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THE DAMES' DOCKET

A Bimonthly Newsletter from Level Best Books



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GREETINGS FROM THE DAMES

“Anyone who says writing is easy isn’t doing it right.” – Amy Joy

Amy Joy, a multi-genre bestselling author and illustrator of YA and Children’s fiction, couldn’t have said it better.

And, maybe because writing is a difficult vocation, those who commit to the life welcome hearing how others approach the task.

When I called for articles about the writing process, a number of Level Best authors were kind enough to share their thoughts. Thank you to Peter Hayes, Linda Norlander, Jim L’Etoile, Julie Bates, Jen Collins Moore, and Katherine Ramsland for their contributions. I believe that the result is an informative and enlightening newsletter that will be of value to all of us.

On behalf of Shawn, Verena, and myself, warm gratitude to Tina deBellegarde and Mally Becker for offering our authors two wonderful networking forums. The Besties Zoom meetings and Slack site are valued resources. We hope you all take advantage of them.

The three of us wish you all a peaceful and loving Thanksgiving.

For the Dames,

Harriette

WRITING THROUGH THE APOCALYPSE

Peter Hayes

Stay at home, they said. Only go out for essential reasons, they said. For the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and us in Pittsburgh, those pandemic directives were effective April Fool's Day, 2020. You can't make this stuff up. I was left parsing the meaning of 'essential.' I wrote three novels—including *The Things That Last Forever*—and more than a dozen short stories while sitting in a well-known coffee chain. To me, the commute and concentration I needed to block out the coffee-shop hub-bub was 'essential' to my writing. But now I had the same problem as everyone else.

How to reinvent my work habits?

I did have advantages. I have a workable home office with a door (which my spouse closes with glee after I enter). I was already in the right profession, because the first draft of any story is up to me alone. And thanks to the loss of my commute, I had more time to write.

But home offices have disadvantages. The main one being the first draft is up to me alone. The rest can be summed up as the refrigerator, the desperate requirement to keep the bird feeder topped up, and the immediate need to investigate any household noise. In short, distractions, any distractions, real or imagined.

Needless to say, for several months I didn't complete a lot of work. It wasn't for lack of trying. Or, as my father used to say (as I sat in my bedroom doing my homework), "Oh, I see you're trying. Very trying." He would then close my bedroom door. Gleefully, I think.

See how that happened? Distractions don't even require a refrigerator or bird feeder.

By the time August rolled around, I knew I needed help. I did an intervention on myself and reviewed everything I was doing, starting in the most logical place.

My playlist.

What I found was disturbing. I listen to my playlist when running errands or taking walks, and I delete and add songs to keep it fresh. My review found lots of new songs from Smile Empty Soul and Death Cab for Cutie. I'm not saying it was depressing. The word isn't quite strong enough. I started deleting, although I did add one song that made me smile every time I heard it.

I also rethought my original commute to the coffee shop. I read, about that time, of people so desperate for normalcy they drove their pre-pandemic work commute round-trip every morning before they started their workday from home. They said it got them in the right frame of mind.

I decided I needed a new commute as well.

I chose to walk from my office to the dining room. The first thing I did when I arrived was to close the dining room door. Myself. With glee. At the dining room table, I fired up the same iPad and detachable keyboard I used at the coffee shop to write my first three books.

Amazingly, it worked.

By December I had the first draft of my fourth book. A couple of short stories in my pocket.

I'm not going to say it was easy, but I'm still at it. And who knows, perhaps by the end of the year I can revisit the coffee shop every day.

In the meantime, I'll keep listening to that one song I added to my playlist. Perhaps you should, too. It's called "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," the cover sung by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole.

It's winter. We could all use a little sunshine.

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Peter W. J. Hayes is the author of the Vic Lenoski police procedural series and is a Derringer-nominated author of short stories. He is a past finalist for the CWA Debut Dagger Award.



