A close-up portrait of Michael LaBorn, a man with dark skin, long dreadlocks, and a beard. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He has a small stud in his left eyebrow and a lip ring in his lower lip. He is wearing a blue patterned shirt.

**Michael LaBorn:  
Rewriting the Rules  
of Representation**

**MERCH 101**

*How to Start  
Selling More  
than Books*

**5 CRAFT  
BOOKS FOR  
YOUR HOLIDAY  
WISH LIST**

**FROM A FEW  
CLICKS TO A  
FLICK**

*Creatorwood  
Turns Authors into  
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**YOUR  
SUSTAINABLE  
YEARLY RESET**

**WHAT YOU  
MISSED AT  
AUTHOR  
NATION 2025**

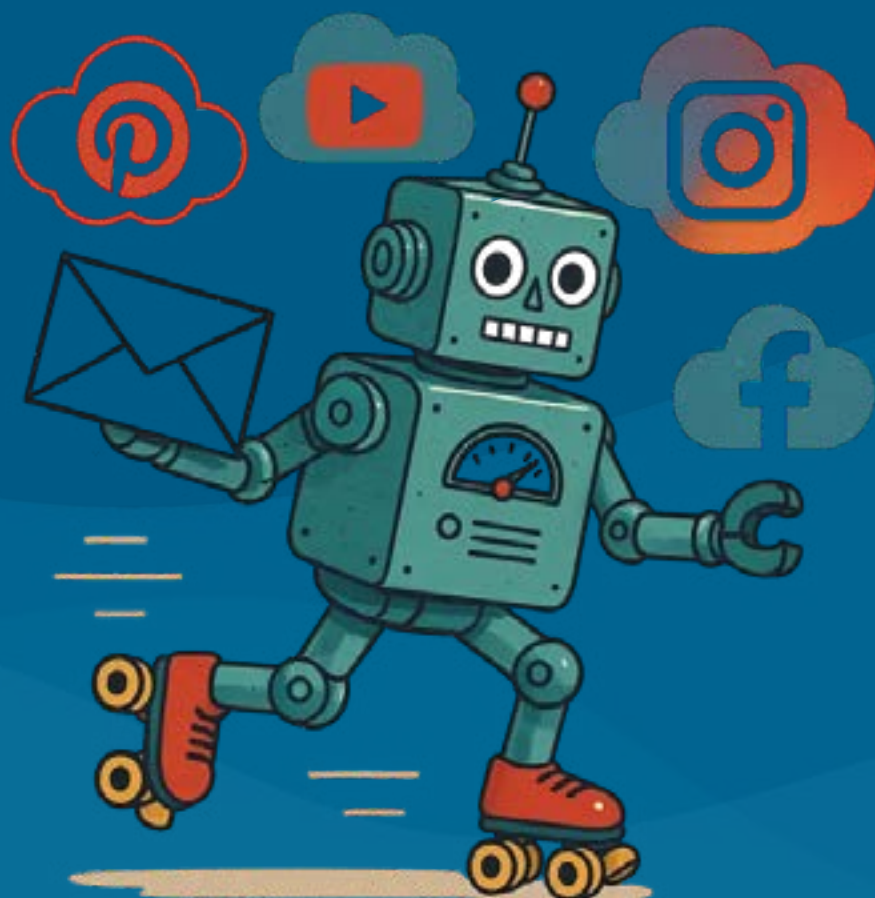
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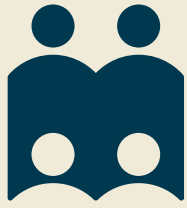
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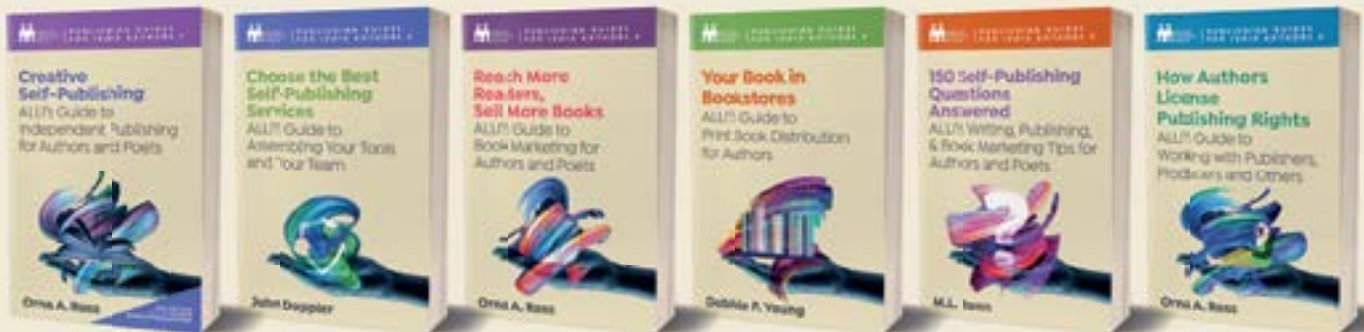
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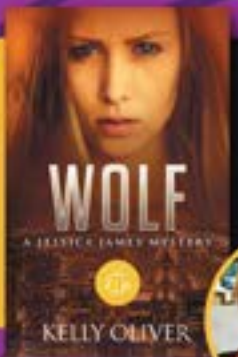
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Nicole Schroeder  
*Editor in Chief*

## *From the* EDITOR IN CHIEF

If you happened across the cover feature of our print issue in November, you'll have read about the exciting shift for *IAM*'s publishing schedule coming in 2026: a focus on longer, more in-depth stories, shared online with you every week rather than with the release of the monthly print issue. If you were at Reader Nation, you may have flipped through the inaugural issue of our reader-focused magazine, *Storyteller Showcase*—and if you missed out on Author Nation or Reader Nation, be sure to read Jenn Lessmann's wrap-up of the 2025 conference in this issue.

This month, you'll read about another big change taking place as we welcome the new year. With *Wide for the Win*'s Erin Wright stepping down from her role as president, *IAM* is stepping into a new role as steward for the community. It's fitting, in a way—for the past five years, we've published our magazine wide, hoping to reach as many corners of the industry as possible. Now, we're broadening our reach even further, to new outlets and new audiences, and we have the honor of doing so while championing the community that made that approach possible for so many authors.

To be clear, our print issues aren't going away; you'll still be able to flip through the pages of both *Indie Author Magazine* and *Storyteller Showcase* every quarter and at author conferences throughout the year. And regarding *Wide for the Win*, *IAM* publisher Chelle Honiker wrote in her announcement about the change in leadership November 7, "The *Wide for the Win* website, Facebook group, and courses will remain intact, with no disruption to members. The existing board will become an Advisory Committee to help guide the community's growth and ensure that its founding spirit remains at the heart of everything."

As we step into 2026, we're thrilled to see how much the indie author community has grown in the past year, and we're honored to be part of that. We also know it couldn't have happened without your support. So thank you for another wonderful year of learning from, encouraging, and celebrating one another. Thank you for your endless support of our publications. And thank you for your stories—those you've published, and those you've shared with us.

Happy holidays from *IAM*. We're so grateful, and excited, to write this next chapter with you.

*Nicole Schroeder*



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# *Indie Author Magazine* Assumes Stewardship of Wide for the Win

**W**ide for the Win, the indie author community that's grown to serve more than 18,800 authors worldwide through its virtually hosted groups, educational resources, and online courses, is changing hands—and broadening its reach. Earlier this month, after the group's founder, Erin Wright, announced she was stepping down from her leadership role to focus on her graduate studies and writing career, *IAM* announced that it would assume stewardship of the community.

Wide for the Win was founded to provide a community and resources to those who choose to publish “wide” rather than exclusively on a single platform. Since it was formed more than five years ago—the Facebook Group “Wide for the Win” was created in 2019—it has become a “trusted space for authors to share knowledge, strategies, and support as they expand their readership across multiple retailers and markets,” according to the press release.

“Erin built something truly special—a space where authors help each other succeed on their own terms,” says Chelle Honiker, managing partner of Athenia Creative Services and publisher of *IAM*. “Our goal is simple: to protect what makes Wide for the Win unique, provide additional resources, and ensure the community continues to flourish for years to come.”

With the transition, Wide for the Win's existing board of directors will become an advisory committee for the *IAM* team, and members will maintain access to the Wide for the Win site, community, and materials. Community members will also receive a complimentary subscription to *Indie Author Magazine* and to Indie Author Training, *IAM*'s education platform. ■

W I D E  
for the  
W I N

I A M



Nicole Schroeder

Nicole Schroeder is a storyteller at heart. As the editor in chief of Indie Author Magazine, she brings nearly a decade of journalism and editorial experience to the publication, delighting in any opportunity to tell true stories and help others do the same. She holds a bachelor's degree from the Missouri School of Journalism and minors in English and Spanish. Her previous work includes editorial roles at local publications, and she's helped edit and produce numerous fiction and nonfiction books, including a Holocaust survivor's memoir, alongside independent publishers. Her own creative writing has been published in national literary magazines. When she's not at her writing desk, Nicole is usually in the saddle, cuddling her guinea pigs, or spending time with family. She loves any excuse to talk about Marvel movies and considers National Novel Writing Month its own holiday.





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# ALLi Exclusive:

## Telling Your Story Beyond the Page

Writers have always imagined their stories leaping off the page, and thanks to new platforms, tools, and reader engagement models, indie authors are expanding their intellectual property into new realms more than ever. Transmedia storytelling—telling stories across multiple platforms in ways that enhance rather than merely replicate—offers a powerful way to deepen reader immersion and unlock creative and financial potential.

Whether you're a beginning author or an experienced authorpreneur, transmedia storytelling can help you meet readers where they are and invite them into worlds they never want to leave. Here are steps you can take at any stage to incorporate transmedia into your business model.









# For Beginning Authors: Think Beyond the Book

When you're starting out, your focus is understandably on writing, publishing, and promoting your first book. But even at this stage, it's worth considering how your story world could lend itself to other formats and experiences.

First, engage with readers via your email newsletter or on social media to better understand what transmedia content might interest them. Then, experiment with offerings like bookmarks, mugs, or shirts. Create designs on low-cost platforms like Canva, or hire a design expert on a marketplace like Fiverr.

ALLi's Editor in Chief Roz Morris offers a word of caution if you're creating merchandise that's based on the artwork of your book cover. "Ensure you have the rights to use the artwork for this," Morris says. "Check your agreement with your cover designer—does it say anything about using the cover image for products beyond books? Even if the designer allows it, ask about any images they've used from stock photo libraries. The standard license to use an image for a book cover often doesn't include the

**Check your agreement with your cover designer—does it say anything about using the cover image for products beyond books?**

*— Roz Morris  
ALLi Editor in Chief*

right to use it on other print-on-demand items such as mugs and T-shirts. You can probably extend the license, so check.”

If you distribute your transmedia content via third-party platforms like Redbubble, Threadless, or Zazzle, you save yourself the expense and inconvenience of maintaining inventory. However, if you handle fulfillment yourself, you will have contact information for purchasers and can use that to maintain a connection.

Transmedia doesn't only mean merch. You might start with a character page on social media or a map of your fictional world shared as a downloadable PDF. (I created a website for the protagonist of my Ann Kinnear suspense novels, a consultant whose website is referenced in the books.)

By expanding your story universe beyond the book, you're laying the groundwork for future expansion. And you're building a deeper relationship with your audience, who will appreciate the invitation to engage with your story in new ways.



# For Emerging Authors: Diversify and Deepen the Experience

Once you've published a few books and begun cultivating a reader base, you're in a great position to try more ambitious transmedia experiments.

Crowdfunding campaigns can be a great approach for transmedia, providing an option to raise funds for the expenses related to more ambitious projects and expanding your reach, since users are going to platforms like Kickstarter not only to patronize their favorite creators but as a way of discovering new creators. As ALLi Advisor Russell Nohelty explains, "We've used Kickstarter to fund games and comics, and people in our community have used it to fund movies, RPGs (role-playing games), and more.

"Most other mediums besides novels are pretty revenue intensive, and using Kickstarter to tell other types of stories is a great idea," Nohelty says. "On top of that, there are communities, like gamers, who are super supportive, and you might find a whole new vein of fans there for your writing work. Just know it's not a guarantee your existing audience will follow you there. It often takes building a whole new audience for whatever new medium you want to explore."

You can also use patronage platforms like Patreon or Buy Me a Coffee to test premium content. A Mystery author might sell detective-themed notebooks or clue boxes; a Romance author might offer their protagonist's diary.

Collaborate with other creators to co-launch crossover merch, boosting exposure and income potential.



# For Experienced Authors: Move Beyond the Author Sphere

For authors with established publishing businesses, consider partnering with others beyond the author sphere.

Historical Fiction author Melissa Addey pitched a themed experience to escape room creators across the UK, eventually partnering with one to create a room featuring puzzles and décor drawn from her novels set in Qing-era China. The result was a successful and immersive attraction—with promotional ties to her books—that also reignited her creative energy.

Other options might include

- full merchandise lines (including licensing to third-party sellers);
- custom apps or games that function as story delivery platforms;
- large-scale events, virtual or in-person, themed around your story world; or

- a limited-edition board game or tabletop RPG set in your universe.

At this stage, it's especially important to think strategically about rights management. ALLi offers guidance on selective rights licensing at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/selective-rights-licensing-for-indie-authors> so that you can confidently license what supports your business while retaining ownership of your core assets.

As with all things indie, transmedia success depends on clarity of vision and connection with your audience. Not every author needs to build a video game or manufacture character plushies—but every author can benefit from thinking about their stories as more than books. Transmedia storytelling invites your readers not just to read your world but to live in it as well.





For more on transmedia, check out these ALLi resources:

- 1 Hear how Action-Adventure author Barry Nugent incorporated transmedia into his business in a 2022 interview as part of the Inspirational Indie Author Interview series, sponsored by Kobo Writing Life. Listen at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/inspirational-indie-author-interview-barry-nugent>.
- 2 “Beyond Book Sales: How Authors Are Expanding into Physical Products” offers a look at why authors are turning outside publishing to attract an audience—and the platforms and strategies they’re using to do it. Read more at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/physical-products>.
- 3 ALLi founder Orna Ross has watched indie authors’ expansion into the creator economy for years. Read her thoughts on how the two intersect in “Indie Authors and the Creator Economy: Earnings Beyond the Books”: <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/indie-authors-creator-economy>. ■



## Matty Dalrymple, ALLi Campaigns Manager

The Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi) is a global membership association for self-publishing authors. A non-profit, our mission is ethics and excellence in self-publishing. Everyone on our team is a working indie author and we offer advice and advocacy for self-publishing authors within the literary, publishing and creative industries around the world. [www.allianceindependentauthors.org](http://www.allianceindependentauthors.org)





# Ask a Book Coach

## WHEN TOO LONG IS JUST RIGHT

*Plenty of authors have plotted a story only for it to grow more complex, watched a short story balloon into a novel, or followed a character down an unintended rabbit hole that added chapters to their manuscript and weeks to their drafting timeline. And plenty of new writers who experience that same phenomenon have worried about what it means for the quality of their story. In this article from her guest series, however, book coach Rona Gofstein reassures authors that “overwriting” a first draft is impossible—and making the piece longer can many times actually help a story come together more completely than sticking to a specific word count.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Writers generally have a word count in mind when they write a book, usually based on genre expectations. But on several occasions, I’ve had writers come to me afraid that they are “overwriting” in their draft. It’s forty thousand words or more, and they aren’t even finished with the first half. What do they need to do? It can be unnerving to have done so much work and already know that it’s too much. Many writers—especially those at the start of their careers—

don’t realize this is a natural part of the process, which is why they turn to book coaches with the question: Why is my first draft so long, and when is it too long?

