the reader. Many beginning writers just write whatever is in their heads, but then it might not be so understandable or interesting to the reader. These days I think in terms of how the reader will understand the article, what context they need, how clear my sentences are, what experience I'm creating for the reader.

So all this might seem like a lot to take on! It's doable, though, if you just keep churning away, every day, and learn all of this a little at a time.

Anyone can write, and everyone should. You don't have to be James Joyce to write. Even if you never want to be a pro, you can write in a journal every day, or write letters to a loved one (and send them or not). You don't have to be polished. And it's a great practice to learn to focus and overcome fears and procrastination, and learn to allow the words to flow from the mind.

Start where you are! Whether you've been writing for a few years or you're just starting out, whether you have a talent for words or you struggle, that is the place to start. It doesn't matter where you are, or how you compare to others—just write, working with whatever you're struggling with. You'll get better over the course of time, and more comfortable with what you're doing.



You'll get good writing a lot—and *caring about your writing*. You'll never be perfect at it—goodness knows I'm far from perfect—but the only way to get better is to practice. And to care about what you're doing. Do that every day, and every step of the struggle will be an amazing one. ✨

**Leo Babauta** a simplicity blogger and author. He created *Zen Habits*, a Top 25 blog with a million readers. He's also a best-selling author, a husband, father of six children, and a vegan. In 2010 he moved from Guam to San Francisco, where he leads a simple life. Website: [zenhabits.net](http://zenhabits.net)







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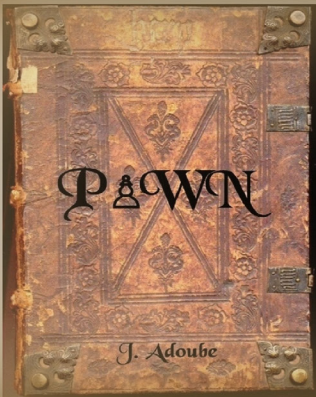
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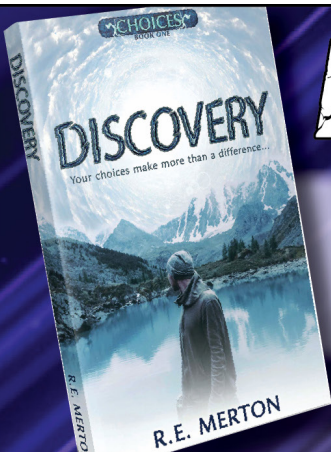
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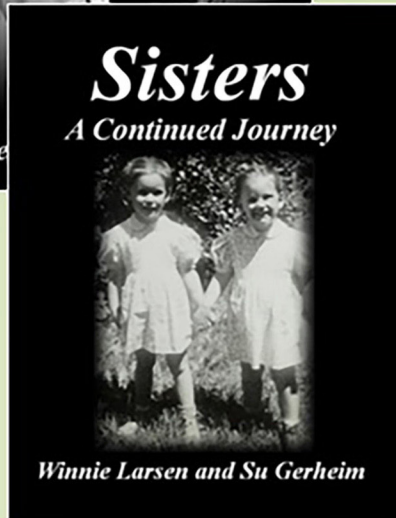
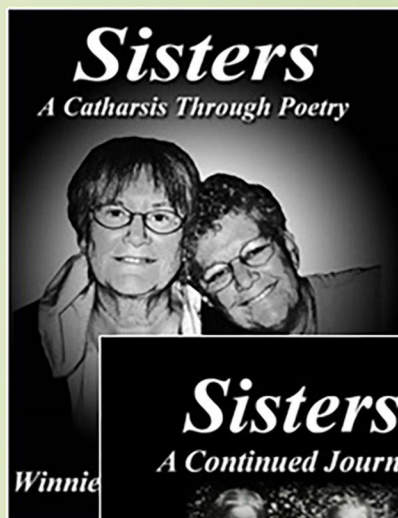
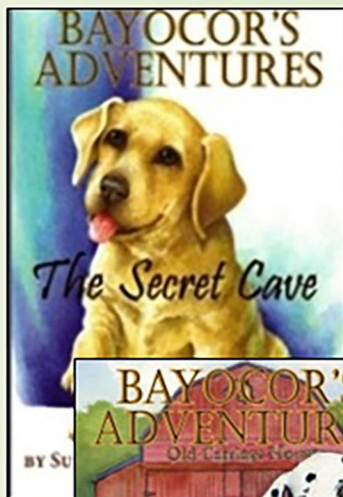
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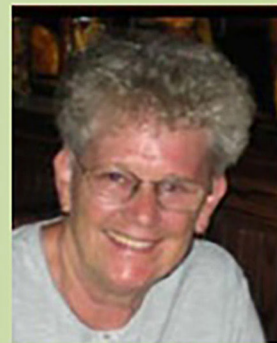