MY WRITING PROCESS

Julie Bates

No one writes because it is easy. Writing well demands commitment, persistence, and a hide of Teflon. The desire to put words on a page must override your ego, because no one gets it right the first time. It's more akin to the metamorphosis of a diamond. Put enough stress on a lump of coal and you will get one, if you're willing to put forth the effort and endure the stress.

Since I write historical fiction, I start with when. Certain places in time are alluring to me, whether because of historic events, journals of people who lived during that time, or even the fashion. Sometimes I don't know why a certain time frame appeals to me, it just does.

Once I know what time period my story lives in, then I go on to what. What was happening during this time frame? How could it have impacted the characters already emerging in my mind? I research until I can build a time frame of events that are occurring nearby and further away. I may or may not make use of all I uncover, but it's a handy reference to look at while I'm plotting the event in my novel. Some of my favorite writers—such as Anne Perry, C.S. Harris, and Ashley Gardner—are masters of making a time period come to life. Their stories are rich in imagery and detail without overwhelming the reader.

My next order of business is my characters. They reside in my head, but they are acquaintances; I haven't gotten to know them well. I take time to write a few paragraphs about each one, more on the major ones. Developing these backstories fleshes them out and helps me discover more about them. It also helps to keep me from forgetting family trees and who is connected to whom. This becomes a lifeline when I write the next book in a series because I don't always remember what I previously put down on a page. It seems somewhat obsessive, but I've misspelled and changed character's names, forgotten the name of a spouse, or added/subtracted the number of siblings in a family. I prefer to avoid embarrassment.

From there I develop a loose outline. I like outlines because they help me stay on track. That being said, I don't plan every action beforehand. I plan a basic story arc and bullet things I believe should happen during that time frame. All this sounds very controlled and too manageable, but characters have minds of their own. Frequently, my characters go off script when I least expect it, causing me to weigh my plans against the events that suddenly spilled out on the page. It varies who wins.

Settings matter. A well-written description can whisk one away to places we could never go to, except in dreams. When I first read, Delia Owen's *When the Crawdads Sing*, I was entranced by the lyrical descriptions of the Carolina coastal wetlands. Even now, the images she described linger in my imagination. That's what I want for my readers. The magic of a good book is how the taste of it lingers late into the night long after you devoured it.

COVID impacted everyone. As a public school teacher by day, surreal does not begin to describe 2020 for me. I felt overwhelmed, lost, and wondering where my life was going. I

still don't have the answers. My writing became my refuge where I could focus on things other than the unnerving headlines stemming from the pandemic and the stress of trying to figure out online instruction. Even now, I struggle with explaining mask mandates and social distancing to my special needs students.

Lastly, I have to acknowledge that with every writing project, there are things I wish I had done better. I loved my first book, *Cry of the Innocent*, but, looking back, I spent less time evaluating the history and more on getting to know my characters. While I am not haunted by my reviews, I listen to repeated themes and ponder them. In truth, there's always something that could be worded better, fleshed out, tied up, or resolved. It's that way in life too. All I can do is endeavor to write the best story I can and hope others like it. As with any of the creative arts, writing is a passion that displays the inner workings of the human heart, both what we intend to reveal and very often what we ourselves did not realize was there.

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Julie Bates, author of the Faith Clarke Mysteries, is a public-school teacher for special needs children. When not plotting her next story, she enjoys crafts and spending time with her husband, son, and a number of dogs and cats who have shown up on her doorstep and never left.



MIRED IN THE MESSY MIDDLE

HOW TO GET UNSTUCK

Linda Norlander

Writing a novel is like a car trip with a whiny inner child demanding, “When are we going to get there?” For me, the beginnings are easy. The trip is planned, the car is packed and the excitement about a new experience is growing. My planning usually involves a lot of “think time” imagining the story in my head. After I have the concept, I write a synopsis longhand to give me a sense of where the story is going. Now I’m set.

Except, like a journey to places unknown, often the road isn’t quite clear. For years I’ve struggled with the middle part of the book. Tina deBellegarde, a Level Best author, put it so well in a recent podcast when she called it “the messy middle.” It’s those chapters that drive the reader to the climax of the story. They need to be vivid enough to keep the reader drawn in and have the details and clues to make the story real. For me, a good middle is like the difference between traveling for miles and miles over flat, boring prairie, or driving the curving highway through the mountains. One will put you to sleep and the other will keep you anticipating the next bend in the road.

