

Issue #30 - February 2025

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# THE RELATABLE VOICE

magazine

VISITING  
**SEOUL**

**LOVE IS IN  
THE EARTH**

*HOOK*  
YOUR READERS

SPEAK LIKE A  
*PRO*



**RICK  
INCORVIA**  
AUTHOR & STORYTELLER

ROMANCE  
ACROSS  
TIME

**VALENTINE'S  
DAY**

## Editor's Letter

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the February issue of The Relatable Voice!

This month, we're celebrating all things love—and for me, February holds a special place in my heart. Not only is it Valentine's Day, but it's also the month of my birthday and my daughters' birthdays. It's a time filled with love, joy, and connection, which makes it one of my favorite times of the year.

In this issue, we explore the many forms of love that surround us: love for the Earth, love for food, love for friends, partners, and so much more. Love is truly everywhere, and our stories and articles reflect just that.

We are thrilled to have Rick Incorvia gracing our cover this month. Rick is a storyteller, speaker, and the author of multiple books, known for inspiring and motivating readers across genres. A long-standing member of The RV family, Rick brings incredible wisdom and creativity to this issue.

And what's February without sweets and celebrations? Celebrated chef Stacey Caron is sharing a mouthwatering brownie recipe that you won't want to miss.

For those bitten by the travel bug, Victoria Ivasyk takes us on a fantastic journey to Seoul, South Korea, while Vicky Oliver offers expert advice on how to hook readers like a pro. If you're a speaker, Elayna Fernandez shares valuable tips that will surely elevate your skills.

And that's not all—we've packed this issue with interviews, book recommendations, and so much more to inspire and entertain you.

I hope you enjoy this issue as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

Wishing you a month filled with love, sweetness, and unforgettable moments.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Warm regards,

*Lucia Matuonto*

*Lucia Matuonto*

*Chief Editor and Creator of "The Relatable Voice" podcast, magazine and Book Fair*



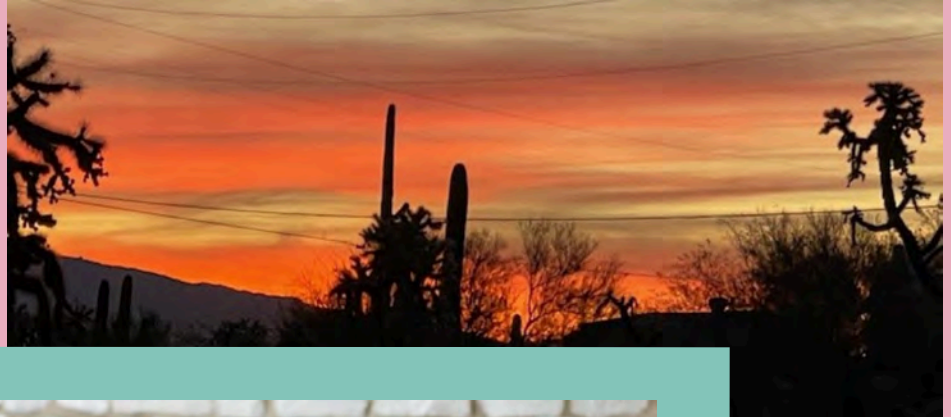
*On the cover: Rick Incorvia, photography by [Jeremy Scott Photography](#)*



# Highlights



5



6



30

60



46





# THE RELATABLE VOICE

magazine

## C o n t e n t s

VALENTINE’S DAY, BY JAMIL DORNELLES.....	5
LOVE IS IN THE EARTH.....	6
VALENTINE’S DAY — AN EVOLUTION.....	8
ROMANCE ACROSS TIME .....	10
FOOD IS LOVE .....	12
APHRODITE AND THE ISLAND OF LOVE.....	14
WHAT’S YOUR ROMANCE PERSONA?.....	16
SWEETHEARTS, CABBAGES AND CARROTS: THE STRANGE LANGUAGE OF LOVE .	18
RIGHT TIME, RIGHT PLACE .....	20
INTERVIEW WITH JONNI JORDYN.....	22
THE TOP 5 MISTAKES PUBLIC SPEAKERS MAKE .....	24
INTERVIEW WITH TONG GE .....	26
CREATE A CATCHY, ATTENTION-GRABBING TITLE .....	28
COVER STORY - RICK INCORVIA .....	30
LIL’ BIT WITCHY - BY ANDY CASE .....	36
NEW DOCUMENTARY OUT NOW: THE FALL OF DIDDY .....	37
TWENTY-FIVE-TO-LIFE.....	38
LOST STORIES.....	40
FILMMAKING IN THE MIDWEST .....	42
FOLLOW YOUR FATEFUL DETOURS .....	44
SEOUL: A JOURNEY OF CULTURE SHOCKS AND SELF-DISCOVERY .....	46
A JOURNEY OF CULTURE SHOCKS AND SELF-DISCOVERY.....	47
THE RV BOOK REVIEWS: MORE THAN YOU KNOW, BY GARY E. SMITH .....	52
THE STORY OF AN UNLIKELY AUTHOR.....	54
THE PATH TO BECOMING .....	56
TO LIVE ANOTHER DAY. . . KAYLEEN’S QUEST.....	58
MEXICAN CHOCOLATE BROWNIES WITH BLOOD ORANGE ICING.....	60
BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS.....	62





Jamil Dornelles







## LOVE IS IN THE EARTH

Join Vivien and Neil Schapera of the *The Schapera Show* and *The Schapera Channel*  
All Positive, Spiritual Talk Radio, Blogs, Vlogs and Podcasts.

We all know that February is unique! Not only is February the shortest month of the year, but February is also the month of love. For Vivien and Neil, February has an additional dimension. It is their favorite month, because for the last 22 years, every year in February, they travel to Tucson, Arizona.

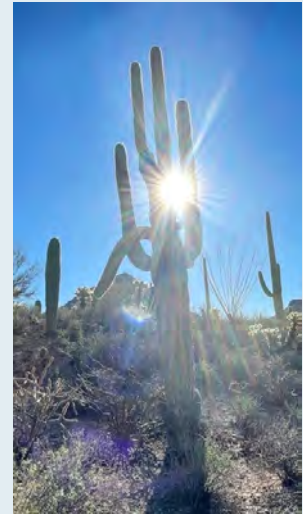
What is the reason for this annual pilgrimage? Tucson hosts a most spectacular, international event — the Tucson Gem & Mineral Show. To be clear, gem shows are not unusual, but the one in Tucson is the most gigantic trade fair, beyond what anyone can possibly imagine. The show is not confined to one convention center and surrounds, but is spread through the entire city, in more than 50 locations.