Let me answer the second question because in the process, I’ll answer the first: In my opinion, there is no such thing as a first draft that is too long.

Terry Pratchett famously said, “The first draft is just you telling yourself the story.” There is no word-count limit on that. You get to tell

***Have questions about book coaches, craft, or balancing your writing career with everything else? Send them to [feedback@indieauthormagazine.com](mailto:feedback@indieauthormagazine.com) for a chance to be featured.***

yourself everything. Will it be necessary in the final version? You won't know for certain until you finish the draft.

Overwriting is usually discussed as something to avoid. But in the drafting phase—especially early drafting—overwriting is often a sign that your creative process is working exactly the way it should. The writer needs more information than the reader does. A reader needs only what serves the final story; the writer needs everything necessary to create that story.

Most writers don't know everything about their books upfront. You can't. Inevitably, when you create these amazing characters, they'll do things you didn't expect. This is especially true for writers who prefer to “pants” their drafts, writing without an outline and letting the story develop naturally. Only through writing can these authors discover that a character has a quirk of never saying goodbye, hates Valentine's Day, or had an imaginary friend they still miss. Even though this information may not end up in the final draft, it doesn't mean writing it was a mistake. It may be essential for understanding who a character is, how they interact with the world, and why they do so in a particular way.

Even if you think of yourself as a planner or outliner, when you're drafting, you're building a story world from the inside out. You're discovering your characters' histories, exploring emotional patterns, and testing possibilities. That deep dive often requires more detail, more internal monologue, and more explanation than the reader will ever see. In the first draft, you're not writing a book; you're writing to understand the book you're trying to write.

When you find yourself writing three pages about the moment your protagonist picks up a cup of coffee, for example, you may actually be:

- uncovering a wound you haven't fully articulated yet;

- exploring the character's motivations from multiple angles;
- getting closer to the emotional truth beneath the scene;
- practicing the voice, rhythm, or tone of the book; or
- finding the heart of what the scene is really about.

That all matters. And even if almost none of it stays in the final version, it is worth writing. The draft is the discovery phase. It can and should be messy. Revision is the clarity phase. But you can't get there without the mess. (Sorry.)

Not everything you write in a draft will be necessary for the reader. However, almost everything you write is necessary for you, the author. You need to know this, write this, experience this, and learn this about your characters and the journey they are on, and only by getting to The End will you know what can and should be deleted. In subsequent drafts, editors, beta readers, and you will trim what's unnecessary and meet the expected word count for your genre. Let your first draft be for you. Once you know the story, you'll be able to revise it for your reader. ■



### Rona Gofstein

Rona Gofstein is a published romance author, developmental editor, and an Author Accelerator certified fiction book coach who loves working with writers who need support to make their book writing dreams a reality.

She describes her style as intensive feedback combined with compassionate enthusiasm because she knows that on this journey, writers need clarity, support and encouragement. She has spoken on writing craft and business across the country and is the past president of the New Hampshire RWA chapter and Broad Universe. A Jersey girl at heart, she lives in Massachusetts and is always up for getting coffee, finding a great new pair of shoes, or deciding where to go out for dinner.







# Author Inklings

## The Gentle Reset: Sustainable Goals for the New Year

**H**ello, my pretties!  
It's December, which means two things: Mince pies are socially acceptable for breakfast, and writers everywhere are panicking about next year's goals.

You know the drill: We make ambitious resolutions. *I'll write a million words! I'll rapid-release twelve books! I'll conquer TikTok and master spreadsheets!* By mid-January, we're face down in alcohol-infused chocolate, wondering where it all went wrong.

This year, I want to propose something different. Instead of chasing productivity, let's talk about sustainability. Let's aim not for burning bright and fast but instead for keeping the fire lit all year.

### Why Productivity Alone Will Break You

Indie culture glorifies the hustle. We're constantly encouraged to write more, publish faster, spend more on ads, shout louder on social media. But constant productivity isn't the same as success. Burnout is real, and it kills creativity.

Becca Syme knows this. She has built her platform on encouraging authors to build productive and sustainable writing habits. Her *QuitBooks for Writers* series, including *Dear Writer, Are You in Burnout?* and *Dear Writer, You Need to Quit*, give authors ways to recognize when they may be nearing burnout and tips to recover from it.

Ask any seasoned author: The graveyard is full of brilliant writers who sprinted hard, burned out, and vanished. Sustainability is about pacing yourself so you're still writing ten years from now—not just ten weeks.

## Looking Back Before Looking Forward

Before you set new goals, take stock of the year you've just had. And I don't mean just counting books sold or words written.

Ask yourself:

- What worked well?
- What drained you?
- What surprised you?
- What made you proud?

For me, my proudest moments weren't orange bestseller ribbons or big paydays. They were messages from readers who said my stories got them through a tough week. They were directing a play, building connections, and finding joy in side projects. That's what I want more of.

And talking about side projects, what have you achieved this past year outside of your writing? Sometimes we forget that we move through this world as multidimensional beings. We are not just writers. We face many challenges and enjoy many triumphs outside of putting words down in a book.

For example, this year saw my directorial debut—a community production of *King Lear* outdoors. I also moved house and set up my new home. And I made new friends and spent quality time with old ones. I am sure your life has been equally varied and full. These adventures aren't just a background to our writing; they inform it. So celebrate all your wins.

Reflect honestly. Even failures are teachers. If you aimed for six releases and managed two, perhaps the real lesson is that two is your sustainable pace. Own it.

## A New Way to Frame Goals

Once you've considered what worked well—and what didn't—in the past year, consider your goals for the new year. Make sure they're reasonable not just for sustaining your career but also for sustaining you. Instead of "How much can I squeeze out of myself?" try asking:

1. **How do I want my writing life to feel?** Energized? Balanced? Joyful?
2. **What rhythms suit me?** Maybe you write best in seasons: three months on, one month off. Maybe you thrive on slow and steady.
3. **What do I want to protect?** Time with family, health, mental well-being—these matter as much as word count.





If you need some added inspiration, here are a few practices I'm embracing—and you might too:

- **Set flexible targets.** Aim for ranges, not rigid numbers. "Between two and four books next year" is kinder than "four or bust."
- **Build in rest.** Schedule holidays, breaks, and days off as deliberately as you schedule launches. Interestingly, I find I work faster when I know I have a trip coming up as I want to go away clean of any lingering work items.
- **Diversify joy, not just income.** Side projects, hobby writing, or community involvement keep creativity fresh.
- **Audit your systems.** Are you juggling ten platforms you hate? Streamline. Free yourself from the tools that drain you.
- **Celebrate small wins.** They sustain momentum. I like a fresh cup of tea after finishing a chapter and, at the moment, I like to add a treat of a cube of Turkish delight.

## My Gentle Reset

This year taught me that success isn't just about output. It's about resilience. About joy. About remembering that I'm not a machine—I'm a storyteller.

So what are my goals for the new year?

- Write at a sustainable pace.
- Protect my mental health.
- Nurture my community.
- Keep storytelling joyful.

If I hit bestseller lists along the way, fabulous. If not, I'll still be here, writing, connecting, and creating a life that sustains me.

## Final Thoughts (or the Bit Where I Get Philosophical Again)

As the year ends, my pretties, I invite you to step off the productivity hamster wheel. Reflect. Reset. And set goals that won't just carry you into January but will carry you all the way through December of next year.

Because the real win isn't how much you produce—it's that you're still here, still writing, and still telling stories only you can tell.

Happy (sustainable) writing,

Susan



Susan Odev

Susan Odev is the co-author of the Mike Atwell Cozy Mystery series and several other successful whodunnits involving vicars, Shakespeare, and suspicious cake. A lifelong list-maker, deadline-dodger, and one-woman writing retreat (complete with dog), she wrote her first best-selling nonfiction book in 2010. She lives in Kent, England, dreams of the Portuguese hills, occasionally tidies her desk, and is always five minutes late for her own ideas. Susan has written for numerous magazines, spoken at international conferences, and contributed to workshops on a range of personal development topics, and yet can still get lost in her own bathroom.



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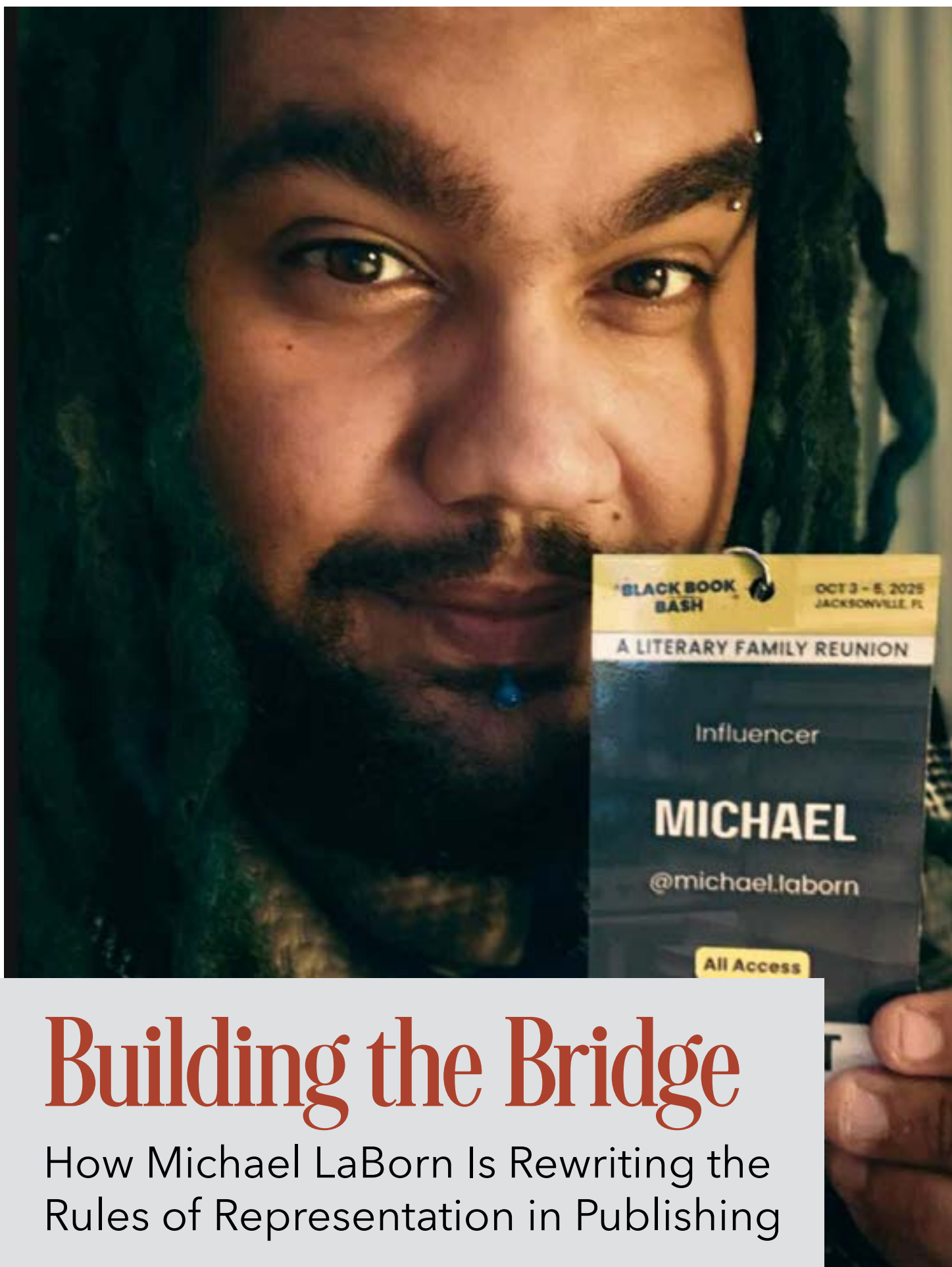


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# Building the Bridge

How Michael LaBorn Is Rewriting the Rules of Representation in Publishing



When Michael LaBorn discusses publishing, he doesn't mention profit margins or bestseller lists. Instead, he talks about the stories that aren't being heard, the writers fighting for a seat at the table, and the visionaries who are constructing new ones. As founder of Left Unread Books, an imprint of Bindery Books, LaBorn has made it his mission to champion Black and brown authors and redefine what inclusivity looks like in the book world.

"We're a publishing imprint that's entirely focused on bridging the gap for marginalized authors and creating space for Black and brown voices in publishing," he explains.

That idea—creating space—has become both his purpose and his compass.

## Lending His Voice to Amplify Others

LaBorn didn't set out to become a publisher. Back in 2019, he entered the online book community on BookTok, simply looking to connect with other book lovers. What he found instead was a glaring imbalance.

"The majority of the books being talked about were by well-known white authors," he recalls. "I was a fan of many of them, but I just didn't see very many Black and brown books being celebrated."

So he began talking about them—and the more he did, the more he noticed who wasn't being invited into the conversation. Even in spaces dedicated to diversity, the spotlight often fell on a handful of already established, traditionally published authors.

"I wanted to use my platform, which had grown quite a bit, to make room for indie authors of color," he says. "Because change starts from the bottom, and we can't leave people behind."

Around that time, LaBorn started hearing mentions of Bindery Books from fellow influencers. Their work immediately caught his attention.

"I heard about Bindery because a few influencers I was loosely connected to started talking about them on their platforms," he says. Bindery Books is an online community space for book "tastemakers," according to the website, as well as an indie press designed to champion authors at the margins by empowering the creators who are already shaping the literary landscape.

"I watched what they were doing, and when I realized they were working to be a disruption in the publishing industry, I saw an opportunity to partner with them to make sure that Black and brown authors were at the center of that," LaBorn says.

That realization became the turning point. LaBorn contacted Bindery directly, unsure of what to expect.

"I reached out and asked if there was room for me," he says. "And turns out, there was."

The leap from influencer to publisher wasn't a quiet one. Once the partnership formed, LaBorn brought his community with him. "The biggest step to make that happen was talking about this new direction on my platform and pulling together a community of readers who were ready to get into the fight," he says.

