

Femmes Fatales

Ferociously talented women dedicated to the fine art of crime fiction

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The Writing Life

by Charlene Harris

When the Femmes do their public speaking thing, there are a few questions that pop up every single time. We're always asked about our work hours, our work methods, and what advice we could give those audience members who've been bitten by the writing bug. It's easy to spot the budding writers in the group; they're the ones who take notes, who listen intently, who scribble down the names of our publishers and our agents. And there are a lot of would-be writers out there. We thought we'd give our favorite answers in this newsletter—but please, still turn out to hear us speak.

As for me, I think it's important for you, the pre-published writer, to do your homework. You have to research the marketplace, which is easily done in this age of computers with the help of a good search engine. The act of research will be good for you; you'll learn a lot about agents and publishers and editors. The more time you spend learning about the business, the better. None of this information is arcane. Just use Google.



Publishing has changed so much in the twenty-five years since my first book came out that it's hard for me to give any more specific advice to writers just starting out, at least about the publishing process. The internet has more, and better, information.

About writing that first book, though, some good ideas never change.

1. **Read.** Good stuff, bad stuff, all genres. What makes it good? Or bad? Analysis will help in your own work.
2. **Write.** No amount of planning or lists of good intentions will help unless you do the actual work. Outline, or not; whatever seems most effective to you. You don't have to follow the same procedure with every book. I am still trying to find the surefire, never-fail 12-step program to writing a book.

That's the best advice I can offer. READ and WRITE and RESEARCH...and good luck to you.*ff*

Long-time regular on the bestseller lists, Charlene's books are now on television too. Oscar winner Alan Ball has adapted the Sookie Stackhouse book, Dead Until Dark, to create the HBO series True Blood. Another Oscar winner, Anna Pacquin, portrays Sookie.

Dana Cameron

After years of writing in dark basements and—let's face it—holes in the ground, Dana finally has the office of her dreams. You'd think that the words would magically flow in a space specially made to order, but really, it all comes down to the basics: a computer and the power to run it, a blaring soundtrack, and a door that closes.

There's nothing mystical about how I work. Each morning, when the sun is just above the horizon, I attend the Whedonesque scripture, cleanse and garb myself, then ascend to my sanctum.

Translation: I get up about six, watch a rerun of Angel over muesli, wash, and get dressed so I don't accidentally scare the mailman. I go up to my office.

I invoke the spirits by word and musical summoning. I tend my familiar.

I warm up with email. Then I turn on my iPod, using a playlist specific to the story I'm writing—I can't get started on a new book until I've made a new playlist. I get the cat a mug of "office water," then she settles into her basket to oversee work.

I summon forth all that my powers will allow, stopping briefly when the sun is high.

I try to write about five pages a day—more, near the end of a book—leaving something unfinished, so I can pick up there the next day. At lunch, I get a sandwich downtown, so I will have spoken to someone besides the cat.

I strive mightily, then refresh myself.

I catch up on work-related stuff until five-ish. Then: cocktails.

It's really not hocus-pocus. For me, developing a good, habitual process—even if it's just ten minutes devoted to writing—helps give inspiration a place to land.*ff*

Donna Andrews

Donna is overjoyed that her adorable twin nephews have moved to a house nearby. Since the boys served as models for Timmy, the toddler who disrupts Meg's life in Cockatiels at Seven, Donna predicts they'll provide a wealth of material for future writing. Assuming she

can find her computer under the stuffed animals and Mr. Rogers videos that have suddenly appeared on her desk.

Whenever I try writerly advice, it starts coming out way long and too much of a downer. So how about one of my favorite questions: How do you think of your titles? Of course, I'd need years of psychoanalysis to answer that accurately. Perhaps I need it anyway, since I consider my titles quite normal. Normal for my fictional world, that is.

Sometimes I think of a plot and brainstorm until I find a suitably odd title—*The Penguin Who Knew Too Much* was that way. Sometimes I get a title and shape the plot to fit, as with *Cockatiels at Seven*—someone suggested that title at a signing, and in thinking of a way to use it I created a whole new subplot for the book, much better than my original subplot. Sometimes book and title come together in a sudden blinding flash, as with *Six Geese a-Slaying*, in which Meg is in charge of her county's annual holiday parade. Best of all: I hardly ever have the problem of another book coming out with an identical title.

Eek! Were we really supposed to offer writing advice? "Pick odd titles" isn't very useful. How about my short advice on finding a good critique group: if you go home fired up to write, feeling you know more than you did before the critique, and excited about doing a complete rewrite on your work in progress, then you've probably got a good group. And if you go home so down on yourself and your writing that you're debating whether to hang or poison yourself, leave that group immediately!ff

Hank Phillippi Ryan

For thirty years, Hank knew there'd be big trouble if her stories were made up—as an investigative reporter with twenty-six Emmys, she's all about reality.

Femmes Fatales

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Now that she's writing mysteries, and is required to make stuff up, she finds fiction dictates a whole new reality.

