Make us work to see the tension instead of smiling. Kirkus reviews are discounted until midnight. Goodreads review bomber apprehended and shamed. Great classes from WLT are on sale until year's end. Another Kindle Unlimited benefit can be heard.

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Stuff to help authors tell stories, write better, and *publish*

It shouldn't be smiles all around.

Pump the brakes on the smiling

Early drafts are hard work. You might be tempted to make sure your readers can rest easy during your storytelling. Using smiles would seem to put everybody in a happy place. Heavy smiling, though, gets in the way of what we like to do while we read: imagining "the feels," as some readers call emotions.

The smiling makes us less curious. When we are told that a character smiled, and then read a line of dialogue, or we watch that character smiling during a scene, we get shortchanged. "It's going to be all right in here," all of these smiles say. When that line gets conveyed, we blow a hole in the hull of Scopeship Tension.

Tension is vital. What will happen next is the number one thing to keep a reader engaged. Lisa Cron tells us this in her lectures and workshops around her masterwork *Wired for Story*. If you're a LinkedIn member who pays for a subscription, she's got a superb two-hour lecture in LinkedIn Learning, including a transcript.

She says that story's real breakthroughs are things that trigger the sense of pleasure we feel when a story hooks us. "It's not lyrical language, great characters, realistic dialogue, or even vivid images," Cron says. "Curiosity is the trigger. In other words, the desire to find out what happens next. That feeling of pleasure, it's actually a rush of the neural transmitter dopamine."

Smiling, over and over, swamps the good work of curiosity. You can type smiles into the draft that gets your book off the launchpad, but rest assured you want to wipe away those smiles if you want to get your story into orbit.

Yes, happiness is our desired landing spot for a story — but warming to it should take a long while, or at least be cooled off repeatedly along the journey to The End.

The dopamine is our reward for following our curiosity until we find the answer. "This information is a game-changer for writers, especially given how often we're led to believe that having a way with words is what hooks readers," Cron says. "In fact, words are the handmaiden of story."

Get a review, discounted

Kirkus Reviews is still an important brand for books of all publishers. If you're self-publishing, you're going to want to submit your book for a paid review. Outside confirmation from a Kirkus review goes into your sales pages, including the one at Amazon.

Kirkus is having a $75 off sale through the end of Friday evening. A 250-word review **is just $375**. You can buy the review now and use it later, Kirkus says.

People in the publishing industry are of a couple of minds about how much outside reviews help book sales. You don't have to be a math wizard to see that just 150 sales of a paperback book, or 100 ebooks, gets you into the black on the Kirkus expenditure. Publishers invest in publicity. You should, too.

Shelter books from review bombs

Goodreads is a fine resource for reviewing books. You can see what's worth reading—or find out how legit a book looks that is in your genre or theme. Goodreads is also a powderkeg of trouble, in the hands of bad authors.

Cait Corrain is one of those bad actors whose sins make her a bad author. She review-bombed her competing authors on Goodreads, posting a slew of one-star reviews to carpet-bomb authors' books coming out at the same time as Corrain's new novel.

For her sins, her novel got canceled and her agent dropped her. Corrain copped to substance abuse and mental health troubles, but that falls far short of the amends a 12-Step program would insist. There's no way to go back to the moment when the bombing commenced so she could un-do the badness. Goodreads has pulled the reviews posted through her fake accounts.

But Goodreads allows any user, not just those who've received advance copies, to leave ratings months before books are released. Books are held hostage over this kind of crime, by now. Bomb threats are not uncommon.

This is the danger of using Goodreads, although all authors need it. Anything goes up there. It was the place where Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Snow Forest* got bombed into a canceled release, simply because reviewers who hadn't read it disliked the setting: Russia, 90 years ago.

The sad history of Goodreads is well-documented in a Washington Post story. Good reporting, considering the story is coming from a newspaper owned by that Bezos fella who also owns Goodreads.

Get second chances at classes

From now until December 31, the Writers' League of Texas is **selling 10 of its year's best classes**. The recorded classes include everything from prepping your novel, building tension and suspense, pacing your plot, writing powerful exposition, mining the world for meaning in memoir, revising, marketing and publicity, and more.

Having studied in a one-day seminar with memoirist Donna M. Johnson, I can testify to the goodness of her teaching. "Mining the World for Meaning: How to Move Beyond the Personal in Memoir" is only $50, and viewable until the end of March. It might be just what you need to prove to yourself that your memoir can be more than simply what happened during your life.

Johnson says it as perfectly as anyone who penned a best-selling memoir (*Holy Ghost Girl*). "We will dig deep into our personal narratives while looking outside of ourselves for ideas, events and motifs that link our experiences with larger threads of meaning."

(Not quite) free audiobooks

If you're not a subscriber to Amazon's Kindle Unlimited, you should ask for it as a holiday present. People rail about how evil the Zon is, and for certain it's made bookstore lifespans fraught with danger. But griping about Amazon is like complaining about traffic lights. They are a part of our experience and they do route readers and riders on journeys.

You can avoid traffic lights with bookstore visits, as well as orders through Bookshop.org. No supplier runs anything as comprehensive as Kindle Unlimited, though, and many have tried. Major publishers sell books there, because every page of a KU book gets an author paid.

I don't know what the payment is for audiobooks on KU, because until recently I didn't even know you could listen for free at Kindle Unlimited. (Free, of course, means included with the $12 a month that KU costs.)

As you clean up from holiday parties or pop those no-bake peppermint chocolate bliss balls into the freezer, you can be enjoying KU audiobooks.

And if you abhor Amazon, head over to the **Texas Book Festival YouTube channel**, where interviews from the latest fest are running. Novelist Ann Patchett talking with novelist Elizabeth McCracken is especially juicy — Liz lights a fire under Ann's cushion with an errant question, right off the bat. They become simpatico soon after. A fun watch.

PS. Build off of the resistance to working on your writing. Set a timer and open the laptop and say, "For just 30 minutes, I will outrun the law that arrests my art."

Write Stuff, last year: **Bestseller shares her marketing steps**

We're taking next Friday off to celebrate the Christmas holiday. We'll be back on Dec. 29 with a greatest hits edition of the 2023 stories, plus news and fun.

You can make something lovely out of leftovers this holiday season. Abby created these savory pancakes with leftover salmon filet from Cheddars this morning. Let it come to room temp, she says, before you slip it onto the pancake already in the pan. Writing can be a way to make leftovers to savor later on. You set aside what doesn't fit, for now, knowing the extra writing will have a life in another book, or a guest blog, or a newsletter to your fan base. I love helping to find the leftovers for books.

Let's talk about your book and how I can help with evaluations, queries, editing, production, or discovery.

Ron Seybold
512-857-3264

Let's talk about your book

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