Recently, I’ve been stuck in the middle. The first chapters of the newest Cabin by the Lake mystery moved quickly. I had my death (was it an accident or was it murder?), my main character pursuing it, and the momentum growing. Somewhere mid-manuscript, my writing car drove straight into the ditch and got stuck in the mud. It felt like I was trying to move the story in one direction and the story itself wanted to go somewhere else—somewhere way too complicated for my writing skills.

How to get unstuck? In my case, the first thing I did was try writing through it. I kept on the same track with scenes I’d conceived at the beginning of the book. After several days of getting myself mired deeper and deeper into a place that whiny little voice in my head didn’t want to go, I stopped and let it sit. I worked on revising a short story instead.

Next, I sat down with my original written synopsis and wrote out a new one. By this time, the story had changed and new characters had popped in. I needed to decide whether to keep the changes and the new characters or stick to the old road map.

With a new synopsis and a better sense of where the story might go, I deleted the most recent chapters. Oh, I admit, it was painful but necessary. Didn’t someone once talk about the need to kill your darlings? Well, I sent them off a cliff.

Was I renewed? Was the car out of the ditch and on its way again, the kid in the back happily occupied with the new landscape? Not exactly. The story still felt flat and a little lifeless. As I told my husband on one of our daily walks, “It’s blah, blah, blah. I’m bored with it.”

Perhaps the admission out loud to someone else was the key for me. When we returned from our walk, I realized I needed action to get it going again. I wrote several chapters that

included another murder, a wildfire, and a daring rescue. The kid in the backseat cheered me on.

I've reconciled myself that on writing journeys, the middle will often be messy. Here are a few lessons I've learned:

- Ask yourself if every chapter propels the story forward. If not, be willing to delete.
- At the end of the chapter leave the reader wanting more.
- Take a break if you're stuck. Write something else completely different. Read an author you respect and pay attention to how they handle the middle of the book.
- Allow yourself "think time." That's the meditative time inside your head where you can work out plot lines, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends. My best think time is when I'm out for a walk.

Despite my best efforts, I know the car might still go in circles, get lost, or hit the ditch once again. Fortunately, as a mystery writer I can always add another body, another cliff, or maybe a wildfire to get it back on the road.

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Linda Norlander is the author of The Cabin on the Lake Mysteries. Each book gives the reader a sense of the beauty and mystique of Northern Minnesota along with the realities of life in an isolated rural place.



WRITING PROCESS?

James L'Etoile

One of the things I love about the writing community is learning from other authors. There are an infinite number of paths to create that next novel or short story. Recognizing which one fits your writing style and matching your personality quirks to the process is something that took me some trial and lots of error to figure out.

When I started to write fiction, I wasn't sure I had the confidence level or skill set I'd need to complete a manuscript I'd share with a publisher. Writing hadn't been my focus in my three decades working in some of California's most violent prisons. I was more concerned about keeping new holes out of my stab resistant vest at the end of my shift. Clearly, a different world—one I draw from to create characters and storylines.

It wasn't until I retired that I decided to try my hand at writing crime fiction. One job I'd had prepared me to take on this new challenge. Early in my career, I served as a probation officer and prepared pre-sentence reports for the judge. I'd go to the jail and interview the defendant, getting their version of the crime and getting a sense of the person who committed the offense. I'd gather up all the arrest reports, talk to the detectives and arresting officers, and I'd speak with the victims or their next of kin to develop an understanding of the crime's impact. Then, I'd gather the information and cobble together a narrative of the crime so the judge would know how much time behind bars the defendant should serve. Looking back, I was writing crime stories years ago. I hadn't thought of them in that manner before.

Armed with the confidence that I could write crime stories, I sought out workshops and conferences to learn more about the craft of writing. That's when things got—confusing.