Besides the excitement, beauty and diversity of the minerals, there is also the buzz and atmosphere of the crowd. Every year, people come from all corners of the world to form this community and a feeling of festivity and celebration fills the air.

Perhaps part of this dynamic energy comes from the minerals themselves. Vivien's crystal teacher,

Melody, was a nuclear scientist, who also researched the healing properties of crystals, documenting them in her books. Because of the intense vibration that she felt emanating from the crystals, she named the series *Love Is in the Earth*.

In the beginning, Vivien used to come to Tucson for just a few days, to buy crystal inventory for her classes and courses. Vivien liked her trips to Tucson very much, feeling instantly at home there. This affection wasn't from a flight of fancy, but from an identifiable psychological dynamic. Vivien's father was born in South West Africa, a country known for its majestic desert, much like Arizona. The style of the houses, with their stoops and yards, the thorny vegetation and the color of the earth were straight out of Vivien's





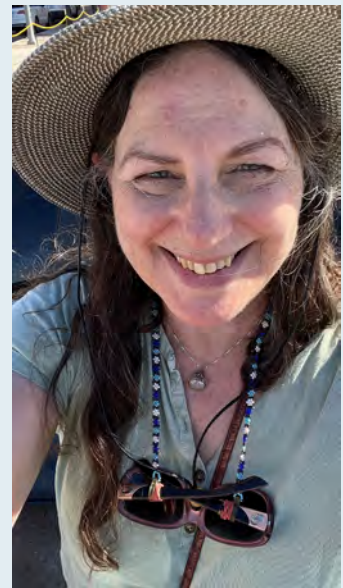
childhood, generating a profound recognition and a sense of belonging.

Strangely enough, it took Vivien several years of these annual trips before she personally experienced Arizona's number 1 attraction for the rest of the world. Tucson is not totally immune to



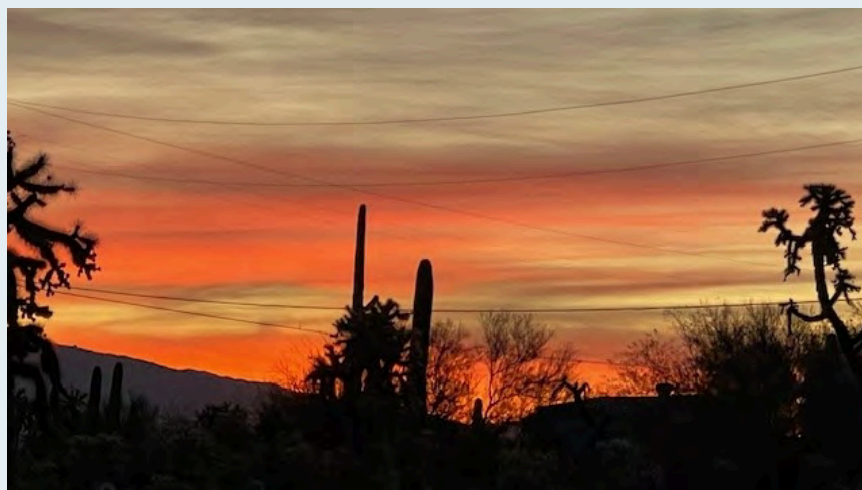
wintry weather but the number of warm, sunny days far, far outnumbers the wet, cold days. By some quirk, on her first few visits, Vivien had only seen wintry days, so much so that when she did finally witness the startling blue sky and the warmth of the winter sunshine, she only had winter gear with her, necessitating a shopping

trip to buy short-sleeved shirts. The need for short sleeves wasn't the only insight. As the sun shone down on her and her body relaxed in the welcome warmth, Vivien realized that Neil should be accompanying her — they should bask in this sunshine and beauty together in the month of love.



The gem show is an extraordinary experience and without question a highlight of the year, enough of a draw on its own. But there's so much more to Tucson! Photos of the Sonoran Desert sunrises and sunsets are famous for the distinctive ruby, rose and amethyst clouds over the iconic Saguaro cacti. In recent years, Neil and Vivien have lengthened their stay even more, to allow generous time for hiking and reveling in the extraordinary sunrises and sunsets.

Whether it is the crystal vibrations or the city, the people or the cacti, the food or the hiking, the sky or the earth, Neil and Vivien are totally in love with Tucson!



Vivien is an award-winning Teacher, Practitioner and Writer living in Cincinnati, OH USA. In private practice for over 40 years, she is also the founder of three schools, and the author of numerous blogs, vlogs, and books, including *Everyday Magic* and *The Complete Guide to Crystal Surgery*.

Find out more at [www.CrystalHealingTechniques.com](http://www.CrystalHealingTechniques.com).







## VALENTINE'S DAY — AN EVOLUTION

*Melanie P. Smith*

These days we associate Valentine's Day with love, romance, decadent chocolates, and maybe — if you're really lucky — diamonds. But, it wasn't always about hearts and flowers. Let me tell you the story of Valentine's Day and how it all began. Hold onto your shorts, because it's probably not the fable you expect.

My tale isn't about Cupid — the cherub-winged infant yielding a bow and arrow, shooting arrows of fertility. Although, that is a key factor in the early Pagan ritual that morphed into our current holiday. Unfortunately, that's where the similarities end.

No one knows the exact origin of Valentine's Day. Although, some have traced it back to those wild and crazy Romans. Others disagree. For the sake of argument, I'm sticking with the Roman celebration which was later rebranded by the Catholics. Why this version? Because it's entertaining and bizarre — and that's just how I roll. Join me as we travel back in time to ancient Rome.

In those days, the annual celebration known as Lupercalia was a blast — not. The shindig began on February 13<sup>th</sup> and ended two days later. During that time, participants sacrificed a few goats and threw in a dog or two for good measure. Why, you might ask. Well, the men considered themselves Luperci which means "brothers of the wolf". And well, when you're drunk, sacrificing a more docile species like a dog seems like a great way to honor your wolf ancestors.