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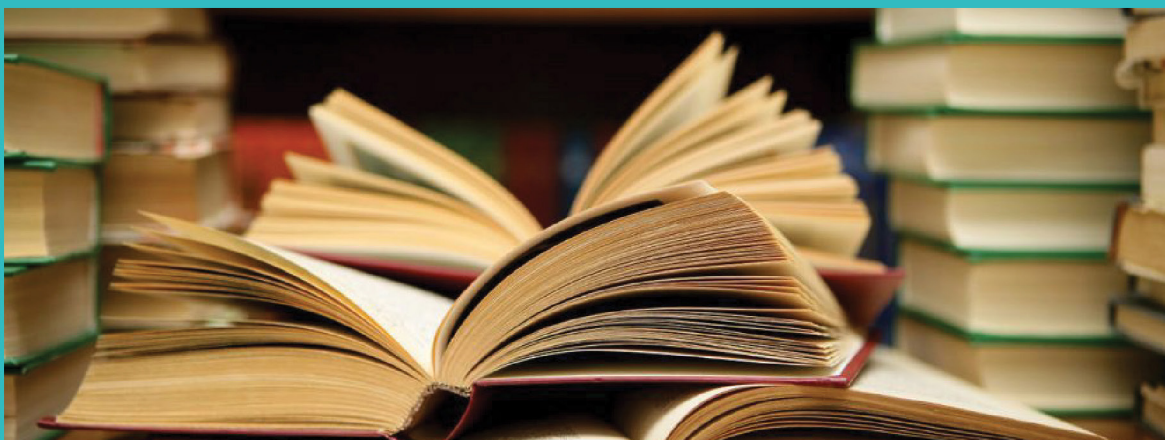
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## A Way Out

by Bob Ellis

As the *Money Bags* neared Bimini, I pulled the nine-millimeter from my day bag and approached Lenny at the con. “Steer 205 degrees,” I ordered, showing him the Beretta.

“What the hell, Jimmy?”

“How much did you steal?”

He hesitated for a few moments, then eyed the gun again. “Almost five million,” he replied. “Are you going to kill me? Or strand me there?” He pointed at the approaching sand bar now prominent above the water.

Lenny is, was, my partner at Fisher and Sifer, Investment Consultants. Prosecutors and newspaper reporters will say I should have noticed the missing money earlier, but we had been friends since seventh grade. Lenny has, as they say, an outsized personality, especially when compared to my quieter demeanor. Perhaps I had been blind to his big new boat, the million-dollar house in Mariner Cay, the new Jaguar. I was his best man when he married Tiffany, his second wife, two years ago.

My first real clue came when Mrs. Greenwald, a friend of my Mother’s, called.

“Dear, I think there is an error on last month’s statement. I don’t see my lovely Exxon stock.”

I researched the missing stock. While I was puzzling over the stock’s sale by Lenny two weeks ago, I received an email from Mack Stevens, a local doctor, and another client.

“Noticed a discrepancy on my April statement,” the email read. “Looks like half my Vanguard Bond Fund is missing.”

Additional research proved he, too, was right.

Sweat beaded at my hairline. I reviewed the firm’s trading blotter where all transactions are required to be recorded. The securities’ sales were listed, but the cash never made it into the clients’ accounts. Over one-million dollars’ worth of trades I knew nothing about, from this month alone.

“No way out, no way out,” I kept repeating to myself. I’ll wind up in jail. Lose all my savings. House, gone; family, gone. The gripping pain in my chest tightened as I mentally tolled the impact of Lenny’s crimes.

Decisively marching to Lenny’s office, I tell him we are sailing across to the Bahamas tomorrow morning. He started to ask why, but I put my finger to my lips. “See you at the marina at seven.” I needed to hear from him what was going on; why my best friend and business partner was a crook.