More than a debate between plotter and pantsers, authors were preaching (yes, preaching because they proclaimed their devotion to “The Process” with religious fervor) about the one true method. I swear I smelled brimstone at one workshop.

I became a follower of the Church of the One True Plot and began plotting out my first novel. I know several authors swear by this method and use color-coded Excel spreadsheets to map out every scene, character arc, and sub-plot. I hated the process. It became tedious and sucked the fun out of creating a story. It felt mechanical. If I wasn't pulled into the story I was writing, how could I expect a reader to care? Jeffery Deaver writes one-hundred-forty-page outlines for his novels. But that approach didn't work for me.

After my excommunication from the church, I found the Commune of the Pantser Community, where everyone was welcome and there were no rules. The advice ranged from go with the flow, to let your characters be free. I must admit, I did enjoy the freedom of creating a story organically, allowing the plot to develop as I wrote. The dark side of this Patchouli oil-scented path is that some of these paths are dead ends. A dead end means

re-writing. While many authors claim they don't mind going back and deleting two-hundred pages of plot that didn't hold together, I found it painful and if left to my own devices, I would never finish my manuscript. I know authors who are three-fourths of the way into the book, and they don't know how it will end. That uncertainty would give me hives. A friend, who is a NYT bestselling author, is a true pantser and missed two separate deadlines because she discovered she didn't like the book she drafted or had to start over because the plot didn't work after three-hundred pages. The stress of starting over must have been incredible.

The Elders in the Commune of the Pantser asked me to leave because my need for structure made them uncomfortable.

So, there I was, an author in the middle. I knew structure was important to keep me from writing off the rails, but I enjoyed the freedom of creating organically. I found a new path using the parts of both disciplines which appealed to my writing style and personality. I became a Gardener.

Now before you think I've become a Hippie Farmer back on the commune, let me break it down a bit. Over the course of writing more than a half-dozen novels, I found a few things are important for my process. The most important is "character first." Character first means I want to know everything I can about the "people" I'm going to live with for the next several months. I jot down a character description, find out what motivates them, what they fear, and their quirks. I've gone as far as writing a short story in that character's voice to get an idea of their dialogue and interaction with other characters in the planned novel. Character is important and I think we've all experienced a book or movie where the plot was so-so, but we hung in there and finished it because we wanted to know what happened to the characters. We started to care about them.

The Gardener bit comes next. The characters are the seeds for what the novel will become. The hopes, loss, fear, and anticipation are all packed into those characters. Before those seeds are planted, I know how this story is going to end, the who-done-it, and the why-done-it. The character development you've done should intuitively tell you that—this story can only end when X happens. The freedom and enjoyment for me, as an author, comes as I organically craft the story to meet that resolution.

The Gardener plants the seeds and tends the vine as it grows. I'll trim it here and there to maintain some story structure. One thing I managed to take from the plotters is a sense of the three-act structure. I've internalized the framework so, as I write, I know when a plot point or climax needs to land. I'll especially prune those wild-growing shoots that will tempt me to run astray of the character's motivation or deviate from the planned ending. Like clipping a Bonsai tree, you can shape your story into anything you need, with twists, pitfalls, and reversals, making the story unique to your voice.

Given the same character and basic storyline, no two authors will write the same story. The writing process is very much the same thing. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach. Each author needs to find what works for them. As for me, I'll be over here, gardening...

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James L'Etoile uses his twenty-nine years behind bars as an influence in his novels, short stories, and screenplays. He is a former associate warden in a maximum-security prison, a hostage negotiator, facility captain, and director of California's state parole system. He is a nationally recognized expert witness on prison and jail operations. He has been nominated for the Silver Falchion for Best Procedural Mystery, and The Bill Crider Award for short fiction. His published novels include Black Label, At What Cost, Bury the Past, and Little River-The Other Side of Paradise. Look for Dead Drop in the summer of 2022 from Level Best Books.