In the newsroom, there's constant noise. Televisions blaring, people yelling, the staticky crackle of the police radios. And for thirty years, I've been writing my stories there just fine.

But in my study, with the latest Charlie McNally mystery up on my computer, it has to be quiet. Oh, the birds in the sugar maple outside the window, the squirrels arguing, the minor traffic out on River Street, that's all fine. But music, no Can't do it—I start singing the lyrics in my head. I even turn off the ping of the "you've got mail" announcement.

The semicircular antique desk my mother gave me twenty years ago is covered with stuff: notebooks, souvenirs, a big jar of pencils. No, two jars. (In case there's a huge pencil shortage at some point.) Lip balm. The foil bags that once held congratulatory champagne, the cards-on-sticks that accompanied congratulatory bouquets. My words-per-day chart. A rock carved with the word "patience." Feng shui—ers would say: toss it all. But somehow, it's comforting.

The floor has rows and rows of books. Stephen King's *On Writing*. Hallie Ephron's how-to. David Morrell's *The Successful Novelist*. Strunk and White. Sometimes, I'll just open one to a random page. *Pre-Prime Time*, my study was so charmingly organized. Now it's festooned with bookstore posters about my appearances, super-sized book covers. When I have a moment when I feel like this whole thing was a fluke and I can't really write and the joy of seeing my newest books will never happen again, I look at my souvenirs, and instantly I know there are more wonderful memories in the making. And back to work.ff

Elaine Viets

Elaine is delighted that her seventh Dead-End Job mystery, Clubbed to Death, was reviewed in Marilyn Stasio's Crime column in the New York Times. Ms. Stasio liked it, too. Clubbed to Death is set at a mythical South Florida country club, whose

motto should be, "Do you know who I am?" Elaine is hoping the subtropics survive hurricane season unscathed.

Recently I gave a speech at my local library. Here are some of the questions I was asked:

Is an agent really necessary?

Absolutely. I'd recommend one from the Association of Authors' Representatives. AAR agents follow a code of ethics, and there are many crooks out there. Even better, the AAR website (www.aar-online.org/mc/page.do) lists agents by the types of books they represent—mystery, science fiction, women's fiction, etc.

Do you use a computer?

Couldn't write without one. Computers make revisions quick and easy. The days of literally cutting up pages of type and pasting in changes with scissors and pots of glue are over, thank goodness. I did that when I worked for a newspaper. Recently, I traded in my old boxy computer monitor for a flat screen. My cat Harry sleeps on my desk while I write. He really likes the flat screen—there's more leg room.

Were you always funny?

Yes. When I was a kid, I was called a smart-aleck, and it got me grounded. I was grounded so often, it's lucky I got out long enough to get married. Now I get paid for my smart remarks.

Have you considered standup comedy?

I'm not brave enough to try to make a living at standup. Comedy is one career that pays even less than writing.ff

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Mary Saums

Paper or plastic? That's the burning question when Mary sits down to write about Jane and Phoebe, the heroines in her Thistle & Twigg series. Desktop or laptop? Legal pad, fancy, leather journal or a cheap school notebook? Which will transform sloppy sentences into a gorgeous flowing page-turner? Too many choices...

I change my mind all the time. At the start of each book, I think, "There has to be an easier way. Next time, I'm going to..."

Whatever I try, I always go back to pen and paper. Typing straight into the computer terrifies me. Blank pages of paper? Never. It's that monitor that shakes me up. It's like a big eye staring back at me. Something about the moving hand and flow of ink connects to my brain better than tapping on little bits of plastic. It's different when I edit. Then I love to type. Seeing my thoughts in paragraphs and with numbered pages, that's when it becomes a real book.

I write at night. Some writers say mornings are best. That used to be true for me. Now, it takes me longer to get cranked up into high gear.

Sometimes writing at Starbucks helps me when I get stuck. I admit, it could be the caffeine. Writing in a busy, noisy place can help me focus and write more in a short period of time usually. Strange but true. Still, I prefer to be at home. Either way, I can zone out distractions fairly well.

The most important advice I can give is to write with joy. If it feels like a chore, do what you must to switch your thinking around. Make your scheduled writing stints the high point of your day. Look forward to them and relax into your story.*ff*

Kris Neri

Kris insists she started writing before she could read, when she made up stories to accompany the drawings she saw in the Sunday comic strips, and "read" them to her baby sister. She liked an audience even then.

Awards!

Murder with Reservations by **Elaine Viets** won the Lefty Award for the Funniest Novel of 2007 at the Left Coast Crime Conference.

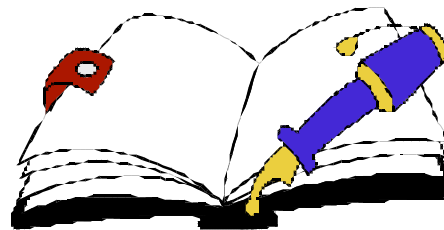
Donna Andrews' story "A Rat's Tale," which appeared in the Sept/Oct. 2007 issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, won the Agatha Award for Best Short Story and has been nominated for a Macavity award.