That night I couldn’t sleep. Yep, Lenny loses the yacht, house, his Jag, Tif’s Mercedes, and then probably Tiffany. But I lose every bit of money put away for Pat and my retirement, as well as our more modest house and cars. Ever the dutiful husband and father, I had ensured there was ample savings for our retirement, plus large insurance policies in case of my death.

Next morning, under a lowering sky full of clouds, I helped cast off the *Money Bags* and then jumped aboard the fifty-foot Hatteras. I threw my day bag aboard and remained well aft while Lenny drove the boat towards the Bahamas. We sailed out the Manatee Pocket and Sebastian Inlet towards Bimini Island. We didn’t speak a word, the noise of the diesels and our physical distance making conversation impossible.

Nearing Bimini, I confronted Lenny. For some reason, I never did ask him “Why?” The damage to our lives, our clients, and our families was done. I couldn’t face my future, any more than I could pull that trigger. How could I explain? How could I do ten-plus years in jail? I had researched the penalties, along with the tides, on the internet the night before.

The Feds would take everything to repay the clients, but they couldn’t touch my life insurance, which named Pat and the boys as beneficiaries, provided it hadn’t paid out. For the next three years, all our assets would be seized, but, if my body was not found, it would be seven years before I was declared dead. Belatedly, my family would get the insurance.

As Lenny drove his boat out of sight, I stood on my sandbar, the gun in one hand and the wrench I had used to open his boat’s seacocks in the other. The tide started to rise. It was my only way out! 🚢

Bob Ellis, retired exec, has lived on three continents and swum in all the oceans!



## False Positive

by Ellen Holder

Megan's hand shook as she reached for her water glass. Tension, all too familiar, filled the air. Her husband had agreed to this lunch date, even though he complained he was covered up at work. They spent very little time together, and she was beginning to wonder if that's what he preferred.

Now they were seated at a sidewalk café. Jack sipped his coffee and the rich aroma drifted her way.

With narrowed eyes, he glanced at her salad plate. "You're not eating. What's bothering you now?"

She chose her words carefully. "I worry about your long hours. Look, I don't want to argue. Let's try to enjoy this break."

"Any time I get to stop and have lunch, it's a treat." He was polite but his tone was distant. He ate distractedly, as if he'd like to be elsewhere.

"Will you be home for dinner? We could talk more then."

Jack's eyes slid away, and he sighed as if she'd piled on another obligation. "I have a meeting at seven; I'll grab something on the way. Don't wait up for me."

Megan dropped her eyes and fiddled with her salad, trying to hide her disappointment. And her anger.

"Do you always have to play the victim?" he growled, running a hand through his dark hair. "It was your idea to meet for lunch. And you're still not happy."

Before she could answer, approaching footsteps drew her attention. That idiot Sammy, from her office, was hurrying their way. The smell of spicy aftershave enveloped her as he drew a chair close. He got right in her face—just like he did with everybody at work.

"I didn't know you were coming here for lunch!" he said, leaning against her shoulder. He grinned like he thought he was cute, then turned to study Jack. "Who's this? Your hubby?"

Megan blushed hotly, trying to meet Jack's eyes. He was staring daggers at Sammy, and Megan felt oddly validated. She would take jealousy over indifference any day. "Yes, Sammy. This is my husband, Jack."

"Great to meet you," Sammy said, waving his hand. "Your wife's a real doll. Not stuck-up like some of those biddies at work."

He wrapped one arm around Megan and kissed her cheek. Her mouth fell open as she drew away from him. Jack's eyes were now glittering, his lips pressed tightly together.

Sammy stood. "I'll leave you two now, so you can finish your lunch in peace!" His eyes twinkled at Megan. "Let me know, honey, if doesn't treat you right. I'm always standing in the wings." He nodded at Jack, then stepped away, humming to himself.

Jack's gray eyes bored into Megan. "He works in your office?"

"Yes, Jack. And, really, he cuts up like that with everybody." Her eyes begged him silently to believe her.

His face was like stone. Then it softened and a smile played around his lips. "No worries. I know you'd never go for someone like that ... he nearly pushed me over the edge."

Megan released a pent-up breath and glanced at her watch. There was time to finish her salad if she hurried.

"You need to go?" he asked her.

"Soon. But it's no problem if I'm a little late."

Jack laid cash on the table with the ticket. "I'm already late. Can you take care of this?" He rose from his chair and gave her a tender smile, then patted her hand and left.

Suddenly hungry, Megan stuffed salad into her mouth. Wow! He was jealous. I think he still loves me. A quick breeze fluffed her auburn hair. The day sparkled with possibilities and hope, tugging her lips into a smile.