As you might have guessed, the wacky Roman's didn't stop there. Upon completion of this fabulous offering to the Wolf Gods, attendees were anointed with animal blood and then wiped clean with wool soaked in milk — makes perfect sense to me.

Then came the feast, more drinking, and a 5K around the city naked. Okay, I made the 5K part up, but not the naked running. Yes, they really did that. But this wasn't your average sprint around town. No, these guys snatched up the skins from the sacrificed animals and proceeded to smack observers with the pelts. How did the observers react? They intentionally got in the way hoping to get wacked. You're probably asking why anyone would want to be struck with a freshly skinned, smelly, bloody pelt. Fertility, of course! Everyone knows if you're barren, one good whack will help you get pregnant. Already pregnant? Never fear, a good smack-down during Lupercalia guarantees an easy delivery for mom and the little tyke.

By now you're probably wondering how this turned into a three-day funfest. Let me explain, the best is yet to come. Once the naked, fertility inducing attacks are over... we start the "matchmaking lottery". I mean why not; all the men are naked by now anyway. No, this is not a bachelor auction where the winner gets a romantic date with a hunk— but it's close. Men are allowed to randomly draw the names of women from a jar. Once all the names are drawn, they are "coupled" for the duration of the festival — it is all about fertility, after all. If the match was deemed right — whatever that means — the coupling could last longer. Forget those mail-order brides' gents, just draw a name and let the orgy begin. Oh, the Good Ol' days.







every bird cometh there to choose his mate.” The poem is considered the first written instance where Valentine’s Day was associated with romantic love rather than fertility and drunken, lust filled partying. And the rest, as we say, is

Okay, so how did we get from then to now? Drum roll please... the Catholics. They didn’t care much for the blood and the nakedness, or the whole sacrifice a dog thing. So, they rebranded. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century Pope Gelasius dubbed February 14<sup>th</sup> St. Valentine’s Day, in honor of two Christian martyrs who happened to be named Valentinus and were killed on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February. Valentine’s Day became more of a theatrical celebration— still a drunken revel — but now people kept their clothes on. At this point, Lupercalia was basically outlawed. I mean, it was an ancient Pegan ritual and those are bad — at least for some.

Did this stop everyone from getting their fertility on during the first part of February, you might ask? Of course not. Around this same time, the Normans began celebrating Galatin’s Day. Galatin meaning “lover”, “gallant” or “lover of women” depending on the translator — and the party continued.

Fast-forward to the Middle Ages. Somehow the two celebrations became confused, or for some reason merged, and Valentine’s Day was finally associated with romantic love. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules*, cemented the idea when he wrote “...on St. Valentine’s Day, when

history.

Yeah, yeah, I know — I can practically hear you screaming.

*You just ruined my favorite holiday. Do you hate romance or something?*

I’m a romance author. I certainly don’t hate romance, but I do have a point. Even a holiday that celebrates love, romance, and happiness has a few skeletons. Just like humans — nothing’s perfect. Relationships are messy — even in fiction. So, after you finish your favorite romance novel; go ahead, fantasize about the sexy, protective, alpha male; or the strong, independent female the author created for your enjoyment. Then set it aside, gather with friends, and have some fun. Although, I don’t recommend a drunken, naked 5k down a popular city street and you should probably leave the pelts at home.

This February I hope you will celebrate love, cherish your partner, and reach for your own HEA. Don’t have a significant other? That’s okay. It will give you time to celebrate old friends, spark new connections, and enjoy life — and chocolate. Because honestly, who doesn’t love chocolate?



Long before she delved into the world of fantasy and suspense, **Melanie P. Smith** served nearly three decades in the Special Operations Division at her local sheriff’s office working with SWAT, Search & Rescue, K9, the Motor Unit, Investigations and the Child Abduction Response Team. She now uses that training and knowledge to create stories that are action-packed, gripping, and realistic. When Melanie’s not writing, she can be found riding her Harley, exploring the wilderness, or capturing that next great photo. Visit her website at <https://melaniepsmith.com/> to learn more.







## ROMANCE ACROSS TIME

*Mandy Eve-Barnett*

Romantic love, or Eros love, to give it the proper designation, is something that many of us dream of, and aspire to. We want to find ‘the one’ as depicted in novels, movies and the socially accepted norm for romantic relationships.

There are several different terms for ‘the one’, such as life partner, soul mate and twin flame. Within these terms there are subtle differences and it is a personal belief as to which one we feel corresponds to our personality and expectations.

**Life Partner** is defined as someone we want to spend the rest of our lives with. Both people have a serious committed relationship, based on common beliefs, interests, expectations, and love.

For **Soul Mates** there is a deeper connection whether intellectually, spiritually, or emotionally that comes from a truer understanding of each other with shared goals, a natural affinity, and love.

When it comes to **Twin Flames**, it is someone you believe is the other half of your soul. In other words your soul was split at some point through a traumatic death and then reincarnated into two separate people, you then reconnect to become whole again.

For many people this last manifestation of love is the ultimate goal in a relationship - a love so strong, so pure, and so deep that there is no risk of ever parting company. Of course, there are the doubters among us that don’t think it is possible to find ‘the one’, but that is not what romance is all about. It is the dream of a lasting love.

No matter which of these titles, or beliefs you align yourself with, the common denominator is the feelings of love you feel for that person. So, the question is, is it possible for past life lovers to meet and become a couple again in this life, or any other time? If you believe the twin flames route then yes it is. I used this hypothesis in my novel, *The Twosome Loop*, in which four characters find themselves meeting their reincarnated lovers from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. I had always wanted to write a reincarnation story since reading *Ferney* by James Long. This book has held

me captive for decades and I reread it regularly. I return to the familiar characters, who are like dear friends at this point. No matter the outward differences between them their love is unmistakable and entwined in their souls. My novel is set between England (where I originally lived) and Italy, where I am sure I have lived before, specifically Rome, but that’s a story for another day. My novel’s narrative brings the characters to an eighteenth century picturesque Italian Villa, which holds a hidden past of a pact between two lovers to live forever. They believe their deadly secret will die with them but in their last moments a vengeful spirit follows them into the abyss. Decades later, four modern day guests, all craving a unique and lasting love, experience flashbacks of their past lives. The betrayed wife running from her deceitful husband, the lonely widower unable to find love again, the adulterer searching for the ‘one’ who will accept his specific cravings, the cam-girl in search of in person fulfillment. The book is full of attractions, jealousy, forbidden love, which all play a part in making the past collide with the present, and the subsequent repercussions.