Toni L.P. Kelner's story "How Stella Got Her Grave Back" was nominated for an Anthony for Best Short Story. It appeared in *Many Bloody Returns*, edited by Toni and Charlaine.*ff*

The question I'm asked most often is "Do you outline?" While that's what the questioner says, I always seem to hear two other, unspoken, underlying questions: "How do I make sense of the jumble of ideas filling my head?" and "How do I find the courage to take this impossible step?"

The first is easy enough to answer. While I don't outline, I plan my novels; I like a balance between spontaneous inspiration and semi-direction. And I've shared my organizational methods with countless other writers, at signings, in my classes, and on my writing DVD, *Writing Killer Mysteries with Kris Neri*. A number of them have gone on to publication themselves.

But the second unspoken question isn't as easy to address, and that's the one, I suspect, that matters most. How do you find the courage to write when you fear



you won't be any good? When you're convinced nobody will want to read it? You just do. You plunge in however you can. If outlining first seems like it will provide a safety net, then that's where you start. If characters keep chattering away in your head, let their dialogue flow onto the page. Whatever it takes to get started.

Ultimately, it's listening to the demands of your heart, rather than the cries of your fears, that matters more than any specific approach.*ff*

Toni L.P. Kelner

Toni's work habits have just undergone a seasonal change—her daughters have gone back to school. She's not sure if the additional private time while they're gone is worth the cost in stricter scheduling, drives to and from school, homework assistance, and the inevitable after school activities.

Let me share some of the writing advice I've heard and read:

Outline your stories. Don't outline—it kills spontaneity. Know everything about each character. Backstory is a waste of time. Write every day. Never force your writing. Write longhand. Type. Use a computer. Network online. Stay off the web! You must have a critique group. Avoid critique groups. Write first thing in the morning, when you're freshest. Write late at night, when it's quiet. First person is best. Third person is best. Never write present tense or second person. Break the rules! Write what you know. Write what you want to know. Create characters based on yourself. Make sure your characters are nothing like you. Write stories you'd want to read. Aim for the market. Write for love. Write for money.

Does your head hurt yet? Mine does. That's why these days, I only have one firm principle for writing:

Whatever works, works.

So gather tidbits of writing advice and use the ones that work for you. Just be sure to take all advice with a grain of salt.

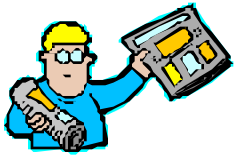
Especially mine.*ff*

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News from the Femmes Fatales

Charlaine Harris is going to be busy. In October, her releases include werewolf Christmas anthology *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe* (co-edited with Toni), the paperback of *Ice Cold Grave*, and a story in the anthology *Blood Lite*. In November, it's the long-awaited reprint of *Shakespeare's Christmas*, and in December comes a story in the anthology *Usual Suspects*.



Dana Cameron's short story "The Night Things Changed" will appear in *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe* this October. After a quiet summer, interrupted only by werewolves, assassins, and carpenters, Dana is looking forward to seeing everyone at Bouchercon in Baltimore.



Christmas will be busier than usual for **Donna Andrews**. *Six Geese A-Slaying*, tenth in her Meg Langslow series, will be out October 28. She's also excited about her short stories in *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe*, edited by Femmes Charlaine and Toni, and *Unusual Suspects*, edited by Dana Stabenow. Watch for *Swan for the Money* in 2009!



Hank Phillippi Ryan's *Prime Time* won the Agatha Award for Best First Novel and a Romantic Times Reviewers'

Choice Award. *Prime Time* is also nominated for the Daphne and for two RITAs: Best First Book and Best Romantic Suspense. *Prime Time* and the bestselling *Face Time* will be reissued next summer as MIRA Books, followed by *Air Time* and *Drive Time*.



It isn't often a murder mystery award can be used as a murder weapon. When **Elaine Viets'** *Murder with Reservations* won the Lefty, the award was a lethal-looking pick ax—a real one. She shipped it home, since she wasn't about to carry it on an airplane. The best part? The shippers swathed the pick ax in bubblewrap.

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Mary Saums had a great time this summer touring with *Mighty Old Bones*, the second book in her Thistle & Twigg series. This fall, look for her at Bouchercon and SIBA, the convention for Southern booksellers. On October 1, she'll participate in Writing Murder 2, a series of writing classes at The Mystery Company in Carmel, Indiana.



Kris Neri's latest publication is *The Rose in the Snow: Tales of Mischief and Mayhem*, a short story collection, featuring some new stories, her Derringer Award winners, and her personal favorites. Whether you like stories that are laugh-out-loud funny, or edgy and original, or even if you prefer a bit of mystical in your mysteries, there's something here for you.



Wolfsbane and Mistletoe, the Christmas werewolf anthology **Toni L.P. Kelner** co-edited with Charlaine will be out in time for Halloween and Christmas. In December, the large print of Toni's novel *Without Mercy* comes out, and in February comes the paperback release of *Many Bloody Returns*. *Without Mercy* will be released in paperback in May, with the new title *Curse of the Kissing Cousins*.