It was the biggest step, but it was only the first.



# What 'Creating Space' Really Means

For LaBorn, the work of Left Unread Books goes far beyond good intentions. “We measure progress by what we see on bookstore shelves,” he says. “When readers talk about our authors’ books without framing them as advocacy pieces—that’s when I know we’re moving the needle.”

LaBorn points out that systemic barriers still shape the publishing landscape; traditional publishers continue to control access to resources like funding, distribution, and marketing. “At almost every step of the path, there’s a barrier,” he says. “Black and brown authors don’t have access to the same money, and they don’t have the same open channels.”

Left Unread Books, however, bases every business decision on how it will unite the community. The imprint’s strength lies in collaboration rather than its capital; every published title is selected with the collective need in mind. “Each story we publish tackles systems of oppression in some way,” LaBorn says. “Our first book, *Cry, Voidbringer*, explores colonialism and how it shapes marginalized identities. That’s not a conversation you see often in literature—but it’s one that matters.”

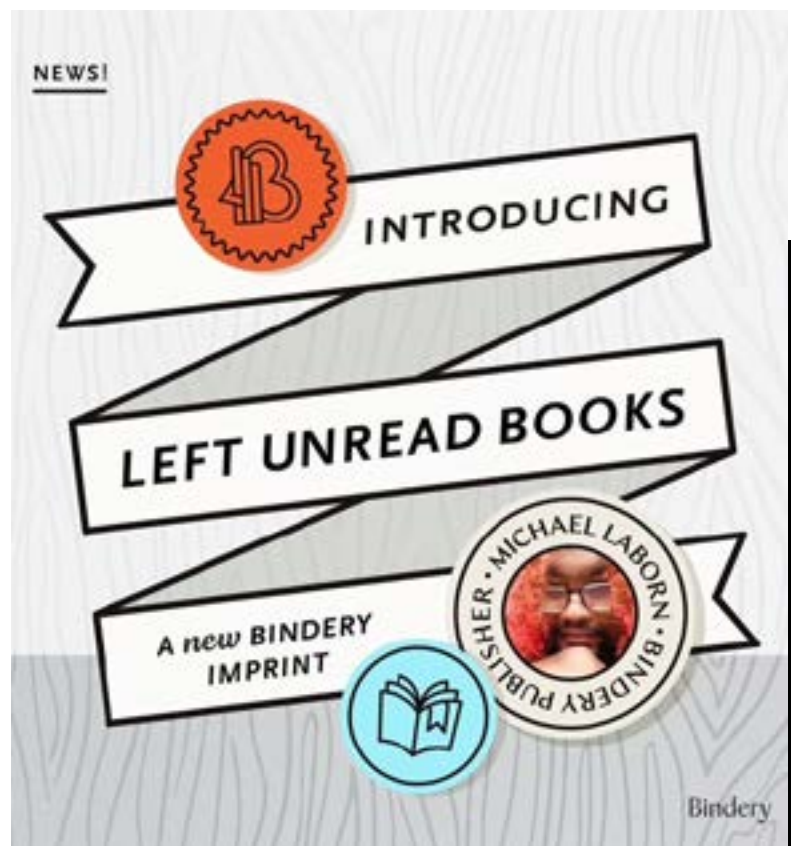
Through a network of paid subscribers and dedicated supporters, Left Unread is able to compete with larger houses, pushing out bold, socially conscious stories at a professional level.

That model is rooted in the structure of Bindery Books itself. Each imprint under Bindery Books is led by a bookish influencer with an established community of readers who actively uplift underrepresented authors. Left Unread is focused specifically on elevating Black and brown authors whose work speaks to the realities of the world and the need for forward movement.

“We operate in community, and we’re showing that indie presses can disrupt the industry while staying true to their mission,” LaBorn says.

Part of LaBorn’s advocacy involves reexamining what publishing considers “quality” books. He encourages readers to question who sets the standards—and whom those standards exclude.

That challenge to convention extends to the authors he publishes. At Left Unread, he says, creative control stays firmly in the writers’ hands. “I give feedback and brainstorm ideas, but the authors have the final say,” LaBorn says. “If they choose a direction I don’t agree with, fine by me. It’s their story. We’re here to champion, not control.”



# Mission Before Metrics

As Left Unread grows, LaBorn balances the weight of the business with the soul of a movement. How does he manage it? “No sleep,” he jokes. Then he clarifies, “I’m surrounded by people who are just as passionate as I am. I might be the one people see, but I’m not doing this alone.”

LaBorn’s long-term vision for Left Unread Books is as bold as it is transformative: to prove that Black and brown stories are not only just as marketable but as essential as anything else. He wants to be “disruptive,” he says—so much so “that nobody can continue to run a publishing business rooted in bigotry without being embarrassed.” To do that, he wants to put more Black and brown people in charge of making decisions in the industry.

That belief is reflected in the imprint’s upcoming titles, each shaped by authors who use genre to explore deeper social themes. *Devil of the Deep* is a Haitian Fantasy about a notorious pirate and an ambitious navy captain who must work together to protect a young

mermaid carrying an ancient artifact. The author frames the story as a response to the impact of Christian nationalism on marginalized cultures. *From Our Blood*, a dark academia Horror novel, follows a Black woman newly admitted to a prestigious school where she hopes to build a future as an artist. As former Black students begin

“I wanted to use my platform ... to make room for indie authors of color. Because change starts from the bottom, and we can’t leave people behind.

— Michael LaBorn



turning up dead, she must uncover the institution’s hidden history before becoming the next target. The author uses the narrative to examine how Western institutions have historically been shaped by the experiences—and losses—of Black people.

“I want to prove that our stories aren’t just worthy—they’re necessary,” LaBorn says. “Writers are important, but as long as old, straight, white men are deciding who gets through, real change will be limited.”





# Inspired by the Power of Community

When the conversation turns to inspiration, LaBorn doesn't hesitate in sharing the source of his own. "Black women who write Romance, hands down," he says. "What they've done in the last decade has completely reshaped the genre. Their sense of community and collaboration is what I want to see across the entire industry."

That spirit of connection also fuels his advice for emerging authors. He urges them to find the people who are already doing the work. Don't treat the community like a resource, he says, but like a relationship that should be nurtured, honored, and respected. "Engage, learn, show up. And watch them make space for you," he says.

For any readers out there who want to help the mission of bridging the gap for marginalized authors, LaBorn's advice is simple: "Pre-order the books. Talk about them. Even if you didn't love it—talk about it. That's how you build momentum for marginalized voices."

He also offers guidance for the authors doing the work from the inside. "I encourage authors to write in community," he says. "Especially marginalized authors. The major players in this industry are primarily interested in two things: making money and ensuring their continued ability to capitalize on your art. Marginalized authors threaten both of those goals because their art historically pushes society away from the systems that empower old white men."

 **We're showing that indie presses can disrupt the industry while staying true to their mission.**

— Michael LaBorn



LaBorn doesn't shy away from the realities of the industry, but he's clear about where true strength comes from. "Beating down gates is not easy work," he says. "But in community, it is absolutely possible. Don't be afraid to use your voice to say incredibly bold things. And never be afraid to walk into any room where your community has decided you belong."

## Moments of Pride and What Comes Next

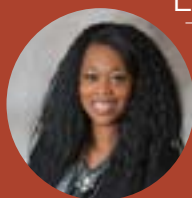
LaBorn lights up when talking about the community that's formed around Left Unread. One of his proudest moments came just days before their first launch, when his TikTok post encouraging readers to preorder resulted in doubled numbers in only two days. "It was incredible seeing the community show up," he says. "People are passionate about change, and they're proving it with action."

Looking ahead, his focus is on growth, not just for his imprint but for the movement it represents as well. Yet when asked what success looks like, his answer didn't involve charts or sales figures. "It's when I see readers engaging with our authors the same way they do with traditionally validated names," he says. "I want to see fandoms built around indie authors—because they deserve that same love."

LaBorn's work isn't about visibility for himself but about widening the lens for others. He encourages other authors and readers to join the movement, supporting authors at Left Unread by subscribing at Bindery Books and giving other marginalized indie authors a platform as often as they can. "Everything is community," he says. "This work doesn't happen in isolation." By championing underrepresented authors and stories, he reminds the industry that influence isn't always gained by speaking the loudest—it's caused by creating spaces for others to be heard. ■



### Eryka Parker



Eryka Parker is a book coach, an award-winning developmental editor, and writing instructor. As a women's contemporary author under the pen name Zariah L. Banks, she creates emotional intimacy novels that prove that everyone deserves to feel seen, appreciated, and loved. She lives in Northeast Ohio with her husband and two children and is currently working on her third novel.

# Community in Action

## Author Nation 2025 Puts Theory into Practice

In only its second year, Author Nation—the largest author education conference in the United States after replacing its predecessor, 20Books Vegas—invited 1,200 attendees to “find your best life through writing.” That’s a challenging aspiration for authors at any stage of their careers, but the week-long event in Las Vegas November 3–7 offered clear paths to success through a combination of educational tracks and opportunities to build a supportive community.

Sheryl Recinos, who has published more than twenty books for teens, middle-grades, and children, joined the 20Books community in the early years of 20BooksTo50K®. “When I found the group, there was one seat left for Scotland, and I immediately got that one spot to go to the Edinburgh conference. And after that, I’ve come to every 20Books event because I found my tribe with that first event,” she says.

Author Nation leadership continues to build on the community aspect of the 20Books events, even supplying a photo backdrop emblazoned with the words, “I found my tribe at Author Na-

tion,” and encouraging authors to share selfies under #AuthorNation on social media.

Participants in this year’s event received an interactive notebook at registration, which included a QR code linked to the schedule, inspirational quotes, and daily sections with blank pages for notes and guided reflection. A multi-page contacts list at the end of the book encouraged authors to not only gather the information that would let them keep in touch but also to leave themselves notes on how they met. As a former teacher, this thoughtful detail brought home for me the conference’s commitment to this year’s theme: “Praxis: the art of putting theory into practice.” The fact that Praxis is also the name of the test required for teacher licensure in many states lent a possibly unintended significance to the word choice, and I went into my first professional author conference determined to make the most of this learning opportunity.

Joe Solari and the team at Author Nation began preparing participants months in advance for the conference



# AUTHOR NATION



through their online author community and the interactive event schedule, which was accessible throughout the week on the Eventee app. Panels and presentations from nine topic categories were organized according to four tracks based on author experience: “Pre-Published Explorers,” “Published Voyagers,” “Well-Pubbed Catalog Builders,” and “Empire Founders.” Several panels overlapped multiple tracks. Participants using Eventee could read course descriptions and in some cases download slides in advance of each presentation and make selections to build their schedule. Since indie authors come from a wide variety of backgrounds, new writers may already have expertise in related fields. So it was left up to each author to choose between following the suggested tracks or creating their own combinations.

Once selected, the app sent reminder notifications before each panel started. Event leaders also used the app’s feed to make announcements or inform authors of changes to the schedule throughout the week. A map of the tables for Industry Expo Day was perhaps the most used feature after the dashboard.

The following descriptions of the available tracks provide a general sense of what the conference was like this year, and what authors can expect as they plan for Author Nation 2026.

## For Pre-Published Explorers

To new authors considering attending next year’s event, know that you are not alone. In some panels, when asked to raise hands if participants were working on their first book, more than half the room raised their hands. Panels on craft; mindset and wellness; production and workflow; advertising and marketing; and AI and automation approached the topics from both new and seasoned authors’ points of view.

Multi-genre author Jeremy O’Carroll came to the conference from Australia, and though he has published previously, he was new to Author Nation at this year’s

event. He describes his first conference as “eye-opening.” Specifically, he says, “Michael Evans’s talk on data gave me a whole new way to look at planning the whole book creation process.”

With over one hundred panels and presentations delivered over three days, pre-published authors may feel overwhelmed by the available options. If this is you, choose panels aligned with the first track and try to focus on absorbing and

processing information or asking questions. If you’re further along in drafting and feel prepared to take the next steps into building a business, all categories, including “Audio & Narration”; “IP Beyond the Book”; “Business & Finance”; and “Websites, Email & Direct Sales” offer open presentations, usually with time for questions at the end.

Photos by Grace Snoke



*Audience members listen to Author Nation Program Director Chelle Honiker speak during the opening remarks of the conference. Honiker is also the publisher of IAM.*

## For Published Voyagers

Author Nation 2025 provided a significant amount of content benefiting those who have published but are still working towards profitability. Presentations on mindset, like Becca Syme's sustainability toolkit, provided inspiring advice on avoiding burnout at any stage of your career, while some other topic leaders took a more granular approach. Janet Margot's "Getting the Most Out of Amazon" presentation, for example, offered actionable steps for optimizing metadata, A+ Content, and Amazon ads.

Attending the conference for the first time, self-publishing coach and travel/memoir author Carla King was excited to attend business panels by Joanna Penn, Melissa Storm, and Chelle Honiker, which she describes as "probably worth the price of admission to the whole conference." She shares how valuable she found the community at Author Nation, saying that she intended to recommend it to her coaching clients. "I think we can learn a lot from each other—fiction authors can learn from nonfiction authors, and nonfiction authors can learn a lot from fiction authors," she says.

Like with any conference, participants following this track thrived when they were clear on their goals for attending the event and planned how to use their time in service of that goal. If you plan on attending Author Nation in the future, consider which presentations might be just as informative in the replays compared with those that might require more interaction, raise questions, or attract authors you might want to network with afterward. Prioritize the activities that require your physical presence to achieve the greatest impact.

Zoe Perrenoud, traveling from Luxembourg for her second Author Nation, has published three dark YA Fantasy novels and is working on her own foreign-language translations. She decided to come back because of the variety of presentations available. "I find that there's always something [at the conference] to meet me where I'm at, something that will correspond to my current needs, and it'll help me keep abreast of developments in the industry. And that's really important to me," she says.





## For Well-Pubbed Catalog Builders

Authors whose businesses have started to turn a profit have plenty of options for educational growth, but many of the authors I spoke with at this year's event cited the community and networking opportunities as the main draw of the conference. With thirty-minute breaks between panels, an hour and a half for lunch, and several meet-ups, hangouts, game nights, and group sprints planned, authors looking to expand their businesses, try new products, or set up collaborations can use this time to exercise their inner extrovert, while overstimulated introverts can find a quiet couch in the lounge or seat at the event center tables to recover.

Activities continued before and after the scheduled panels; authors met for tai chi on Tuesday morning and

gathered for a "bring your own game" night after dinner on Wednesday. Spoken, The AI audiobook company, hosted karaoke after presenting on Thursday.

Cozy Epic Fantasy author ZS Diamanti attended the conference this year for his third year, having previously participated in its 20Books incarnation. "It's so good to have other people who will talk book business with you and who just don't gatekeep. Everybody's willing to just talk around tables. That's one of the things I really love, is that we have all these standing tables that we just gather around, and we actually just talk about what we're doing in the book world. And there's so many different ideas that can work for so many different paths," he says.