Many of us have déjà vu experiences from time to time, but sometimes it is connected to a specific person. It is someone we feel drawn to, someone who feels familiar, but is at first a stranger. It is not logical to feel the way we do, but there is something





deep in the fabric of our very being that 'knows' this person. It might be a gaze into their eyes, a physical touch, or how they speak. One of my teen boyfriend's touch was literally electrical. We both felt it and it was the start of our relationship, while another understood my inner personality, which led to a true bond. We all want to feel that intense magnetic pull with someone new. To find synchronicities between us and a profound understanding of each other that is inexplicable. There might be an extreme sense of recognition, euphoria and familiarity that defies logic, but in our inner soul we know they are the one.

Of course, there is the biology of love that can explain the physical side of the feelings, an evolutionary drive of neurochemicals and hormones, which include dopamine, norepinephrine, oxytocin, serotonin and vasopressin. These can account for attraction and lust, attachment and bonding and behaviours that produce monogamous and long-term relationships.

It has been discovered that specific areas of the brain become activated when we are in love.

However, in the midst of a loving relationship, or indeed at the beginning of one, all we feel and experience is an overriding impulse to be with that person. This person shows us care, passion understanding, acceptance, and love through a mutual attachment, closeness, commitment and connectedness. These feelings can be exhibited with excitement, nervousness, infatuation and sexual attraction and intimacy.

There are the inevitable changes to a relationship from when we fall in love and that first flush of newness and discovery to a more steady and satisfying love, when we know our person inside and out and still want them.

Romance in either stage of a relationship makes us feel worthy, seen and appreciated. So here's a toast to the lovers of the world. *Long live love and romance in this life or the next.*



**Mandy Eve-Barnett** is an Edmonton Best Seller, multi-genre author, writing children's, YA and adult books. With ten books published since 2011, and one more launching in July 2025, and another nine in various stages of completion, her writing life is full. This does not include her writing in numerous anthologies and magazines, and a variety of non-fiction projects through her freelance business as well as presentations and panelist positions at various writing conferences.

Mandy draws on over 10 years' experience as a multi-genre author, freelance writer and writing community advocate. She is the current Secretary of The Writers Foundation of Strathcona County and past President of the Arts & Culture Council of Strathcona Council and past Secretary of Alberta Authors Co-operative.

She hosts the local Writers Circle monthly meeting and creates weekly writing prompts for the WFSC website.

Mandy has been blogging since 2010 and has over 3000 subscribers and visitors from 209 countries.

Find out more at <http://www.mandyevebarnett.com>.







## FOOD IS LOVE

*Nikki Perry & Kirsty Roby*

**“Food is love made visible.”**

– Sarah Ban Breathnach

We're foodies. We love to try new food, eat comfort food, and make food. We plan holidays based around places and things to eat.

One of our rom-com books, 'Bringing home Mr Bacon' is full of food. We start most chapters with a recipe; things like baklava and risotto, spanakopita and feijoa chutney, (feijoas are a top ten food for Kirsty by the way), cream puffs and lemon curd. Because for us, food is a big part of love.

It is impossible to eat a custard square without thinking of being at home sick as a child, when Mum would always bring one home to 'make you feel better'. Somedays, even now, when things seem a bit less sunny, a custard square is the perfect antidote.

When we stayed with our Gran she would make porridge on the stove on cold winter mornings, drizzling it liberally with condensed milk and cream. We would crawl from our warm beds and sit at the oval table, eating around the edges of the bowl where it had cooled while she watched and chatted and made up stories to entertain us.

Each year, when our kids were little, we made themed birthday cakes; dogs and trains, unicorns and rocket ships. All made with decreasing patience the night before, where icing slid sideways and things were patched up with coconut or candles. With love. And when they see the cake and they think it's incredible - that's love.

Just before Christmas, Kirsty spends a day labouring over the Christmas pudding, the house filling with the smell of spices, even though she can't stand to eat it. (This recipe is in our Christmas book 'Mary and Bright'.)

On Christmas day our kids would sit around a bowl, shelling fresh peas, complaining and laughing over the increasing pile of husks versus the minimal pile of peas for their efforts.

Boxing day morning we all huddle around the kitchen bench, the leftover pavlova on its fancy platter, spoons at the ready. (Pavlova is a New Zealand invention and don't let the Australian's tell you otherwise. It's also delicious, but especially the next day for breakfast. Just like trifle.)

These are the memories we have with food. Not just because of what we eat, but where and who we eat with.

We have done a lot of traveling. We've eaten poutine in Vancouver, Peking duck in the oldest Chinese restaurant in San Francisco, Philly cheesesteaks in Philadelphia, white sauce pizza in Little Italy in New York. Alligator bites and beignets in New Orleans, Lovo in Fiji, Morten bay bugs in Queensland, Australia and lavender cheesecake in Tasmania. We've had snails and squid ink pasta, crickets and frogs. We've had some incredible food. But the experience is always what remains. The love that comes from being on an adventure with someone as you eat it. Someone you love.

In New Zealand, we have some great food and it can be eaten in some incredible places. The cheese roll never tasted better





than the one we had sitting in a cafe on Stewart Island, New Zealand's tiny third island where we saw a kiwi in the wild and hand fed a kaka. (We loved the place so much that we're writing our next book about it.)

Sitting in Eden Park stadium watching the New Zealand women's rugby team play, we ate hot dogs, waving our silver fern flags and yelling til we were hoarse.

In childhood we ate hokey pokey ice cream on Mount Maunganui beach where the fine golden sand stretches for miles and the Pacific Ocean rolls in like the calming beat of a mother's heart. We'd eat pipis dipped in vinegar and fresh corn on the cob dripping with butter, waiting impatiently for sausages and steak off the Barbeque, smelling of charcoal and summer.

We've eaten fish, caught that morning by Kirsty's husband and crayfish that our cousin went diving for, and unbeatable lemon ice cream and kedgeree made by our Aunt. In a chateau at the base of the Tongariro mountain we ate high tea with Mum, celebrating both her and our motherhood.