You can find out more at www.jamesletoile.com



UNLOCKING YOUR EDITING SUPERPOWER: WORK IN PASSES

Jen Collins Moore

If you've read anything about the craft of writing, you probably know about the sh***y first draft. It's liberating to accept that the first attempt at anything is going to be terrible. But once you've gotten to the end, it's tempting to roll up your sleeves and start dissecting dialogue and polishing paragraphs you'd be proud to share with your writing group or editor. Don't do it. At least not yet.

Chances are, you're going to have some major issues with your draft. Even if you're a dedicated plotter, scenes are going to have to be moved around. Characters may be merged. Settings may have to change.

There's no sense in spending time and energy perfecting language that may not end up in your final draft. My advice to anyone facing a revision is to work in passes. This will help you to focus on the big picture first, then to work effectively and efficiently on everything else.

Step 1: Read Your Manuscript

Print out your draft and put it in a three-ring binder. I like to use the "two pages per sheet" print function so it feels more like a real book. Make a cup of tea, find a comfortable chair, and start reading.

You'll see many, many things that you'll want to change. And, hopefully, some things you love. At the end of each chapter, make a list of things that struck you in a separate notepad.

Is the dialogue flowing, but there's no real conflict in the scene? Write it down. Are characters covering the same ground they did two chapters earlier? Make a note. Did you use the same word five times? Ignore it. You're looking at the big picture right now. That's why I wait to make my notes until the end of the chapter. If I noticed something that's not big enough to have stuck with me for a few pages, it's something I can worry about down the road.

Step 2: Consolidate Your Notes

If you're anything like me, you might have 30 pages of notes on everything from "play up motive for Faye" to "bring the café to life in Chapter 5" and "make Stefano's character consistent."

Go through your notes and create logical groups and categories for each one. Everything related to an individual character might go in one bucket, location in another, etc. Now you have a manageable way of understanding your pages and pages of ideas and issues.

Step 3: Come Up with a Game Plan

Chances are, the story you wrote isn't the story you wanted to tell. It might not have enough tension. It might not connect with a bigger theme. Or maybe the ending just isn't much of a surprise.

Take time to consider what changes would bring your manuscript closer to your vision. I find myself needing to play with motives, suspects, and the timing of the big reveals at this stage.

Step 4: Prioritize

Review your game plan and decide what changes are the most important to make right now. It's important to have the right characters on the page. It's important to have the scenes in the right order. But making sure a character's wardrobe reflects her personality probably isn't going to change the structure overall. You can save that note for Step 5.

Now come up with a big picture plan for restructuring your manuscript so that its skeleton is closer to your vision. This requires creative problem solving, and it's the stage of writing I enjoy most. You can move things around, make big cuts and major additions until the story feels right. But resist the temptation to spend time writing beautiful descriptions and tense dialogue. For now, you're focused on the framework.

Repeat steps one through four as many times as you need to until the story works.

Step 5: Focused Polish

When your scenes are in the right order and you have a strong framework for your manuscript, you're ready to begin polishing. And this is where the magic of revising using passes really delivers results.

Do a single pass for each of your grouped focus areas. One pass could be for dialogue. Another could be for descriptions of a single character. A pass could be for descriptions of the light in each scene. Another could be for wardrobe. Don't read the entire manuscript as you're doing this editing. Work only the scenes where that particular character appears, or there is scenery to describe. Resist the urge to change anything that's not part of this pass.

Trying to catch everything at once asks our brains to multi-task in a way that's plain inefficient. Allowing your brain to specialize allows you to unlock an editing superpower.

With a laser focus, you'll find editing is much easier. If all you're thinking about is dialogue, you'll find writing it easier, because your brain is tuned into it. Same goes for describing scenery and scents and all the rest that goes into a wonderful novel.

Step 6: Final Polish

When you've completed as many focused passes on your manuscript as you can think of, you're ready to read the entire story start to finish, this time with an eye for the typos, word choices, and everything else that you've been waiting patiently to tackle.

This final polish will take a few rounds. I like to print the manuscript in a new font so that my eye sees things in a new way. And I always read it aloud. It's amazing what my ear catches that my eyes skim over.

Editing is never easy, but when you take it one step at a time, you can make it fun and efficient.