## For Empire Founders

Although the Empire Founders track was designed for authors whose businesses exceed \$100,000 in profit, this track overlapped with the other three more than might be expected. Although many of the advanced panels assumed a base knowledge of their subjects, others introduced ways to expand beyond authors' original business model: developing merchandise beyond their IP, branching into translations, or testing out special editions. Additional panels in this track offered insights to new platforms, suggested ways for authors to level up, and discussed changes in the marketplace that apply to authors at all levels.

Dale L. Roberts, author and self-publishing YouTuber, presented on marketing through community building, a topic that resonates with how he built his own career and defined his experience with Author Nation. "I really like the sense of com-





## Author Nation 2026

**Dates: November 10-13;  
Reader Nation November 14**

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**Full-price ticket: \$680**

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munity and being able to connect with a lot of the authors here,” he says of the conference. Asked what he hoped participants would take away from his talk, Roberts explained, “With mine, I just want to get it to where they understand that there’s no secret formula, there’s no shortcut. There is only just taking that action and being consistent with that action, so you can be able to build that community and really grow your author brand.”

After Monday’s Industry Expo, many of the more than one hundred vendors at this year’s event maintained a presence throughout the convention, allowing authors who arrived later, or who needed more time with them, to connect. Empire Founders and other advanced authors met with representatives of companies offering publishing services, marketing, and technology, such as Amazon Ads, IngramSpark, Draft2Digital, and Reedsy, on their own time throughout the week. Some of these connections resulted in six-figure deals.

## Takeaways

One the most exciting moments for me, as a follower of the Published Voyagers track, was sitting in T.D. Donnelly’s “Superdraft” presentation and finding a seven-figure author sitting next me, geeking out about his ideas as much as I was. The enthusiasm and generosity of authors whose reputations preceded them truly made the experience special.

Through Author Nation, Joe Solari and his team have fostered a supportive community where authors at all stages can come together and learn from each other—and the proof was evident at this year’s event. One of the most amazing things about indie authorship is the variety of journeys to success. Everyone brings different experiences, skillsets, and backgrounds, and receptive authors who have found success in one area can still find things to learn from authors who are just starting out.

Lydia Sherrer, whose full-time writing career supports her family of six, says, “One of the main reasons I come to Author Nation is to meet other people like me. We actually feed off of each other. We raise each other up. I love the opportunity to get to be a mentor and to empower other people who are beginners in the journey or just starting along.” The hybrid author of Cozy Epic Fantasy went on to say, “I really love learning from people like Joe [Solari] and people like the Empire Builders, who are a little bit further along from me. And being in the same physical space together is incredibly important for us as human beings, being able to make those connections—it can’t happen over digital.”

Author Nation 2026 will shift from Monday through Friday to Tuesday through Saturday in order to make the Reader Nation signing event more accessible and maximize reader attendance. With over one thousand readers in attendance on a workday, organizers expect an even larger crowd on the weekend, especially given the announcement of featured author Andy Weir’s attendance. Show dates are November 10-14, 2026.

Early Bird tickets for next year’s event went live immediately after the conference, and general admission tickets will become available in January. For more information, visit [www.AuthorNation.live](http://www.AuthorNation.live) or follow @author.nation on Instagram. ■



# Headlining in Las Vegas

## READER NATION 2025 DRAWS A CROWD

**R**eader Nation 2025—formerly the Reader Author Vegas Event, or RAVE—drew so many excited readers to the Paris Hotel and Casino that event leaders were forced to open the doors early in order to bring down the line. Nearly two hundred authors set up their tables in the ballroom, arranged in rows according to genre and marked by themed backdrops designed by Peaceful Events. Around the edges of the space, participants also found a Reader's Lounge, Narrator Showcase, and Quiet Room.

Although the signing floor was the main event, where readers had time to meet new and favorite authors, Reader Nation offered several other activities and opportunities for community. In the Reader's Lounge, guests could get their books gift-wrapped, play board games, draw in coloring books, or take a chance on a Blind Date with a Book.

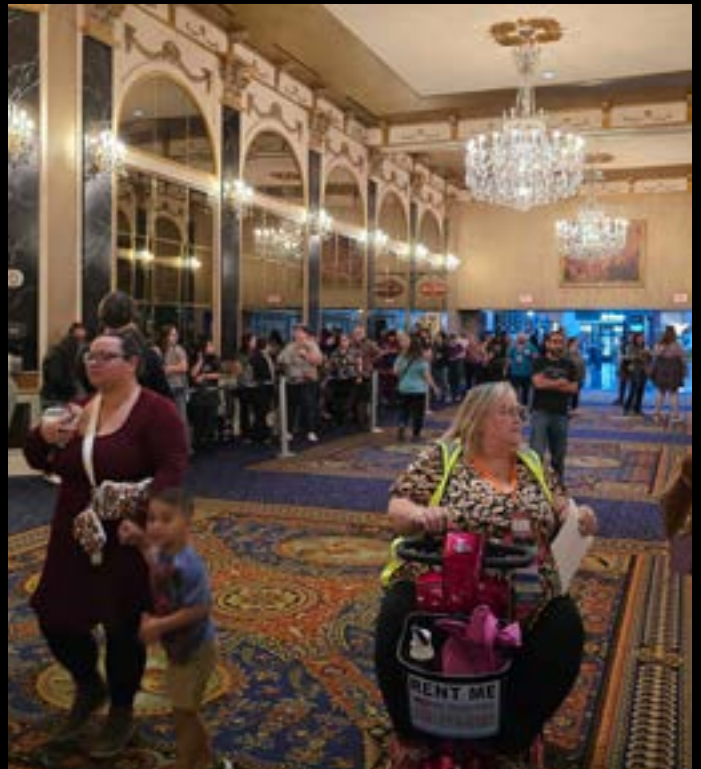
Soundbooth Theater hosted live readings with cozy seating, as well

as a raffle in the Narrator Showcase. Participants were encouraged to play Bookish Bingo, getting squares signed by authors to earn tickets for the raffle. Awards included VIP tickets and hotel stays for 2026. VIP swag bag holders gained early access to the event.

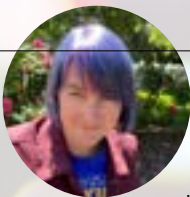
Unfortunately, featured author James Patterson was unable to make the event due to illness, but three hundred readers who won the lottery for his signing were able to pick up their signed copies of his latest book, *Disrupt Everything—And Win*, at registration. Readers who backed the Reader Nation exclusive Romance anthology, *Love Me in Vegas*, on Kickstarter were also able to pick up their copies at the registration tables.

Over one thousand readers attended this workday event, and more are expected when Reader Nation moves to Saturday, November 14, in 2026. Next year's keynote speaker, Andy Weir, the best-selling author of *The Martian* and *Project Hail Mary*, is sure to draw a crowd. ■





*Reader Nation 2025 took place November 7 at the Paris Hotel and Casino, with a line that snaked out the door (bottom left) and required event organizers open the ballroom early. Attendance is expected to be even more impressive next year, with the event taking place on a Saturday and Sci-Fi author Andy Weir announced as the keynote speaker.*



### Jenn Lessmann

Jenn Lessmann is the author of *Unmagical: a Witchy Mystery* and three stories on Kindle Vella. A former barista, stage manager, and high school English teacher with advanced degrees from impressive colleges, she continues to drink excessive amounts of caffeine, stay up later than is absolutely necessary, and read three or four books at a time. Jenn is currently studying witchcraft and the craft of writing, and giggling internally whenever they intersect. She writes snarky paranormal fantasy for new adults whenever her dog will allow it.





# Merchandising 101

## Your Introduction to Expanding Your Author Business to Include Products

As their backlist grows, many authors consider expanding sales beyond their books. And merchandise related to their backlist, or bookish merchandise in general, is often at the top of their list, as a way to both increase sales opportunities and advertise their books.

Merchandising is another cog in the marketing wheel. As authors delve deeper into transmedia, crowdfunding platforms, and direct sales from their author websites, they often look for other products they can sell to expand their storefronts. If a Kickstarter had purchasable add-ons or book-related merchandise, those items can then be added to their website as a sellable item. If they've expanded into comic books, custom character art, or recordings or virtual meet-and-greets for fans, those can be made available for purchase. If fans are looking for bookmarks, pins, pens, signed bookplates, stickers, or other items to

celebrate their favorite stories and characters, authors have a starting place for a store.

Author Jynafer Yáñez said that when she began merchandising, she had to shift her mindset and understand that selling merch isn't just about making money. "Sometimes we intentionally give up a little margin to make the merch more accessible because if someone loves us enough to wear our logo or carry our tote bag, that's a win. That's brand loyalty you can't buy."

Whether you're considering branching into merchandising or have already taken the plunge and are looking to expand your products, there are many factors to consider to be successful: tested strategies for creating, promoting, and distributing products; copyright laws that can affect your ability to sell merch; and ways your merch may play into your author business in the long run.

# A Note About Licensing

To sell merchandise based on your covers, logo designs, or other designs that aren't drawn by you, first note that you need to have extended licensing that allows for commercial use for each part of a design. If multiple images are used to create a cover, logo, or other product design, each image used has to be licensed for commercial use. You also have to license your fonts for commercial use.

Beyond licensing your images and fonts correctly before you begin selling merchandise, it is important to keep track of how many items you sell once you've started, especially if you have multiple types of products. Each license you purchase will be good for a certain number of items sold and must be re-purchased once that limit is reached. For example, if a license is good for one thousand physical product sales, and you offer both mugs and T-shirts that include the image, you'll need to tally both product's sales to determine when to renew your licenses.

It is a good idea to purchase and maintain all your licenses on your own and to make sure your designer tells you which images in your cover need to be purchased. If your cover designer allows it, you should also purchase the copyright of your cover design from your designer or, at minimum, have a contract that says they have provided you with all the images you need to purchase and that you have the right to use the final product for merchandising, and that you will maintain the licenses needed to do so.

If you use AI to generate your images, be sure to verify you are on the appropriate paid plan that doesn't share your designs with everyone and allows for commercial use. Each AI platform is different when it comes to which plan you'll need in order to use its generated images commercially, so be sure to check this each time you change platforms.

## Pro Tip:

This licensing is also true when it comes to use of your ebook and paperback covers. For each design you purchase, you are given a set limit for the number of times you may use the image—in this case, the number of books you can sell with that image as the cover. Once you reach that limit, you are supposed to buy the elements again to renew the sales license. Licensing varies according to each stock photo site and fonts, so read requirements closely when purchasing a design element for your business.



# Integrating with Your Platform

Once you have the ability to sell products, you'll need to decide where to sell them. Whether you decide to use WooCommerce, Shopify, WordPress, or another content management system (CMS), it is important to decide whether you want to integrate your shop with your existing author website or create a second website just for your shop. Many authors opt to have one site dedicated to their books and a subdomain or second domain linked to their main site for their shop. Some authors have chosen to integrate their shop directly into their main site. What you decide to do can depend on several factors.

If you are looking to create a new website that integrates everything because you only want to maintain one site, you may choose to create a new domain and use Shopify, Wix, or another service to create your new shop and build your presence there.

If you are looking to integrate with an existing site, you will want to see what integrates best with your current web-hosting platform. For example, you can purchase WooCommerce and the appropriate plugins needed to integrate with a print-on-demand (POD) provider, or you can look into setting up Shopify and integrating it with WordPress through WP Shop.

Consider costs involved, who acts as the merchant of record, and whether they deal with potential fraudulent charges or taxes—or if you are the merchant of record, how easy it is to integrate your POD provider and shop, as well as which provides the best services to meet what you need for your store.

A “merchant of record” is a service provided by some companies that process credit cards. The merchant of record is the name that appears on credit card statements when an item is purchased and handles all aspects of payment processing and fraud claims; calculates, collecting, filing, and remitting applicable sales tax, Value Added Tax (VAT) or Goods and Services Tax (GST) to the relevant local and international tax authorities; and handles refunds and chargebacks.

Using a platform that acts as your merchant of record means you don't have to deal with many of the legal things that can cause headaches for small businesses. Fourthwall and Curios are merchants of record, but Shopify is not. WooCommerce is not a merchant of record unless you use their WooCommerce payments option, though they integrate with other plugins that will act as a merchant of record.

## Pro Tip:

Print-on-demand functions the same way for merchandise as it does for books, allowing you to offer a range of products in your store without needing to stock them beforehand. Shopify and WordPress using WooCommerce have many plugins that make it easier to integrate POD with the shop. However, they don't all integrate, so it's a good idea to verify before you set up products with a POD provider.



# Platforms for Creating and Selling Merchandise

There are a variety of platforms available for print-on-demand (POD) products, some of which can integrate with an external site and some of which are hosted on the platform's own store.

## Fourthwall

Website: <https://fourthwall.com>

Fourthwall is a unique option for authors because not only can you set up products through Fourthwall's POD provider and distribute ebooks, but you can also set up a subscription service similar to Patreon or Ream Stories. It offers a free plan and a \$15-a-month plan. The free plan includes designing and selling products, monthly subscriptions, customer support, promo codes, discounts, and giveaways, as well as the ability to sell products elsewhere. The \$15 a month plan, in addition to the free tier's perks, provides you with \$120 worth of samples a year, a free .store domain, and other additional benefits.

Fourthwall is easy to set up and allows you to add team members to help you create your store. It is a great option for authors starting out with merchandising or who are interested in having subscriptions as well as selling merchandise. If you are looking for affordability, Fourthwall is by far the cheapest option that provides the most functionality upfront.

## Etsy

Website: <https://etsy.com>

Some authors have used Etsy to sell not only ebooks and paperbacks but also POD products. It is easy to distribute electronic files through Etsy, and many POD providers integrate with the site, allowing products to be ordered on demand without requiring they be stocked ahead of time.

You can, via a plugin, integrate Etsy with a WordPress website as well.

## Printify

Website: <https://printify.com>

Printify has an impressive catalog of items through a variety of printers in its network. They offer a free plan as well as a paid plan, allowing you to receive products at a lower cost.

Printify integrates with Shopify, Etsy, WooCommerce, eBay, Wix, BigCommerce, Squarespace, and PrestaShop. It also connects with Amazon and TikTok Shop, and it offers an API for custom integrations.

This provider works with print facilities all around the world and includes local shipping options for many of their products. If you are looking for a provider that ships internationally, this could be a good option. In addition, if you want to order products in bulk to sell at conventions or to ship from your business, they provide a bulk order discount.

## Printful

*Website: <https://printful.com>*

Printful is a POD provider with more than 430 customizable products, with global facilities that allow for products to reach customers in more than 190 countries.

It can integrate with Shopify, Etsy, Squarespace, Wix, WooCommerce, Big Cartel, Amazon, Square Online, eBay, TikTok Shop, and many other places. They also offer the option of setting up a Quick Store through Printful to sell directly through it.