Jack hurried around the corner to his car. He stopped abruptly when he saw the car next to his. Sammy sat behind the wheel. Jack marched to the open window and closed his hand tightly around the arm resting there.

Sammy turned and fixed Jack with a bold smile.

Jack's grip softened. Then he touched Sammy's chin, rubbed a finger across Sammy's lips. "You're such a rascal," he murmured. "See you at seven. We have all night." ❄️

Ellen Holder belongs to several writer's groups and enjoys writing short fiction.

## The Warrior Code

by Mike LaBonne

Sgt. Conner Boyd cursed the sweat that bit into his eyes. A hard-charging five-foot-seven Marine, he now stood 18 inches because he was sprawled flat against the dirt of a Vietnamese mountain, hiding from the enemy.

A devoted Gyrene who never quit a job until it was done, his resolve was even stronger on this mission. He was leading a recon team to find four missing Marines inserted the night before when five went out but only one came back. He died before he could tell what happened.

Boyd's team was deep inside enemy lines six miles northwest of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. Along with brutal heat and humidity, the area was surrounded by dense jungle and tall elephant grass with razor sharp edges that sliced the lifeblood from anyone going through it.

The team moved cautiously toward the last known position of the missing Marines. Bringing up the rear, Boyd heard a distinct pop. Someone had tripped a wire. The earth suddenly erupted in an explosive tsunami of dirt, metal, blood, and flesh as it vaporized the four Marines in front of him.

The NVA immediately opened fire, spraying bullets everywhere. Boyd took one to the left shoulder and one through his left calf. He crabbed quickly away, the bullet grinding painfully in his shoulder.

Away from the NVA, he rose shakily when an apparition stopped him cold. In front of him stood a Marine who reeked of jungle rot and body odor. Bearded and filthy, he wore a tattered uniform as though he'd been fighting for months without relief. He carried an AK-47, the NVA's weapon of choice.

In a calm whisper, he said to Boyd, "Easy, Marine. I'm Gunny Beckett." He saw Boyd looking at the rifle and said, "Friggin' M-16s are always jamming. Nearly all of our dead have been found with their rifle torn down trying to fix it."

A hail of bullets suddenly snapped angrily by them amid the sound of approaching voices. Beckett grabbed the limping Boyd and began to move when an enemy soldier burst through the sawgrass and knocked both Marines to the ground. Beckett leaped to his feet and quickly dispatched the man with a combat knife.

Boyd was still on the ground, weak from blood loss. Dragging him to a secure position, Beckett said, "We've got to get that bullet out and stop the bleeding." He pulled a probe from a battered medical pouch.

"This is going to hurt." He handed Boyd a gold Vietnamese 500 Dong coin. "Bite on this. It'll help." Crudely etched in the center of the coin was a B. "Beckett?" said Boyd. "No. Ban. Friend. It's a long story." Boyd bit the coin and passed out as Beckett dug for the bullet. When he came to, the bullet was out and the wounds bandaged. He handed the coin back, but Beckett said, "Keep it. It's only worth about two cents American. Let's go before they find us again."

"Gunny, I haven't completed my mission. I'm here to find missing Marines, and I can't leave until I find them."

"I hear what you're saying, but you can barely stand. You need to head back."

"I've never failed a mission. I've got to go back." Boyd took a wobbly step, flinching visibly from the pain.

"What you'll do is pop those bandages and bleed again until you drop. Think smart here. Turn back and live to fight another day."

After a long silence, Boyd nodded and said, "I'll be back." Still hobbling, he leaned on Beckett as they worked their way through the sawgrass, ducking frequently from probing enemy fire. They soon found a path that led to safety. "I'll cover your six," Beckett said. "See you on the other side."

Recuperating in a field hospital, Boyd told fellow Marines about Beckett. "Oh, Dude," said one. "You lost too much blood or you're on too many meds. Beckett died over a year ago."

After his strength returned, Boyd began packing his bags when something fell to the floor. He picked it up. A gold Vietnamese 500 Dong coin with a crudely etched B in the center. Worth about two cents American. ✎

**Mike LaBonne** is a retired Marine who lives with his daughter and son in Port St. Lucie.





## In the Fine Print

by Philip Levin

Joel rippled through the manuscript, trying to suppress his hands' trembling.