When Dad's Alzheimers kicked in, we spent holidays with him eating fish and chips for lunch and for dinner every day when that was all he could recognise on a menu.

There is a muesli slice that our godmother made for us everytime we were home. It's chewy and full of raisins and will always make us miss her as the smell of it baking fills the kitchen.

In Wellington, a city we both adore, we eat faithfully at a restaurant on Oriental parade called Pomelo, where the food feels both comforting and awe inspiring and we look out at the bay and feel like some of the luckiest people on the planet.

All of these meals and so many more have become part of our core memories. We love to cook and to eat. But really, the love of food comes from the



people who cook it. It comes from the people we eat with and the feeling of sharing the experience.

There is no greater love than spending time with the people you love and the people who love you back. Add in good food and you have true love. For us at least, food is love.

**Nikki Perry and Kirsty Roby** are sisters from New Zealand and co-writers of rom-com books. They have six published novels; 'How to Marry Harry', 'Pinot and Puha', 'The Missing Wife Life', 'Given a Buckley's Chance', 'Bringing Home Mr Bacon' and 'Mary and Bright'.

They love to travel and are working towards visiting all continents, if only they could sell a few more books.

[@Write Doozy](#)

<https://www.facebook.com/NikkiPerryandKirstyRoby>

<https://www.nikkiperryandkirstyroby.com>







## APHRODITE AND THE ISLAND OF LOVE

*Myron Edwards*

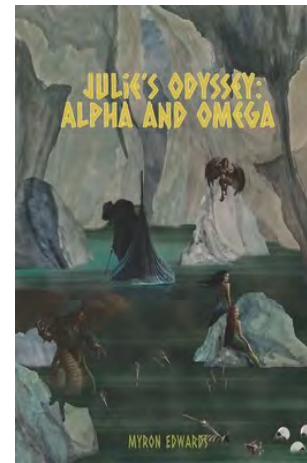
I live in Cyprus birthplace of the legendary Goddess Aphrodite, whose very name means “From the foam” where legend says she was conceived in the waters before being brought to shore on a conk shell, as represented in the famous Botticelli picture of her birth. So, we are fortunate that every day is a day of love not just on Valentine's.

Throughout the year people tie ribbons to the bushes surrounding the beach where the symbolism of her birth is represented by three giant rocks known locally as Petra Tou Romou. Love is celebrated throughout the year with many couples having their wedding photos taken by the rocks or on the beach overlooking the waves and the famous foam.

But what of the goddess herself she is recognised as one of the twelve Royal Gods of Olympia and her stories are notorious, her love for Adonis seems to be the one that captures the very essence of love and passion, and his subsequent demise only adds to the tragedy of her doomed love affairs.

Yet there is no proof or evidence why this place was designated as her birthplace and why it holds such significance for the people of Cyprus. Throughout the island, the Goddess of love is celebrated in statue form as well as paintings and tacky souvenirs. Yet there is no evidence of her existence, like many Greek legends she is just a myth, with no credibility for her existence.

Or is she?



Once she stepped foot onto the sands of Petra Tou Romiou her story began as the ultimate “Femme Fatal.” It was said she could seduce a man with just one look which would leave him helpless at her feet.

I tell you this because this is the premise of my trilogy of books entitled The Cyprus Mysteries, the First book being The Mistress of the Rock.

Like many things in life, fate deals you the cards, you must decide whether you pick them up or not. Such was the case for me personally when I and my future wife visited Petra Tou Romiou which seems a lifetime ago. On that visit, I spotted on the wall a poster of the area taken from the air and beneath the surface what looked like the form of a female figure. My mind reeled as I considered the possibility that the image on the wall was the evidence that for centuries people have been looking for to validate the claim of Aphrodite's birth. As far-fetched as I could not rid the thought from my mind. The goddess was trying to tell me that I should do something about it. Which is what I did, but only after we moved the family to Cyprus, to the Island of Love.

I began to write the story as a screenplay which was read by some friends who encouraged me to write a book. I did this and gave it to my wife as a Christmas present, after a few more people read it, I was advised to get it published which I did and printed the books in English and Greek. There was even talk of a movie.



But that is in the past, what is not is the influence Aphrodite has on this island although personally, I think much more could be done to glorify her. Which I attempt to do in the books as the central theme that runs through all the stories is love, in all its variety of emotions. Inside the pages is the love of family, the love of a husband and a wife, a fantasy

love, a passionate love, a jealous love, and above all what perhaps we are all searching for, and some have found true love.

The island of love holds many secrets like The Mistress of the Rock.

<https://www.myronedwardsbooks.com/>



**Myron Edwards** was born in 1952 in Orsett, Essex, England, the youngest son of Welsh parents.

Upon leaving school, he went into the travel industry globetrotting as a tour operator and representing airlines for some 30 years. In 1976, Myron began freelance writing for the BBC, in Radio and Television. His credits include The Two Ronnies, Week Endings, The News Huddlines and A Kick up the 80's.

In 1980, he joined JWT Advertising as a copywriter, writing his first TV commercial within 10 days.

Always artistic and inventive, he created Tubewalking in 1987, a new map concept, that made getting around London easier on foot and which still operates today.

He married Niki, whose family is Greek Cypriot, in 1990 and on a family trip to Cyprus and while visiting Aphrodite's Rock for the first time the beginnings of his passion to write the story of Mistress of the Rock came to fruition.

Moving permanently to Cyprus in 2005, gave him the opportunity to write, as during this time he worked on campaigns for TV and Radio in an advertising agency in Limassol. The first manuscript of this book was completed in 2007 and released by a local publisher but it had a limited audience yet was well received by those who read it. In 2017 he teamed up with RockHill Publishing that is based in the US, to release a new version of Mistress of the Rock. He has now completed the sequel Scylla, The Revenge and the third part of the story Alpha and Omega completes the trilogy.

Being an adept creator of short stories, Myron has recently started writing for 5-7 year olds in a distinctive style.