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*Jen Collins Moore transports readers to Rome in *The Maggie White Mysteries*, which debuted in 2020 with *Murder in the Piazza*. Her short fiction has appeared in *Mystery Weekly* and *Masthead: The Best New England Crime Stories*. She is an officer of *Sisters in Crime—Chicagoland* and served for three years as editor of the *Mystery Writers of America Midwest newsletter*.*

Learn more at www.jennifercollinsmoore.com



HOW TO POWER YOUR INSPIRATION PROCESSOR

Katherine Ramsland

You know the feeling: You're at an impasse. You're getting nowhere, but your deadline looms and you can't seem to spur your muse.

Consider this: Relax. The less you strain your brain the better your chance of breaking through. Your brain needs you to just let go. Isaac Asimov discovered this. Whenever he experienced writer's block, he'd go see a movie. When he relaxed, his material seemed to work itself out in its own way. Invariably, he gained new ideas. (I did this once, and got three ideas before I even sat down.)

Many writers, inventors, scientists, and artists have learned the same lesson. In the midst of their work, when they focus on something else—or on nothing at all—ideas arrive. And the impasse itself serves a purpose. It signals to your brain that you're striving toward a goal and that you need a way to recalculate.

Any of us can generate a flash of genius that will melt our mental freeze. I learned how this works from a 19th century mathematician, Henri Poincaré, who once described it to a group of psychiatrists. After coming to a deadlock on a series of vexing problems, Poincaré gave up and traveled to the seaside. On his walk one morning, the resolution he needed “arrived fully formed.” Upon returning, he got back to work. But one part remained stubbornly cryptic. He worked on it day after day, without success. So, he took another trip. While walking, the solution hit him. He realized that in the midst of work his brain required down time to launch its most creative punch.

Neuropsychiatrist Nancy Andreasen clarified how this happens in her work on creative genius: the brain is a self-organizing system of feedback loops that constantly generates new thoughts. With brain scans, Andreasen observed activity in the association cortices—our information integration center. She found that the more data the AC can process from our various experiences, the better the conditions for innovative mash-ups. But we need “random episodic silent thought” (REST). During this disconnected but active state, the AC appears to “throw out feelers for possible connections between unrelated capacities.”

You might be skeptical. When you relax, your brain doesn't feel the same as when you focus. But it's still active. Given some slack in the left brain's deliberations, the right brain can take over to give the info we've gathered the chance to dance.

But there's a catch. To make the magic happen, we must prepare.

Here's the formula I devised: Scan, sift, and solve. First, you scan: you do your research. Be diverse. Collect different types of data. Immerse in your field of expertise, but also read things unfamiliar to you. Travel. Take a class. Learn a new skill. Make your personal “idea stew.” This becomes your knowledge base. The more you do, the more raw ingredients you gain. You can work on your WIP, but always keep gathering.

Now, for the fun! Read through the material on which you're working, then get away and do something else. Relax and release your eager right brain to sift through your data and reshape it into new combinations.

Finally, allow your integrating brain to solve your problem and resolve your impasse. If you give it space to throw out feelers for new connections, an idea will pop. You don't even need to be blocked for this process to work. I use it for plotting and character design.

Asimov went to movies. Poincaré went for walks. Others play with their dog, take a shower, tap a drum, bake a cake, or sit and knit. The point is to relax the cognitive load so your creative brain can merge your gathered data. Once you've learned which type of leisure works best for you, blend it into your work on a regular basis. You'll be amazed by how often your brain will surprise you with ideas you hadn't considered.

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Dr. Katherine Ramsland teaches forensic psychology at DeSales University, where she is the Assistant Provost. She has appeared on more than 200 crime documentaries and magazine shows. She's the author of more than 1,500 articles and 68 books. Dr. Ramsland currently pens the "Shadow-boxing" blog at Psychology Today and teaches seminars on extreme offenders to death investigators and homicide detectives. Katherine is brand-new to Level Best and we're thrilled to have her on board.



SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER NEW RELEASES