"What kind of contract is this? It's sixty pages and full of fine print."

The demon cackled. "It's a standard contract. You said you'd sell your soul for a million bucks. For a soul like yours, I'd have offered a hundred grand, tops." He shrugged his black shoulders, his hairy palms held upward. "But the boss says offer you the million."

"I needed the million bucks yesterday." Joel looked at his watch. "Big Al's thugs will be here any minute."

The demon spat on the floor, singeing the carpet. "I got delayed by a nymph. Take it or leave it, don't make no difference to me."

The glass window reading "Attorney" shattered as Joel wrote rapidly. "Here, sign this." He pushed a paper across the desk to the demon, who pulled out a pair of reading glasses from a skin fold in his belly.

"Million dollars for one soul. What's this scribble on the bottom?"

"Just a little fine print about how to distribute the payment. Could you hurry please?"

Two big men in ski masks and overcoats burst into the room. The demon made his mark on the contract and grabbed Joel's hand. Using a sharp claw, he pricked Joel's thumb, pressing a bloody print on the paper.

"Done," the demon said with a grin as an assault of bullets riddled Joel.

Joel's naked muscles sagged. He found himself in a cold black cavern, fires burning in little smudge pots on

various rock outcroppings. "This place is going to be hell on my sinuses," he muttered.

He walked up to a smoldering demon hunched over a large book. "Hello there."

The demon's glowing eyes stared at him. "I was just registering your arrival, Joel."

"That's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. Do you have a copy of my contract there?"

The demon flipped a few pages in his book. "Not a standard contract," he growled.

Joel nodded. "That's right. Can you read the fine print on the bottom?"

The demon studied it. "It's written in Hebrew. It says ... yeah, I can read it. Okay, you're out of here."

The world around Joel was dark and warm, quiet and safe. Then the walls began to close upon him. There was a terrible squeezing and his head burst into a cold bright light. Someone stuck something in his mouth. Another squeeze and he was out, crying loudly.

"It's a boy!" the doctor shouted. "What name did you choose?"

"Joel, after his grandfather," Joel's new mother cried happily.

"And look at the time!" the doctor said. "It's exactly midnight. That means Joel wins the million-dollar prize for the first baby of the century! Congratulations! You've been twice blessed." ✨

Dr. Philip Levin has published 27 books and over 300 articles, poems, and stories.



"You don't want to write your own opinion, you don't want to just represent yourself, but represent yourself through someone else."

Michael Ondaatje



## Excerpt from *Those Around Him*

by Brett Shapiro

Once arrived at the usual spot on the sand, Andrew said to himself with a certain conviction: Let me go just a bit farther this time, to that house over there in the distance, the one with the tiki bar jutting onto the beach, where I keep saying I'll get to but never do. He made it to that house and in front of it (but probably having nothing to do with it) was a tall young guy standing erect at the water's edge like some solemn and solitary lighthouse. Andrew didn't register him in any particular way, except for the phenomenon of his height, so it was with a simple politeness that he responded, "Pretty good, and you?" to the guy's "Hey howya doin'?" The guy looked at him more intently but with disarming gentleness. "Doin' great too. Look at all this in front of us." It was then that Andrew saw astonishing light in his eyes and shine in his teeth as he spoke, and that he imagined for some reason, or better yet for no reason at all, how he might sit with this guy's head in his lap, on his favorite sofa in the living room, stroking that rainforest of hair (defiantly unwashed) as if to coax him to be still, here, just for a moment.

He stopped walking, paralyzed by the sight of such a creature and the attention, however cursory, that the creature was directing at him. Along the beach, he could make several groupings—two elderly couples, a young girl with her dog, and possibly one of his neighbors with his son—and was struck by what we find to love in order to love and be loved. He started to head back toward his car, his house, the piece of fish sitting in a bowl of cold water in the kitchen sink that he would grill for dinner to bring on yet another quiet evening that the routine of his crafted solitude, along with the advancing of his years, had crisped into an age-hardened rind.

He heard the voice behind him. "I grew up here. Are you new here? I've never seen you before." They stood, touching lightly on many things. Andrew let the creature do most of the talking, which required little effort. This youth's youth was a floodgate—of thought, of feeling, of love, of life. Of being in Love with Life. His presence cast a shimmer on everything around him.