## WHAT'S YOUR ROMANCE PERSONA? HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEART OR SMOKING COWORKER?

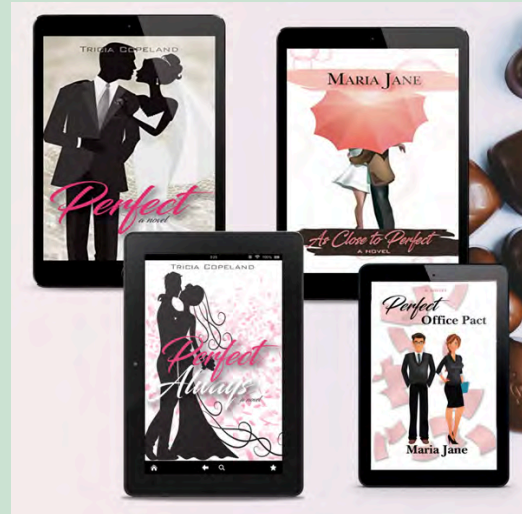
*Tricia Copeland*

With the season of Valentine's upon us, romance is top of mind for many. And yes, I do mean Valentine's season because as soon as the Christmas decorations leave the stores the Valentine's candy, cards, and décor appear. And why not? Because everyone loves love, right?

This leads to my next questions. What is your romance persona? Did you fall in love in high school or was it the smoking coworker you fell hard for? I've got a romance character for all the personas, so let's dig in and discover which persona you are and/or which persona you're drawn to. My romance, *Perfect*, explores perfect matches at each stage of the main character or MC's life. Who does she end up with? It's for you to choose.

**1. The High School Sweetheart** – Chloe and Adam start dating in high school. Adam's got their love story all mapped out, right down to the white picket fence ringing their horse farm. And who wouldn't love that right? But Chloe's dream has always been to travel, and she'd love to live in Paris. Can this couple go the distance?

**2. The College Hunk** – Isaac is the hot basketball star looking for a shot in the pros. Still, he's all about Chloe who's focused on landing the perfect job across the ocean. They're polar opposites, but sometimes opposites attract. There's a lot of chemistry and passion between these two. What



do you think? Could they find their happily ever after?

**3. The Parisian Affair** – Chase is a successful banker Chloe meets in Paris. He loves soccer and his family owns a vineyard. Can we say swoon? They meet through mutual friends and after Chloe lands a job in Paris, she give in to her feelings for him. Needless to say, he's over the moon. But her family and single mother are miles away. Is lasting love in the cards for this couple?

**4. The Smoking Coworker** – Liam is the hot accountant down the hall, and he's not shy about divulging his attraction to Chloe. He's a bit of a knight in shining armor, coming to the rescue when Chloe breaks her arm. His family's from



upstate New York and he's a huge hockey fan. Liam gives off a bit of the boy next door vibes. Yes, he's just that wholesome. What do you think? Are Chloe and Liam destined by the stars?

**5. The Focused Investor** – Who doesn't love someone focused and mature? And that's exactly what Mason is, except for the moment Chloe steps off the curb, and he barrels into her with his bicycle. What's even worse is he doesn't even get her number. How will he ever find her in New York City? But fate steps in and the two lock eyes over a latte. Can this couple make love last?

Have you decided what romance persona you are or which one you're drawn to? *Perfect* is definitely its own breed of romance book with five sections telling each story in Chloe's alternate ending romance saga. One review coined it speculative romance. In the next book of the series, *Perfect Always*, we learn how Chloe's happily ever after plays out. These two books set the stage for the *Perfect* romance series and all the characters which star in it including Chloe's friends Bree, in *As Close to Perfect*, and Mira, in *Perfect Office Pact*, written under pen name Maria Jane. Their friend Dani will star in the next installment tentatively titled *My No-So-Perfect Cop*.

Speaking of romance personas, each of the books in the *Perfect* series highlights different tropes with second-chance romance and small town tropes in *Perfect Always*, friends to lovers and multi-cultural tropes in *As Close to Perfect*, and enemies to lovers, opposites attract, and workplace romance in *Perfect Office Pact*.



On the topic of personas and tropes, the list could go on forever. I recently found a list of 100 romance tropes which included abduction to love, alien, alpha male, amnesia romance, anonymous love, bodyguard romance, bully romance, celebrity romance, chronic illness, cinnamon roll, cowboy, escort romance, fake dating, forced proximity, arranged marriage, forced marriage, friends with benefits, grumpy sunshine, Vegas, jilted bride/groom, law enforcement, mafia, military, missed timing, nanny, omegaverse, one night stand, the one that got away, political, revenge, reverse harem, rock star, road trip, and secret baby. Have you heard of all of these? Which ones catch your favs? Let me know in the comments and add more to the list!

Happy Reading.



Award-winning, and best-selling, fade to black, closed-door romance author **Maria Jane** believes in the power of love. She sees that love may look messy and take a winding path, but there is magic in the journey. Her books are filled with fun moments, sweet gestures, surprising turns, and characters searching for their happily ever after. Craving your next HEA and/or HFN read? Find all of Maria's *Perfect* romances, formerly penned under Tricia Copeland, and dive into a fun love story today at [mariajaneromance.com](http://mariajaneromance.com).

**Tricia Copeland** believes in finding magic. She thinks magic infuses every aspect of our lives, whether it is the magic of falling in love, discovering a new passion, a beautiful sunset, or a book that transports us to another world. An avid runner and Georgia native, Tricia now lives with her family and four-legged friends in Colorado. Find all her titles from contemporary romance, fantasy, to dystopian fiction at [www.triciacopeland.com](http://www.triciacopeland.com).