Printful doesn't charge a monthly fee and offers access to all its tools on its free plan. Without an account, however, it's difficult to see whether there is a paid plan or what it offers.

## Redbubble

*Website: <https://redbubble.com>*

Redbubble is a POD provider designed for artists, with global printing and shipping, as well as anti-piracy measures, in place. It offers three tiers for creators, including reduced fees, advanced notice of sitewide sales, and more.

Unlike some of the other POD providers mentioned, Redbubble does not integrate with other platforms; instead, customers purchase directly from an artist's Redbubble store. There are, however, automations you can use with bridge platforms such as Zapier to allow you to integrate Redbubble with your website.

Redbubble seems to be more crowded than other sites, so it's more challenging to stand out from others on the site and make sales. Unfortunately, that can be difficult to accomplish unless you have a strong fan base already.

### Pro Tip:

Several changes to Redbubble account tiers went into effect September 1. If you are considering Redbubble, be sure to read up on these changes:  
<https://blog.redbubble.com/2025/08/artist-account-tiers-and-fees>.

## Shopify

Website: <https://shopify.com>

Shopify has become the go-to for many authors who are selling books and merchandise direct to their readers. Shopify integrates well with several electronic delivery options for ebooks, including Bookfunnel, and integrates with a variety of POD providers.

Shopify not only has a monthly fee, but it also has fees for every additional plugin you use to improve your store, plus fees for each sale. Research what integrations you want to use and determine how much your site will cost you monthly before making a decision.

Shopify allows you to set up shipping fees as well as prevent orders from countries you specify by product. If you don't want to ship paperbacks internationally, for example, but want to allow people to purchase products that are printed through local POD providers, you can do that.

There are more than five million stores on Shopify and many courses to teach you how to set up your author store, how to advertise, and more. "It's a long set-up process ... but don't let it daunt you," says author Catherine Banks. "Once it's set up, it pretty much runs itself with only updates or additions needing to be done." If you are considering Shopify as an option, look at other authors' stores to see what has worked for them.

### Your Basket

White short dress	20\$	-	1	+
White collar blouse	9\$	-	1	+
C no.12 Glasses	18\$	-	3	+
own Leather Shoes	35.50\$	-	1	+

## WordPress with WooCommerce and Other Integrations

Website: <https://wordpress.com>

Running a WordPress site with WooCommerce or other programs isn't a free endeavor. Whether you're using WordPress.com on a higher-paid tier or are self-hosting WordPress, there are costs involved. WooCommerce has put together an article breaking down the cost of managing a store through the platform at <https://woocommerce.com/posts/woocommerce-pricing>.

These costs are also true for custom themes or other plugins for your store. You may choose to integrate Shopify with WordPress, in which case you'll pay the Shopify cost and the plugin cost to sync everything between your sites. If your store is on Etsy, there are free plugins you can use to integrate with your website.

It is important to research the options that will work best for your business before making a decision. Alternatively, you can hire a website designer who has worked with stores like these and can set them up for you, though this option can cost a premium.



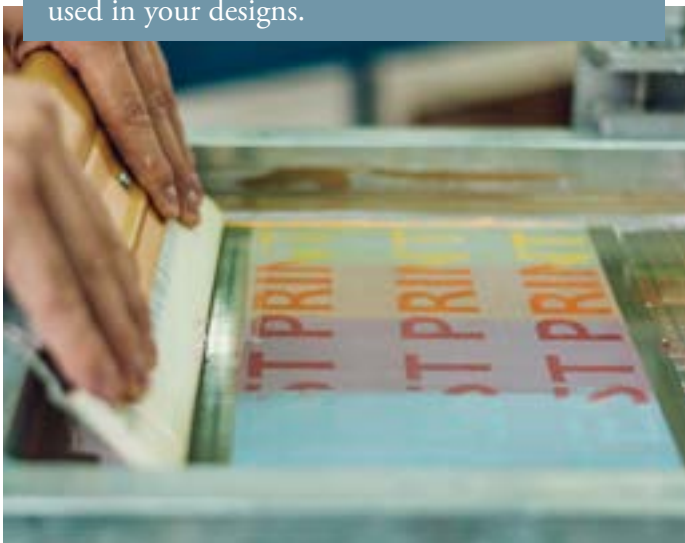
# Designing Your Merchandise

Most POD sites have downloadable templates you or your designer can use to create the products you want. Often, different-sized mugs and tumblers will have different templates for each size, whereas T-shirts will all use the same template. However, you can always test and see if you can expand a smaller template to a bigger one within a site's design platform. Each site is different, so flexibility depends on the system.

As with cover design, be sure to pay attention to the crop and bleed lines of your product design, as well as whether the site you use requires RGB or CMYK for printing, or whether it changes depending on the product.

## Pro Tip:

If you can order samples of products, design some and test the quality and color quality before you put the products up for sale on your site. "It doesn't always look the way you've hoped, and especially with greens. They always come out darker and less clear than you'd hope," says Talia Beckett, Urban Fantasy author. You may have to adjust your designs or use a different POD provider depending on the colors used in your designs.



## International Shipping

Whether you are a US author shipping internationally or an international author shipping to the US or elsewhere, monitor the changes to tariffs and customs around the world when it comes time to sell your products.

While some POD providers can print and ship locally, thus avoiding the hassle of international shipping and tariffs, not all POD providers do. If you have a large fan base outside of your country, verify that your chosen platform prints in other countries.

If you're shipping products to countries where tariffs could be an issue, such as signed paperbacks, hardcovers, or other items you have on hand, you may want to disclose on your website that the purchaser may have to pay a tariff based on where they live when they receive the product. You may also choose not to ship to certain countries, though be sure you have that set up in the settings on your shop.

## Pro Tip:

Before deciding to ship internationally, calculate the cost of shipping to a given country. You can do this by weighing the books and other products, plus packaging, and putting the information into a shipping site, such as Pirate Ship. Shipping to some countries can be more expensive than the book itself, in which case, you may decide not to ship there.

# Lessons Learned

It may seem like there are a lot of authors out there selling their own merchandise already, but there are also plenty of authors who are just starting out—and established authors willing to offer guidance.

“The biggest lesson for anyone starting the process: don’t overcomplicate it,” Yañez says. “Start simple. Use what you already have—book art, logos, series titles—and test a few designs using POD platforms like Printful or Printify. New items are added all the time, and you can upgrade designs as you grow. Poll your readers. Ask what they want. Don’t hesitate to scope out adjacent brands for inspiration.”

Banks also reminds everyone that their store may not take off immediately unless they have a voracious reader base. “Just like with your books, you have to get the word out there about your items and drive traffic to your site. I recommend checking out well-known authors’ sites to get an idea what type of merchandise and pricing is used.”

Julia Huni started her store in 2023 and has learned a lot since then. She’s changed where her store was set up, re-evaluated her best options for sales platforms, and learned a lot as she’s continued. She echoes Banks’s advice. “No one buys merch from a store they don’t know about,” she says. “And I wasn’t very good at telling people. You have to be willing to advertise if you want to sell products.”

Huni recommends starting small and asking your readers what they want. “You don’t need to have a full store set up to launch. Add one or two items you think your readers will really want and start with them. Add more items as you go.”

Beckett, who has been running a store for ten months, also recommends starting small and simple, though for a different reason. “Don’t overwhelm people with products,” she says. If you’re selling the products yourself rather than using a POD platform, she recommends starting with things like stickers and bookmarks—“small things you can store in bulk but [that] don’t take up a lot of space if you are doing the distribution yourself, so you don’t suddenly need a whole warehouse just for merch.” She also says it can take some trial and error to find products that sell. “Quotes and book-world-themed merch does a lot better than things like logos, unless the logo is super cool.”

Huni suggests building merch ideas into your story as you’re writing it. “If your characters go to a bar or theme park or restaurant, come up with a clever name, and think about logos. Items based on those places could be super popular if your series takes off. You could also partner with a local company for things like tea, candles, et cetera. That kind of collaboration could benefit you both.”



## Final Thoughts

Banks advises authors who are just starting out to find a mentor who has already set up a store who would be willing to answer questions. She remembers her first questions when setting up her store focused on delivery, pricing, and advertising. She compared her products with those on other authors' sites to determine her pricing, though when it comes to advertising, she says, "I'm still trying to get the hang of this."

Huni wished she had known about sales taxes: when to start charging them, how to pay individual state and country taxes, and more. While some places will pay the taxes on your behalf, sites like Shopify do not. You should talk with your accountant to learn what steps to take before launching your store.

She was also overwhelmed trying to figure out which companies to use and how to set up everything at the start, but doing your research and asking other authors for advice can ease some of that stress.

Merchandise doesn't need to be a mystery, Yañez points out. "Listen to your readers," she advises. "In the beginning, I wondered what would actually sell; what readers would care enough about to wear, gift, or display. Watch what they respond to, what they ask for, and even what they joke about in comments or emails. Your audience will tell you what they want if you're paying attention." ■







### Grace Snoke

Grace Snoke is a 42-year-old author and personal assistant residing in Lincoln, Nebraska. Having been a corporate journalist for more than a decade and a video game journalist for even longer, writing has been something she has always enjoyed doing. In addition to non-fiction books, she is currently working on a paranormal romance series, and two urban fantasy series under her real name. She has also released more than a dozen illustrated children's books and several non-fiction books. She has been publishing erotica under a pen name since 2017. For more information about her personal assistant business visit: <https://spiderwebzdesign.net>. Her author site is: <https://gracesnoke.com>.

# From a Few Clicks to a Flick

Michael Evans's Creatorwood.TV  
Turns Books to AI Movies in a Blink



The independent publishing economy has been subject to many disruptions in modern times, from the introduction of the Kindle to Brandon Sanderson's record-breaking Kickstarter campaign. In recent years, generative AI has stolen the spotlight, giving creators the opportunity, with a click, to generate hundreds of thousands of words' worth of text, a lifelike picture for their next ad, or a musical score for their book trailer. Even short-form video is possible, with some services generating up to fifteen seconds of lifelike video for free.

The tools have been seen both as a boon and as a challenge to the industry, depending on how they're used. But Michael Evans, founder of Creatorwood. TV, views his platform as an expansion of the publishing opportunities currently available to authors. "It's author or creator first," he says. "You own your customers. You own what you create. You can take your movie anywhere, and we are non-exclusive. Keep your movie on our platform or not; it's whatever the creator wants."

Already a recognized name in the industry, Evans is a serial software entrepreneur dedicated to creating software for storytellers. He is an author himself with over twelve Sci-Fi books he published in high school. He's a Harvard graduate and worked closely with YouTube celebrity Mr. Beast. Evans designed Creatorwood to disrupt the generative AI community by offering other publishing options for authors, publishers and creators. On Creatorwood's platform, anyone can create a professionally produced, full-length movie. From there, where it goes is entirely up to them.

Creatorwood is still brand new—the program beta-launched earlier this year and launches publicly December 1, following a mastermind hosted by Evans the week of Author Nation. It isn't only a generative platform; once fully launched, it also will serve as a streaming platform to allow creators to sell their movies directly to their fans.

Evans believes that at the core, authors are storytellers, and the medium they choose to tell their stories is words on paper. But he wants to give them the option to expand their storytelling into another medium. "Previously, authors have been limited to a small market: ebooks, print, audio, and maybe comics. ... But the market for film is about ten times that," he says. "We can go after that market as storytellers. We're creating a new industry—indie storytellers."





# How to Use Creatorwood

Like most generative AI applications, Creatorwood relies on the creativity and vision of the user to direct its output. Creatorwood uses an internal generative AI application called The Movie Machine, also created by Evans. When given a book or piece of text, The Movie Machine will first output a script and a production bible. Once the creator reads through the script and story bible and approves it, The Movie Machine outputs director's notes and storyboards.

Director's notes are all the details of each scene: the music, camera direction, characters, setting, and props. Storyboards are the first snapshots of each scene. Users will have to approve both before The Movie Machine actually generates any video. Once the director's notes and storyboards are approved, the program will begin video generation. The Movie Machine will automatically stitch together every scene and output the movie.

"This is technology built by authors for authors," Evans says. "We designed it to be easy to use but also fun. Consider yourself a director, able to dictate the movie's look and feel on the fly. Our users report they love spending time editing their movies because it's fun."

Movies can be as long or as short as the author would like, depending on how many hours they'd like to commit to the project's creation. Using Creatorwood's cost estimator, to generate 107 minutes of movie from an eighty-thousand-word book would cost roughly \$2,065. Users only pay as they go, and the price also reflects some amount of "regenerations," or edits made to the video within the program.

# Time Investment

“A movie from Hollywood takes hundreds of thousands of hours and costs an average of \$8 million to produce,” Evans says. “There are only one thousand scripted productions per year, and that includes TV and movies.” However, with Creatorwood, he says, authors can spend a few hundred hours to create a full, ninety-minute movie for about the cost of an audiobook.

“It’s easy; it’s fun,” Evans says. “You can take your ideas and see what can be done. You can type your thoughts into existence, and the movie changes at will in seconds. You’re a director calling your shots.”

Creatorwood was designed to give its users as much control as possible over the final product. To that end, authors own their generated content forever and can upload and distribute it as they wish: to a streaming service, to social media, or to Creatorwood’s own streaming platform once it launches. Authors will receive 80 percent of the total revenue regardless of price; of the remaining 20 percent, 10 percent will go to payment fees and processing and 10 percent will go toward server costs. Creatorwood’s platform will require no exclusivity, and authors will be able to set their own prices for the films they create. Users could even make a few episodes free and charge for the rest of a series.

For those who don’t want to invest hundreds of

hours into film creation, Creatorwood also offers a VIP service, where the company will produce the content for you at a cost of \$100 per finished minute.

“Kindle made it possible to distribute ebooks without having to print twenty thousand print books. The bottleneck was in the distribution, and the Kindle changed that,” Evans says. “The bottleneck in film is not distribution but the cost of creation. Creatorwood brings that cost down by one thousand and the time down by one thousand, [to a place] where there’s no gatekeepers. A new industry for self-publishing film is being born today, and it’s going to grow the pie for storytellers by ten times.” Evans’s plans for Creatorwood expand beyond its current feature list to include a mobile-streaming app and television-streaming app, where viewers can watch shows from their favorite devices.