They stood some more, this time in silence, frozen under the heat and humidity of the sun, which had now begun its dip under the horizon line. The creature's

impossibly thick hair was wet-waved. Andrew wondered whether it had been done purposefully with gel or naturally by the ocean. The key—what of him is about innocence and what is about knowingness?—was buried precisely there, in that sun-bleached mane, he thought.

"By the way, my name is Andrew. I really should be getting back to my car."

"I'm Alexander. Most people call me Lex. Or Ex. Would you mind if I came with you?"

Andrew looked beyond this tall magnificent specimen toward the sliver of remaining sun. The sky was pale blue, oh so peaceful, the soft regular crashing of waves behind him oh so steady, this familiar cloak of beachside-sunset safety that enfolded him and protected him against change. Of course this beautiful stranger would not be coming with him! No explanations, no summings-up, no attempts whatsoever at closure. Just a tip o' the hat and walking away. What would it be like, he wondered, to slip away before the mess sets in? He glanced at his feet. A small sand crab burrowed into a hole nearby. He knew Ex was waiting. But Ex was twenty-three and had all the time in the world. Andrew gazed at him and, in the face of such huge and luminous youth, could no longer see the sky nor hear the waves. He was powerless to do anything except nod his head and say "Okay." ✨

Brett Shapiro is a UN consultant and author living in Indialantic.





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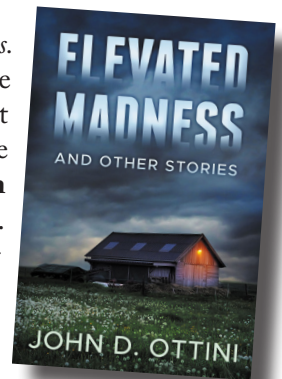
**Philip Levin** edits and publishes books for writers. This month he has published a book for a quadriplegic to help her raise money for her medical care. *Circus: Handicapped Haikus* consists of 90 pages of haikus and life stories written by Ananda Bennet. Available from Amazon.



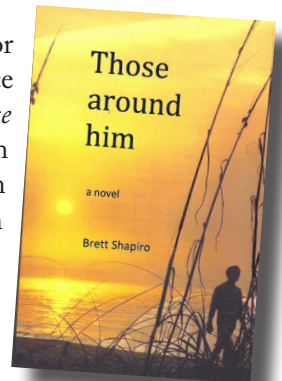
**Howard Moon** recently took second place in the 2020 East Lake County Poetry contest for his poem "Bring It On." Howard is a retired broadcaster, professional writer, and businessman living in Summerfield, Florida. He now spends his time writing poetry and flash fiction. He was an RPLA finalist in 2019. Howard has two poetry books on Amazon: *Poems from A Shattered Brain: Living With Mental Illness* and *White Fox: A Collection Of Native American Poetry*, as well as a book of flash fiction. *Zombies Are Not Vegetarians: A Collection of Flash Fiction Zombie Stories*.



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Internationally acclaimed author **Brett Shapiro** is pleased to announce the publication of his novel *Those Around Him*, a lyrical meditation on the intimate relationship between three generations of men, each of whom is trying to understand his place along the continuum. In language that captures the rush and flow of thought, the reader is carried along on the journey and reconciliation of the central character, Andrew, as he endeavors to make peace with the relentless march of time, and the arrivals and departures of those around him. The novel is available on Amazon.



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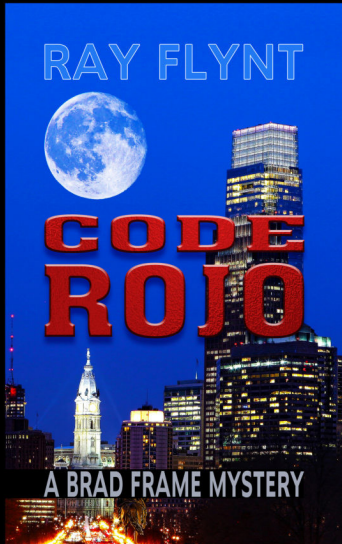
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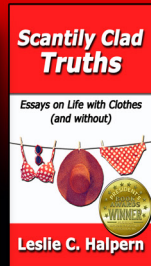
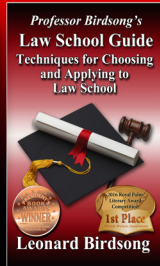
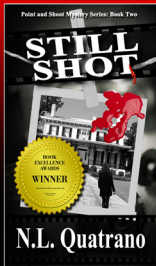


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