## SWEETHEARTS, CABBAGES AND CARROTS: THE STRANGE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

Mark Morton

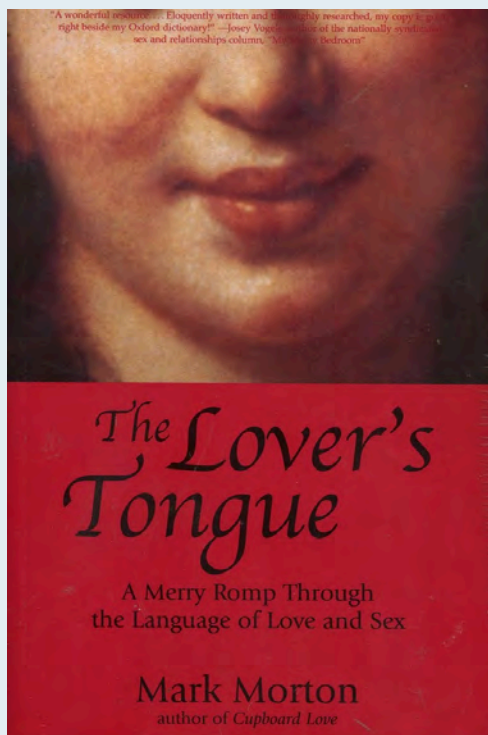
It amazes me that kids still give their classmates the same Valentine's Day cards that were popular when I was their age (i.e. a half-century ago!). You know the ones I mean: cheap cards featuring bad puns and pictures that look like they were drawn when Queen Victoria was on the throne — for example, a maniacally grinning train locomotive with “I choo-choo-choose you” coming out of its smoke stack. These goofy cards, along with the sour Valentine's Day candies embossed with phrases like “You're Mine” and “Hug me,” are a long way from the historical origin of the day of love that we celebrate on February 14. That origin likely goes back to a third-century Bishop named Valentinus who defied the Roman Emperor by secretly performing Christian marriages. Bishop Valentinus was punished for his disobedience with stoning and beheading, something you rarely see depicted in the card section at Walmart.

Skip ahead about a thousand years and you get to another milestone in the history of Valentine's Day. That was when the medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer penned a poem called *The Parlemount of Foules* — that is, the Parliament of Fowls or, more

idiomatically, the Annual Board Meeting of Birds. In that poem, Chaucer links the traditional date of St. Valentine (which was February 14, the day the Bishop's head and body split up for good), with the mid-February tendency of English robins, cuckoos, coots, and blue tits to engage in a kind of tree-based speed-dating so that they could choo-choo-choose their mates. Ever after, February 14 was St. Valentine's Day, and its associations with love, wooing, and hanky-panky were firmly established.

Now, if you are either over 110 years old or a student of film history, you'll recall Rudolph Valentino, a movie star of 1920's silent movies who became famous as the “Latin Lover” thanks to his smouldering eyes and steamy roles. You'd be forgiven for thinking that “Valentino” was his stage name — and you'd be partly right. Rudolph Valentino's real name was (take a deep breath) Rodolfo Pietro Filiberto Raffaello Guglielmi di Valentina d'Antonguolla. When asked by his manager to shorten his name to fit on theatre marquees, it's possible that he considered “Filiberto Guglielmi,” but more likely that he immediately landed on “Rudolph Valentino,” thanks to the cultural cache of Valentine's Day. Though his movie career was short (he died at age 31, not from a broken heart but from a perforated ulcer), the surname of this black-and-white heart-throb helped make Valentine's Day an even more amorous date on the calendar.

What do lovers call each other in their Valentine's Day cards? Well, things like “sweetheart,” “sweet pea,” “sweetie,” “honey,” “honeybuns,” “sugar,” “sugar pie,” and “cupcake.” Notice a trend in these terms of endearment (also known as hypocorisms)? Obviously, they're all sweet things (we could add “pudding” to the list, though this became less popular as a term of endearment after the mid-twentieth century when it developed into sexual slang for “women's genitalia”). Other languages also use foods as terms of endearment but oddly — to my way of thinking, at least — not sweet ones. The French, of course, have *mon petit chou* — that is, “my little cabbage.” In Greece (and I'm totally





serious about the following usages), lovers call each other *fasolaki mou*, meaning “my little kidney bean”; in Italy, they say *mia patatina*, meaning “my little potato”; in Portugal, they use *meu chuchuzinho*, meaning “my little squash”; and in Russia the sweet nothing that lovers whisper into each other’s ears is *mya morkovka*, meaning “my little carrot” (in English, I recommend not applying that last one to a man).

In emails, I’ll often sign off (though not with my boss at work, as I’ve learned to my chagrin) with “xoxox” and “LOL.” The letter “x” has been used as a symbol for a kiss going back to the twelfth century. More recent is the use of the letter “o” to signify a hug — it goes back only to the mid nineteenth century. So “xoxox” obviously means “hugs and kisses.” As for “LOL,” I admit to formerly misunderstanding its usage. I thought it stood for “Lots Of Love” and so I once used it in a Facebook comment to express support for a friend who had just announced the death of his elderly

father. My intended sympathy, however, was misconstrued by the family of the dearly departed, to whom “LOL” meant “Laugh Out Loud.” Ah, the vagaries of love.

**Mark Morton**, author of *The Headmasters and Cupboard Love: A Dictionary of Culinary Curiosities* (nominated for a Julia Child Award), is also the author of three other nonfiction titles, *The End: Closing Words for a Millennium* (winner of the Alexander Isbister Award for nonfiction); *The Lover’s Tongue: A Merry Romp Through the Language of Love and Sex* (republished in the UK as *Dirty Words*), and *Cooking with Shakespeare*.

He’s also written more than 50 columns for *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* (University of California Press) and has written and broadcast more than a hundred columns about language and culture for CBC Radio.

Mark has a PhD in sixteenth-century literature from the University of Toronto and has taught at several universities in France and Canada. He currently works at the University of Waterloo. He and his wife, Melanie Cameron, (also an author) have four children, three dogs, one rabbit, and no time.

Find out more at <https://www.markmorton.ca/>.







## RIGHT TIME, RIGHT PLACE

*Charles Breakfield & Rox Burkey*

The rising tide carried the echoes of the surf crashing against the rocks to the verandah where Colson sat. Dark, longish hair brushed the neckline of his Cody Johnson T-shirt over khaki shorts with leather sandals at the end of his long legs. He savored his morning coffee, watching the waves deposit treasures onto the sand.

*'I'll pick up some of those shells later to add to my collection,' he mused.*

The distressed wood exterior, expansive windows, and deck allowed year-round ocean views from the modest beach house. Colson owned the property to the cliffs on his left and a half-mile to the north. He chuckled at the greedy seagulls dancing on the wind, screeching messages at one another in between grabbing their breakfast tidbits.

Few people ventured this far down the sand. He had dreamed today would be perfect for starting a conversation. Colson leaned forward, delighted when her head emerged around the sea stairway separating his residence from the public beach.

"Good, she's back," he murmured and added a grateful sigh.