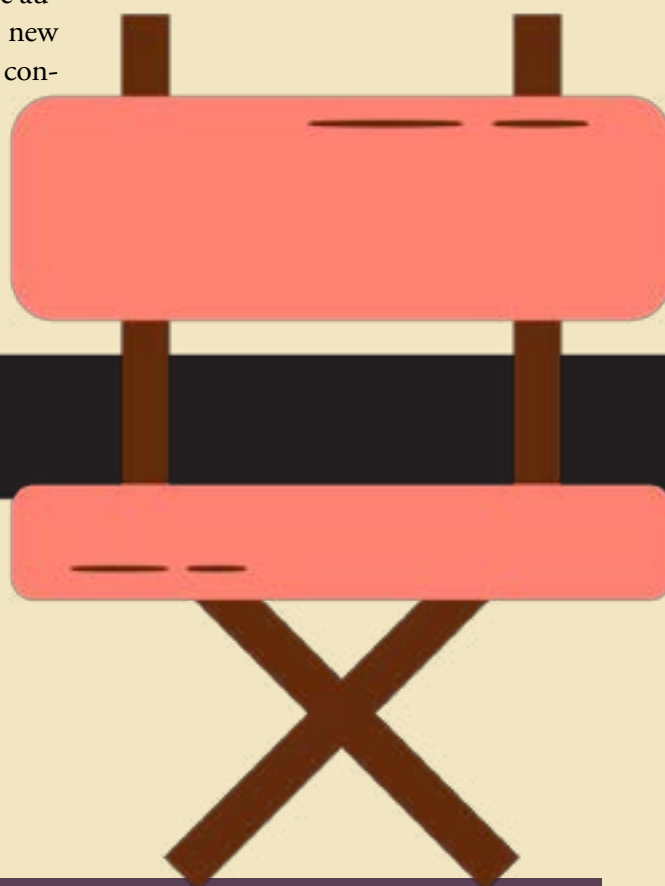
Information about current features, future updates, and common questions can be found on the platform’s website, <https://creatorwood.tv>.



*Learn more about  
Creatorwood’s current  
features and planned updates  
at <https://creatorwood.tv>.*

# Tools of the Trade

Like any AI application, Creatorwood is a tool, and indie authors will have to make the best decision for their business when deciding whether to use it. Producing a movie and investing hundreds of hours may not be right for you at this stage, and AI applications may not align with your business goals and principles. For those who are interested in the platform, however, Evans hopes Creatorwood can be a tool for indie authors to expand their stories into new mediums and allow them creative control in the process. ■



## David Viergutz

David Viergutz is a disabled Army Veteran, Law Enforcement Veteran, husband and proud father. He is an author of stories from every flavor of horror and dark fiction. One day, David's wife sat him down and gave him the confidence to start putting his imagination on paper.

From then on out his creativity has no longer been stifled by self-doubt and he continues to write with a smile on his face in a dark, candle-lit room.





# STORYTELLER OPERATING SYSTEM

NOTION FOR AUTHORS

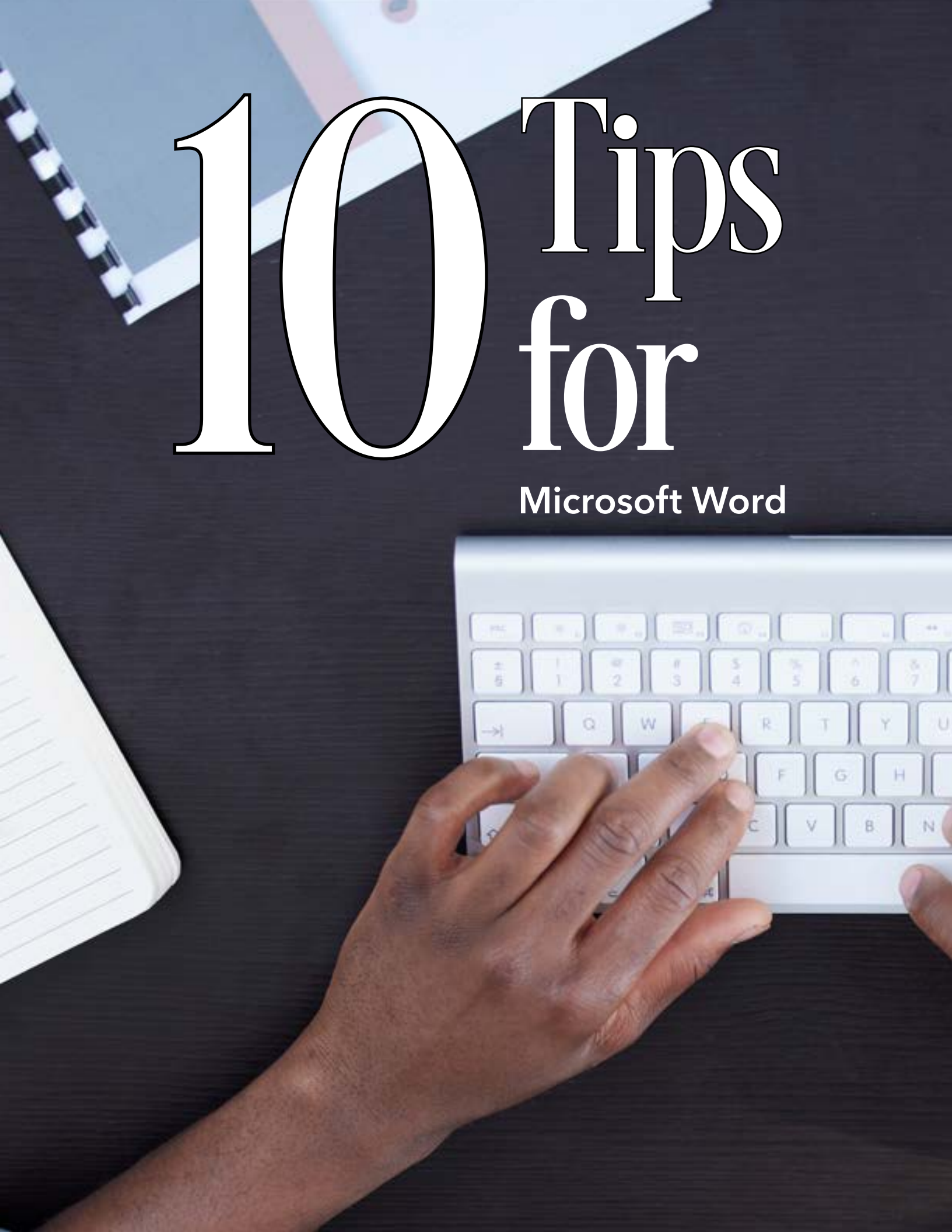
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# 10 Tips for

Microsoft Word





Many writers think of Microsoft Word as something they outgrow once they move to Scrivener or Google Docs, but that assumption sells the program short. As both an author and a writing coach, I've worked with just about every writing program available, yet I've always returned to Word. It's the program I use daily for editing, and though it may look simple on the surface, beneath that familiar layout are tools that can take even an experienced author from first draft to publication.

Word isn't the simple word processor many chalk it up to be. Explore past the basic tools and functions, and it's a flexible, professional workspace with features designed to help writers stay organized, edit with precision, and format their manuscripts for submission. The program is available for free in a limited version online, but you can also purchase the full version via subscription for \$9.99 per month or buy Microsoft Office Home for a single computer with a one-time payment of \$149.

These ten tips highlight how Word can support your creative process at every stage of writing, revision, and publication.

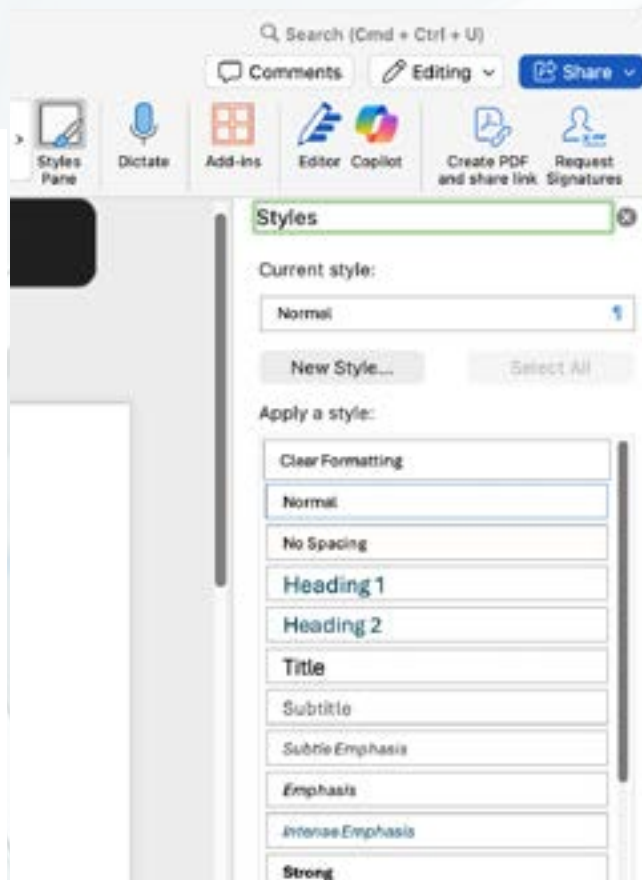


# 01

## Harness Styles for Effortless Formatting.

In Word, a style is a set of formatting instructions that control how text looks and behaves. Each time you apply a style, you're giving Word a label to recognize, such as "Heading 1" for chapter titles or "Normal" for the main body of your manuscript. Instead of manually adjusting fonts and spacing throughout, styles create consistency across your entire document with a single click. When it's time to update fonts or layout, changing one style updates the entire manuscript, saving hours of tedious reformatting.

You can find Word's styles on the Home tab. The main Styles gallery gives you quick, ready-made formatting options. If you want more control, click the small arrow in the lower-right corner of the Styles group to open the full Styles pane, where you can browse, edit, and customize styles.



# 02

## Use the Navigation Pane to Stay Oriented in Long Projects.

Styles aren't just helpful for standardizing your formatting in a document; they also form hyperlinks in the Navigation Pane. When you apply heading styles to your chapter titles and scene breaks, Word automatically creates an outline in the Navigation Pane on the left side of your screen. Each heading becomes a clickable link, allowing you to jump to any section of the document without scrolling. This feature also makes it easy to rearrange chapters or scenes by dragging and dropping headings, similar to the Binder in Scrivener or document tabs in Google Docs.

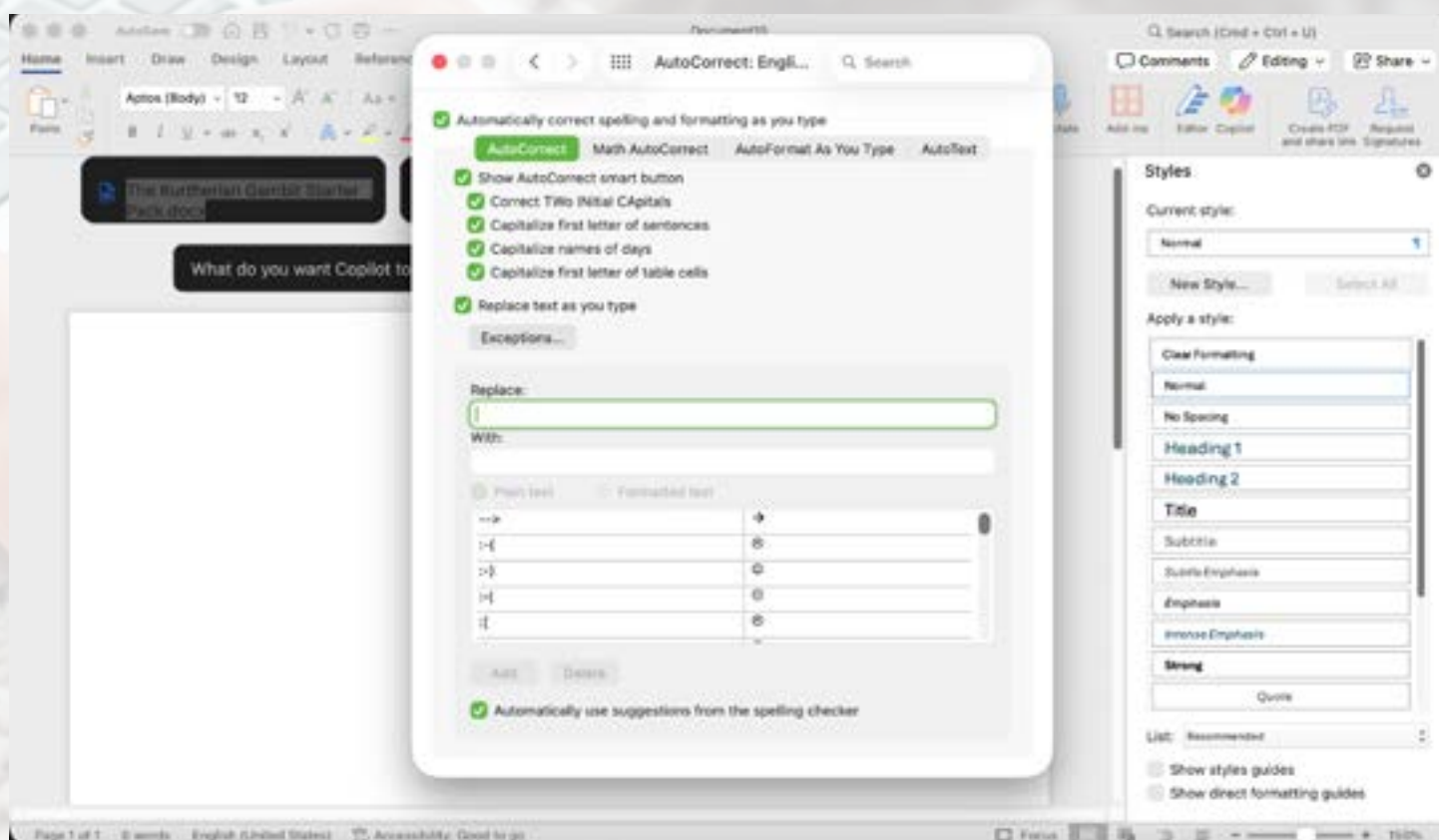
### Pro Tip:

When I start a new manuscript, I set "Normal" for my body text and use "Heading 1" for chapter titles. I also create a custom "Scene Break" style for section transitions. Starting with this structure early keeps your writing organized and ready for whatever comes next: editing, layout, or ebook conversion.

## Build a Personal Author Dictionary and Autocorrect Shortcuts.

Use Word's custom dictionary and autocorrect features to make your writing smoother and more efficient. Adding character names, invented places, or unusual spellings to your personal dictionary prevents Word from flagging them as errors. You can also use an autocorrect shortcut to autofill difficult-to-spell words or common phrases. To create an autocorrect shortcut as a Windows user, go to File > Options > Proofing > AutoCorrect Options, and enter a short code that you'd like to have expand automatically into a specific longer word or phrase. If you're on a Mac, go to Word, select "Preferences," then select "AutoCorrect."

These tools save time and keep your writing consistent, though be selective about what you add. Custom dictionaries and autocorrect shortcuts are shared across projects, so too many specialized words from one project can spill into the next, causing Word to overlook legitimate errors. Periodically review your custom list, so it stays relevant to your current work.



# 04

## Explore Copilot and AI for Brainstorming and Revision Planning.

Microsoft's Copilot integrates with Word, so you can work more efficiently while keeping your text in one program. To use it, open the Copilot sidebar, or type "@Copilot" in your document. You can ask it to summarize sections, suggest alternate phrasing, or identify areas where your pacing or tone might need adjustment. Copilot can also generate quick outlines or scene summaries to help you see the shape of your story at a glance.

### Pro Tip:

AI tools like Copilot can be powerful aids for brainstorming or research, but they should never write your story for you. Current copyright laws do not allow you to claim ownership of text produced by AI, so relying on it can cause serious legal issues. Please see the notice on Generative Artificial Intelligence at this congressional website for more information: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/LSB10922>. Use Copilot to explore ideas, summarize notes, or strengthen clarity, but keep your creative decisions and your words your own.

# 05

## 'Track Changes' Like a Pro.

Track Changes is Word's built-in editing system and lets you see what's been added, deleted, or revised in your manuscript. To turn it on, go to the Review tab and select "Track Changes." Once active, Word highlights every edit; insertions appear in one color and deletions in another, and comments can be added in the margins for clarification or discussion. You can then accept or reject suggestions to make the revision permanent. This visual tracking makes it easy to review feedback or keep a record of your own revisions.

### Pro Tip:

Word's Track Changes feature has become the industry standard for professional editing. Most editors rely on it when working with authors to ensure every revision is visible. Even if you write in another program, Word allows you to review and approve or reject edits, and to see who suggested the change in the first place.



# 06

## Compare and Combine Documents During Revision.

When you're juggling multiple drafts or receiving feedback from several readers, Word's Compare and Combine tools can help you keep everything organized. Found under the Review tab, these options allow you to see what's been changed between two versions of a document or merge edits from different reviewers into one master file. Compare shows all added or removed text and formatting variations for your review.

The Combine feature is useful when you've received multiple edited versions of your manuscript. It merges all comments and changes into a single document. This makes it easier to evaluate feedback side by side or merge two drafts of the same project. For authors who collaborate with editors, agents, or beta readers, these tools streamline the revision process and prevent confusion about which draft is the most current.

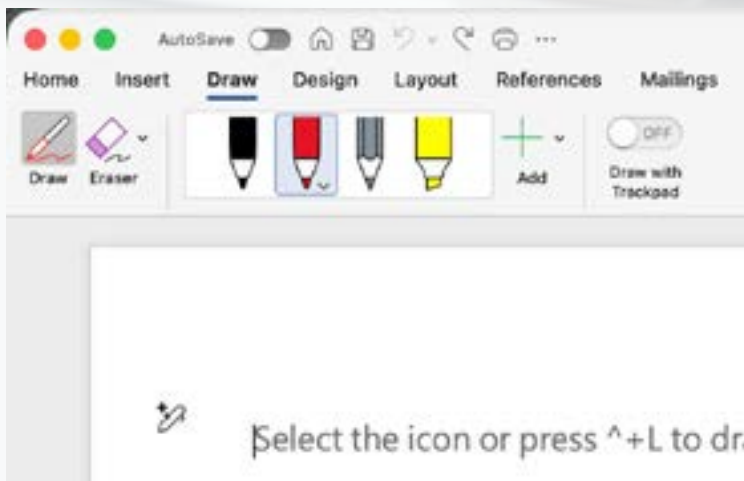
# 07

## Leverage Ink Tools for Deeper Edits.

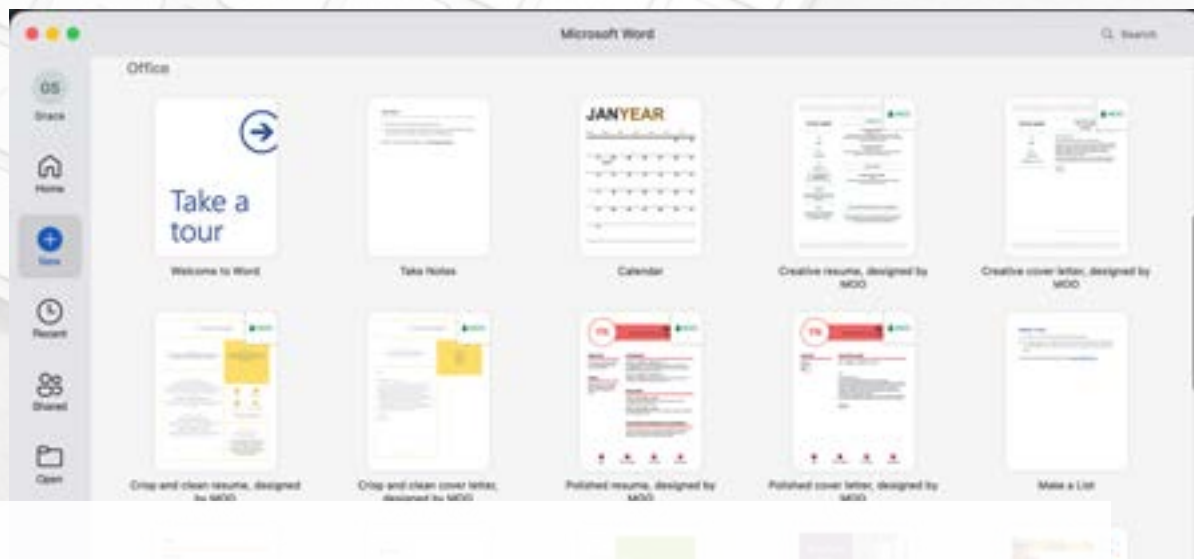
For authors who prefer a more hands-on editing experience, Word's Draw tab offers Ink tools that allow you to mark on the page using a touchscreen or stylus. You can circle awkward phrases, underline problem areas, or draw arrows to show movement within the text. This feature recreates the feel of working on paper but keeps everything digital and easy to revise.

### Pro Tip:

If you own a tablet and stylus, Word's Ink tools let you edit your manuscript by hand without the cost or waste of printing. To get the most from this feature, learn the common proofreading symbols used by editors. There are many resources and free guides available online through writing centers and universities. One resource is the Chicago Manual of Style: <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/help-tools/proofreading-marks.html>. Once familiar, you'll be able to combine digital efficiency with the precision of traditional editing.



## 08



## Use Templates to Standardize Submission and Formatting.

Templates in Word provide a consistent foundation for any writing project, which can save you time and ensure your work looks professional. Select File > New and browse the program's premade options, or create and save your own. For authors, templates are especially useful for maintaining standard manuscript formatting: double-spaced text, one-inch margins, and a readable font such as Times New Roman or Garamond.

A template is different from a style in the Style tab. Whereas a style changes how your text looks, like choosing a font or heading, a template is the whole setup for your document. It includes styles, spacing, and layout, so you can start writing with everything already in place.

Templates can help with other parts of the writing process. Authors often rely on them for query letters, book proposals, or formatted poetry layouts. Templates maintain uniformity in your presentation, aiding publishers in concentrating on your content instead of on formatting errors. Once set up, you can reuse your template for future projects to ensure uniformity across submissions.

## 09

## Manage References, Indexes, and Cross-References.

Word's built-in referencing tools can save authors hours of manual organization, especially when working on nonfiction or projects that require heavy world-building. Under the References tab, you can insert citations, manage sources, and generate bibliographies automatically in your preferred style. This feature ensures consistency when citing books, articles, or online sources throughout your manuscript. For writers working on academic or research-based material, these tools simplify a process that can otherwise become overwhelming.

Fiction authors can also benefit from Word's indexing and cross-reference features. Indexing allows you to mark key terms or character names and create an alphabetical index for readers to navigate. Cross-references link sections or terms within your document, helping maintain continuity across chapters or related passages. Whether you are managing complex lore, keeping track of research notes, or preparing a nonfiction manuscript, these tools help organize information for both you and your readers.

# 10

## Prepare a Polished File for Publication.

When your manuscript is ready to share with the world, Word provides everything you need to prepare a professional, publication-ready file. You can insert section breaks to manage chapters or formatting changes, add page headers and footers for consistent identification, and generate an automatic table of contents that updates as you revise.

Once your layout is complete, use the Save as PDF feature to preserve fonts, spacing, and design elements as intended. Most publishers, printers, and literary journals accept DOCX or PDF files, so you can submit or self-publish straight from the program you used to draft your story. Whether you are delivering your manuscript to an editor, uploading an ebook to a digital platform, or printing physical copies, Word's built-in features ensure your final document looks as professional as the writing itself.

## The Final Word

Word has been around for decades, but though many see it as simply a writing program, its lesser-known features expand its usefulness far beyond the first draft. With features that can help organize your drafts, polish your prose, and prepare your work for publication, the platform offers a surprising answer for authors looking for something that can do it all. Each tool helps remove a little friction from the process, letting you focus on the story and giving your words a smooth path from idea to finished book. ■



### Wendy Van Camp

Wendy Van Camp, Anaheim's Poet Laureate Emerita, is a dynamic voice in speculative poetry, blending cutting-edge technology, astronomy, and daydreams. Her talent has earned her nominations for the Elgin Award, Pushcart Prize, and Dwarf Stars Award. Wendy's poems, stories, and articles grace journals worldwide such as "Star\*Line," "Scifaikuest," and "San Diego Poetry Annual." You can hear Wendy as a rotating radio host of "Poets Cafe" on KPFK 90.7 FM Los Angeles or on her own audio podcast "No Wasted Ink Ramblecast." As a member of SFWA, SFPA, and IBPA, Wendy is a passionate advocate for the speculative community. Her debut poetry collection, "The Planets," was nominated for the Elgin Award. Discover more at [wendyvancamp.com](http://wendyvancamp.com).





# From the Stacks

## Tool

### Author Brand Guide

<https://brandguide.authorautomations.com>

Brought to you by Author Automations, this free-to-use tool helps you create three download-ready documents that turn generic AI output into your marketing copy—the kind that actually sounds like you and sells your books. Narrow down your book's branding, your target audience, your copywriting voice, and your social media strategy—information that you can share with virtual assistants, AI tools, or automation platforms, and that can inform your business decisions going forward.



## Webinar

### “How to build an integrated publishing ecosystem”

<https://webinars.indieauthortraining.com/talks/building-an-integrated-publishing-ecosystem>

In this webinar, *USA Today* best-selling author Russell Nohelty shares his methodology developed through years of experience, including running more than forty successful Kickstarters and building a 1,100-plus-member Substack community.

Learn how to build a thriving author business without burning out, using a proven five-step integrated publishing ecosystem, as well as how to leverage subscriptions, retail sales, crowd-funding, landing pages, and direct sales in a strategic sequence that maximizes results while minimizing stress.

Rather than chasing every new trend or platform, discover how to create a sustainable system that generates recurring revenue and reader loyalty, all while maintaining your creative energy and joy in the process.





## Podcast

<https://open.spotify.com/show/1MjZYaA5iClRL2JMtEiY12>

The *Indie Author Magazine* podcast has been refined and focused for bite-size listening, giving you just what you need to know about some of the biggest topics in the industry. Here are episodes you may have missed:

### **“Make the Holidays Work for You: Essential Book Marketing Tactics for Indie Authors”**

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/6AcihzLzDTs7Kr52VwwFze>

The holiday shopping season is one of the largest sales opportunities of the year, but did you know the period directly after Christmas can be just as big for indie authors—if not more so? Learn the marketing strategies that will help you make the most of the gift-giving season this year, plus the steps you should be taking now to prepare.

### **“Strategic Marketing with Universal Book Links: Tools, Data, and Global Opportunities”**

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/7Lsv6KiaFaTd1DKb0uw1MT>

Universal book links, or UBLs, create a single landing page for authors with multiple store fronts to share with readers and in marketing materials. They aren't just useful for those who publish wide, either. Explore how UBLs can benefit your business, how different platforms stack up, and when they'll be a boon or when you're better off sending a direct sales link.

### **“Walking, Writing, and Winning: Productivity Hacks from Sci-Fi Legend Kevin J. Anderson”**

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/7w6WZsLjsgpECRUzSmUFex>

Over the course of his career, Science Fiction author Kevin J. Anderson has signed his name on franchises like *Dune*, *Star Wars*, and the *X-Files*; he co-founded the Superstars Writing Seminar and now teaches the master's program in publishing at Western Colorado University. In this episode, hear more about his climb to the top of the mountain—literally—and the advice he has for others who want to follow in his footsteps. ■



Karen Guyler

Always being the new girl at nine schools on two continents was no fun at all so books became the only constant in Karen Guyler's life, even if they didn't help her get out of sports days. Now settled in Milton Keynes, England, Britain's best kept secret, she juggles reading with writing twisty thrilling stories, her children, husband and two grand-puppies - a much nicer mix! She also teaches Creative Writing for Adult Education with lots of laughter in amongst the word wrangling and discovery.



# When the Light Declines

Katherine May's *Wintering*  
Shows How to Find Creative  
Growth in the Winter

As the light declines and winter descends in the northern hemisphere, many of us feel the pull to snuggle up in our blankets, sip something warm, and indulge in our own human version of hibernation. Yet working writers don't always plan—or desire—to slow down, especially not when we've been told we shouldn't lift our foot from the gas pedal if we want to be “successful.” Industrialization drives us to reach for ever greater heights of productivity and, therefore, surely, success. We must write, edit, publish, promote. Then do it again, and over and over in an unending cycle until we can't possibly do it anymore. Deadlines hold us in a firmer grip than daylight, binding us so tightly we know we might break if something goes wrong.

That cycle is the expectation, the required cadence of life painted in so many authors' minds, but that doesn't have to be reality.

It can't be.

These beliefs about success, productivity, and a life well lived weren't always etched in our minds. Even in our not-so-distant past, we didn't strive for maximum productivity all year long. Longer days meant more time spent in the sun's warmth, but shorter days meant more time near the hearth. The solstices were marked with deep reverence, the equinoxes celebrated with festivals, and communities



worked closely together to honor the wheel of the year. Seasonal rhythms affected more than just temperate climates; they were global, and polar and equatorial communities were also shaped by their seasons. Whether through cultivating and harvesting, foraging and gathering, or creating and teaching, our activities ebbed and flowed with the world around us.

Creatives, especially writers and storytellers, were not immune to or set apart from these cycles—they were the heart of them, bringing the community together and sharing history, fables and folklore, tales of strength, and stories that brought hope for brighter days to come. If you've ever felt drawn to recede in the dark season, or compelled to rebel against constant productivity, then you'll find validation in Katherine May's memoir *Wintering*. In it, she encourages us to look more closely at natural rhythms as a source of inspiration to better care for ourselves while cultivating growth and inspiration.



## The Cost of Constant Light

Although industrialization has brought us a multitude of advances in technology, energy, and medicine, it has also moved us increasingly away from the natural rhythms of life. Widely available energy means it's easier to heat homes in the winter or cool them in the summer and fill every room with false daylight. Even our sleep schedules now fit the unwavering work schedule, rather than the work schedule fitting the undulating daylight hours.

Among the many costs of all this light and

industry is burnout—a spirit-shattering condition we've all heard about and that many of us have experienced. As much as we wish we could power through every day of every week of every year with consistent, unwavering levels of energy, we simply can't. We are the creators of industry, not the rising population of machines we've designed to automate an ever-increasing number of jobs. As humans, we require self-care, work-life balance, and better sleep to thrive and explore the vastness of our creative potential.

# The Impossible Equation

In May's memoir, she explores what enduring winter means both in the physical context of the cold season and in the personal context of life's difficult times. She reveals how our loss of connection with winter—and the local communities outside our own homes—has shaped our modern cultural beliefs about rest and the natural ebb and flow of life. Many Western cultures have come to view the need for rest or withdrawal as weakness, or even as the result of some personal failing, as if produced by an incorrect equation in our individual lives: Money x (Productivity - Happiness) = Success.

The lie is that if only we can find the right equation, we'll ascend to the pinnacle of the mountain we've been climbing, or reach the far edge of the storm we've been battling. From those points, life will be an easy, steady walk, or smooth sailing into a watercolor sunset.

$$\frac{\text{Money} \times (\text{Productivity} - \text{Happiness})}{\text{Success}}$$

The truth is a far cry from the standard hero's journey. There is no simple plot arc; no clear beginning, middle, and end to mark our journey. We are living in the moment. Our lives bob upon the waves, buoyed by hope and ambition, then pulled beneath the cold water during stormy weather.

So how do we manage it?

## Return to Winter

There is an apt maxim you may have heard: "If you don't schedule a break, your body will do it for you." Before we had the breadth of our modern conveniences, winters were a forced break. Although there would always be grueling, time-consuming work to be done, there were natural limits to it. Those limits haven't quite been abolished, but they're now mostly ignored, if not negated. When we get tired, we brighten the lights, brew coffee, or quickly heat up some soup, then get right back to what we were doing. Instead of letting the shadows of winter and the flicker of candle or lamplight lull us into gentle sleep, many are tempted to binge their next television obses-

sion until they're bleary-eyed and brain-fogged.

As writers, we can learn not only from May's enchanting, thought-provoking memoir but also from other cultures. Pen some time in your planner to learn what other cultures, past and present, do during the winter. Consider exploring the winter practices of your ancestors for inspiration on how you can embrace the season.

The purpose of this, beyond inspiration—and, inherently, story fodder—is to tap into that instinctual piece of yourself. Let it guide you to listen more closely to what you need this winter for your brain, body, spirit, and creativity. Do you long to slow

your pace and retreat from social activities? Or are you hungry for cozy social events and merry gatherings? Consider why, then build more of what you desire into your schedule.

Live in the moment, in your body, and feel the world around you, if not for its own sake, then for the sake of better describing the sensation of icy North Atlantic wind biting your exposed skin, the crashing of winter's waves on the shores of Lake Superior, or the sound of freshly fallen snow crunching beneath your boots on a remote Appalachian mountain.

Cultivate your own wintering practice for the times when you need it most. In the autumn, trees cut off the supply of nu-



trients to their leaves, shedding their coats to conserve energy for hard, lean times. Perhaps shedding your leaves means disappearing from social media for a while, letting digital cobwebs gather on your newsletter software, or reducing your participation in public life, physically or digitally. Once you've identified what's draining you, don't feel obligated to keep doing it; take a step back to center your writing and yourself, then reevaluate.

During hard times, whether brought on by physical or mental health concerns, burnout, tragedies, or any number of other reasons, there is no reason to be ashamed for sheltering and protecting yourself. As May explains, trees in the winter aren't merely dead things waiting for resurrection. All right, we already knew that part.

But she beautifully reminds us that not only are they still alive; the new nubs of the next season's blossoms are already growing before the old leaves have completely fallen. During their winter, trees still produce nourishment for the surrounding forest, but they do so quietly and mostly unseen. You can do the same. Even if no one else sees the work you're doing, your effort and your whole health still matter just as much.

Even in our winters, in the darkest mo-

ments, when we feel bereft of our usual leaves—the pieces of us that others see most prominently—there is beauty and nourishment for ourselves and for those who depend on us. And most of all, there is still growth happening, even in the cold, and even in the darkness.

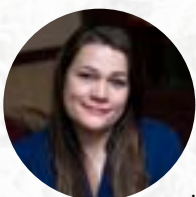
Keep in mind that our “winters” may not always happen in the cold months and can last however long they need to alongside lifestyle shifts, medical diagnoses, or burnout. When spring comes again—whenever your energy and creative spirit return—you also don't have

to immediately pick up all the things you set aside. Carefully reconsider what you take on again, such as marketing or administrative tasks that drained you of more resources than they returned. Rather than forcing rhythms and a pace that don't align with this season of your life, allow yourself

to live and create in ways that bring you joy, meaning, and freedom for experiencing both the highs and the lows.

Do not fear the decline of light this winter, because it may be the perfect opportunity to shed a few leaves, turn your attention inward, and nourish quiet growth, so you might blossom more brightly with your creativity in the spring. ■

**There is no simple plot arc; no clear beginning, middle, and end to mark our journey. We are living in the moment.**



**Audrey Hughey**

Audrey Hughey designs planners, writes fiction, and works diligently to help her fellow authors. Although she currently writes horror and thrillers, she's as eclectic in her writing tastes as in her reading. When she's not submerged in the worlds of fiction and nonfiction, she's caring for her family, enjoying nature, or finding more ways to bring a little more light into the world.









# Getting Crafty for Christmas

## FIVE BOOKS ON WRITING TO ADD TO YOUR HOLIDAY WISH LIST

**N**otebooks, pens, and coffee mugs are fun and thoughtful gifts for the author in your life, but few things warm a writer's creative soul quite as much as a good book. For most writers, the best gifts aren't just things to own but also those that ignite inspiration, sharpen skills, and remind them why they fell in love with storytelling in the first place.

Books, but especially craft books, make perfect presents because they offer something rare: growth wrapped in possibility. Whether your favorite wordsmith is polishing their first draft or editing their tenth novel, a well-chosen book on writing craft can unlock new perspectives, boost confidence, and turn "someday" projects into polished stories ready for the world. Plus, while you're shopping for others, there's no rule saying you can't treat your future self to a holiday gift this season, too.

Read on to find some of *IAM*'s favorite books on writing—and to see if you'll find your next favorite among them.

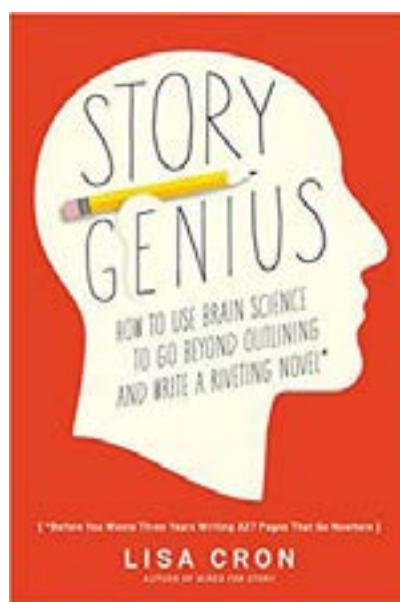
# *How to Write a Novel* by Joanna Penn

Joanna Penn's *How to Write a Novel* is geared toward the author writing their first book, but her insights can be valuable at any stage of your career. The book guides readers through the process of creating, from idea generation, through research, plotting, and writing, and all the way to editing the first draft. Along the way, Penn covers basic novel structure, finding your own drafting process, how to know when your book is done, and other helpful tools for writing and editing.



Find it at: <https://www.thecreativepenn.com/writenovelbook>

# *Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel* by Lisa Cron



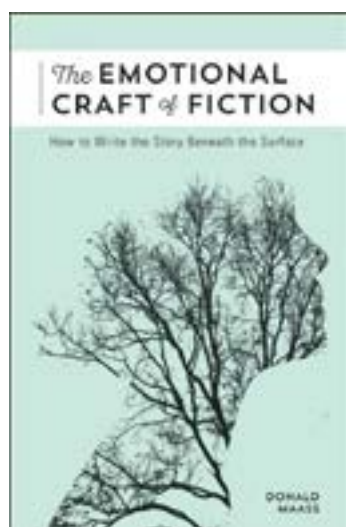
If you have an author on your shopping list that doesn't fit neatly into either the plotting camp or the pantsing camp, this book could be one to consider. In 283 pages, Lisa Cron digs deep into the power of story and what makes readers crave more. The book guides writers through the "blueprint," as she calls it, of understanding and building the internal and external layers of a story rather than outlining linearly.

Find it at: <https://books2read.com/b/49kN9J>



# *The Emotional Craft of Fiction: How to Write the Story Beneath the Surface*

## by Donald Maass



“Writers might disagree over showing versus telling or plotting versus pantsing,” writes Donald Maass in the description of his book, *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*, “but none would argue this: If you want to write strong fiction, you must make your readers feel.”

For the writer looking to add more emotional depth to their writing, Maass’s book may hold the answers. In it, he covers all aspects of the emotional journey of a novel, internally and externally, peeling back the layers that exist within the story itself, those of the reader’s journey, and those of the writer’s journey while writing it.

*Find it at: <https://maassagency.com/books-on-writing>*

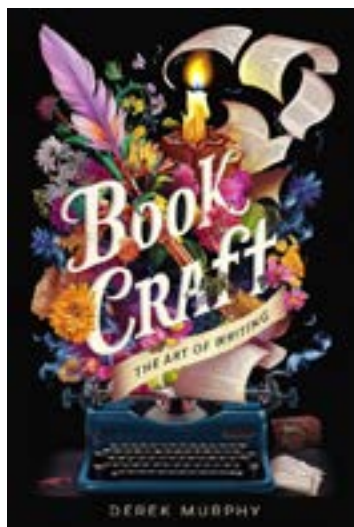
# On Writing and Worldbuilding series by Timothy Hickson

Need a gift for the series author on your list? Gift them a series in return—about how to build out their world, characters, and story across books. Although somewhat geared toward Fantasy authors, Timothy Hickson’s three-book series also covers everything a series writer or Speculative Fiction author needs to know to create a well-fleshed-out story world. Hickson uses examples from well-known story worlds to illustrate the concepts he discusses—everything from religious and magic systems to fight scenes to heroes and villains. Plus, he walks you through how to plan your novel once you’ve established it all.



*Find it on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08423QJ63>*

# *Book Craft: The Art and Science of Writing Great Books* by Derek Murphy



Whether you need a gift for a new or established author, Derek Murphy's *Book Craft* is one to consider. Murphy's book description says it best: "Book Craft is your key to unlocking the secret alchemy of storytelling—where art meets craft to create fiction that captivates, resonates, and lingers long after the final page."

At 423 pages, Murphy's book offers practical advice on structure, writing techniques, and tools for writers in all stages of their journey. One reviewer describes it as "the writing book equivalent of being in a wizard's hut as he tells you his secrets."

Find it on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Book-Craft-write-readers-polish-ebook/dp/B089NJK1SC>

Finally, if you're looking for some extra stocking stuffers, consider gifting subscriptions to *Indie Author Magazine* or Indie Author Training courses. Authors can learn not just about craft but about the publishing industry as a whole, with new articles and a host of webinars, courses, and discussions bringing joy to your favorite author's inbox or mailbox throughout the year. Visit: <https://indieauthormagazine.com/#/portal> or <https://indieauthortraining.com>.

Even the most seasoned writers know there's always another layer to peel back, another technique to master, or another truth to uncover about story and self. That's what makes how-to and craft-focused books such perfect gifts, whether for the author in your life or for yourself. They're the rare presents that keep on giving, long after the wrapping paper's gone. ■



## Jenn Mitchell



Jenn Mitchell writes Urban Fantasy and Weird West, as well as culinary cozy mysteries under the pen name, J Lee Mitchell. She writes, cooks, and gardens in the heart of South Central Pennsylvania's Amish Country. When she's not doing these things, she dreams of training llama riding ninjas. She enjoys traveling, quilting, hoarding cookbooks, Sanntangling, and spending time with the World's most patient and loving significant other.





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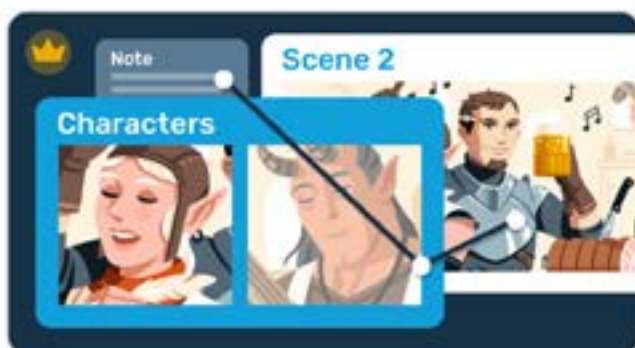
reedsystudio

# Every writer needs a Studio

A **FREE** place to plan, draft, edit,  
and typeset your book

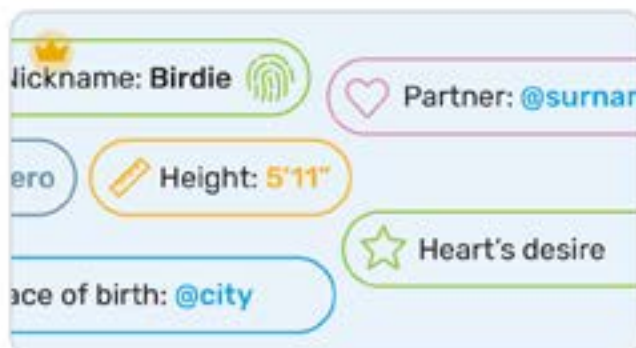
The screenshot displays the reedsystudio interface, which is divided into several functional areas:

- Manuscript Management (Left Sidebar):** A dark sidebar with a menu including 'Front matter', 'Copyright', 'Table of Contents', 'Body', and 'Back matter'. The 'Body' section is expanded, showing '1 Chapter 1' selected. A status bar at the bottom indicates '12,340 words' and the 'reedsy' logo.
- Editing View (Center):** The main workspace shows a manuscript titled 'Rocket Bride'. The chapter title is 'The Rehearsal D'. The text reads: "Are you ready, Princess?" Bria placed the delicate silver crown "I don't know." Ximara pressed temples, just below where the c bit of a headache. Maybe it's the braids?" A rich text editor toolbar is visible below the text.
- Goals & Insights (Top Right):** A panel showing progress tracking. It includes a 'Today' summary with a word count of +1000 and a daily goal of +1123. A calendar view shows progress for the week of Oct 23-27. A 'Manuscript goal' section shows 12,079 words (30% complete) against a target of 40,000 words due by Nov 30.
- Main Characters (Bottom):** A section titled 'Main characters' featuring three character cards: 'Princess Andromeda', 'Aether Lefield', and 'Captain Perseus', each with a stylized illustration.



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