Gusts of wind carelessly picked up the sea-misted strands of her long, sun-kissed brown hair. Hair sailed around her, framing her pensive expression. The long-sleeved white coverup twirled to expose shapely-tanned legs. Random light sea sprays caught by the wind added rainbow-hued water droplets but didn't alter her graceful progression. She paused just out of reach of the rising tide, then turned toward the endless horizon where the sky and water met.

"Excuse me, miss," he called. "I don't mean to disturb you, but I'd like to ask you something."

The lithe form half-turned toward his voice. Her eyes met his, and a slight frown played on her lips.

She appeared surprised as if seeing the beach home for the first time.

"I've seen you glide onto this stretch of beach now and again. You stop and stare at the sea with neither melancholy nor hopeful expressions but lost in thought. I wondered if you'd like to sit and chat for a while."

She faced him with bright green eyes, registering everything in a single assessing glance. "I don't recall our meeting, but you seem more than a stranger," the dulcet tones of her words rose above the retreating wave. "I do find your curiosity a bit intrusive." She watched the water as it ebbed and flowed. The sun began to melt the morning fog, adding sparkling rainbows to her outline with new droplets.

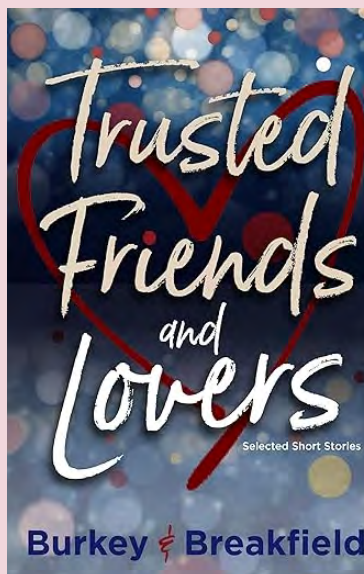
"I meant no offense," he stated with gentle determination. "My name is Colson Martin. You caught my attention the first morning you visited this part of the beach. I hope the sea gives you peacefulness. It does the same for me."

"I come here to forget I'm alone," she offered with a shrug. "My thoughts drift mind to planning my future, yet I've failed to move forward, Colson."

He walked to the railing, casually leaning against the worn wood. "I moved here years ago to gain peace with my past." He grinned and slightly shook his head, noting the determined edge to her chin and flawless complexion. "I wonder if it's serendipity for us to meet in a place where we can escape to the sounds of the sea that always moves."

Her shapely figure, silhouetted through the translucent material, glided closer. Colson saw her eyes trace across his form like an x-ray

seeing his soul. "You look like a powerful man. From your tanned features, you must spend a lot of time outdoors. You need a haircut to smooth the edges and compliment your jawline." She shrugged





Diana took additional steps toward him, pushing the wet hair from her eyes to better focus her attention. She giggled. “Seriously, is that your best line?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t a line. Join me for a cup of coffee. Help me understand why our paths crossed.” He gestured to the empty chair. “You’ll still get a great ocean view from my porch.”

“Colson, I don’t think I’m ready for a complication.”

“Neither am I. Consider this a stop at the end of a beautiful beach. I’ll serve you a glass of water or cup of coffee. Your choice.”

and grinned. “I don’t believe you barter with your good looks, even though your dark eyes could take a person ten fathoms below the ocean surface.” She laughed. “I’m called Diana. My mother wished too much.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Diana.” He grinned as he let her name roll off his tongue.

“Honestly, Colson, I never noticed you or your house. I view this remote, unfettered beach as my private retreat.” Her arms moved sweepingly over the area. “You live on the edge of paradise.”

“For weeks, I’ve watched you walk across the sand, then vanish. You’ve crept into my dreams.” Trying to find the right words to clarify, he dragged his hand across his face and briefly closed his eyes. “I find visions of you in scattered childhood memories that aren’t mine. They seem like premonitions. I hoped if we ever spoke, I might understand why.”

Diana shifted her body in resignation and walked through the gate toward the open seat. “Plain coffee would be nice,” she said with a slight smile blossoming over her lips.

A sensation of possibilities swelled his heart. Colson turned and entered the house to retrieve the beverage. Moments later, he handed her a cup and raised his.

She met his gesture in midair. “To beaches.”

He gazed at her, praying she wouldn’t disappear. “And coffee with a special friend.”

They sat in companionable silence. Diana finished her coffee and stood. “Same time tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here. Wouldn’t miss it.”

She drifted off the patio onto the beach. Looking back, appearing relaxed, she smiled. “Neither would I, my new friend.”

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## INTERVIEW WITH JONNI JORDYN

**Hello Jonni, tell us about your action-packed suspense fiction novel, *The Mother of All Viruses*.**

A brilliant young man enters college with a checkered past, having hacked some sensitive government computers to defend and avenge his father. He is given a chance to use his genius for good and helps a brilliant young professor prove her controversial theories in quantum mechanics by making her simulations run much faster. He created a self healing algorithm that is able to improve its performance. Another bad actor tries to steal the process and ends up infecting the internet with it, and it ultimately finds its way into supposedly secure government computers.

In the meantime, the professor's secretary is missing and a ransom note is delivered. Government agents from the cia, nsa, and fbi cross paths in very dangerous ways as the intrigue builds, and someone is taking over control of the navy, escalating the danger to a world level.

**Who are the main characters?**

Bobby Blain is a brilliant young college student that helps improve a professor's ability to simulate her physics experiment. To tell you who Bobby is, I'll include an excerpt from the book where a government agent has already tried hacking the professor's computer. The agents have not been identified by name yet and are simply referred to as the large man and the small man.



*The large man did not understand the problem and simply stated, "His name is Bobby. Bobby Blain. When he was in High School, he cracked the Federal Reserve Bank, the Treasury, and Wall Street, and transferred a ton of money into the President's bank accounts, but made the transfers look like they were several years old."*

*"WHAT?!?" the small man screamed, "YOU HAVE ME HACKING INTO BOBBY THE MIDAS'S SYSTEM AND YOU DIDN'T TELL ME???"*

*"Bobby the Midas? Is that what they call him?"*

*"Oh God, oh God," the small man panicked, "he probably dumped my disk all the while I thought I was dumping his passwords. He probably knows who I am already. I'm out. You can find someone else to do your dirty work."*

*"What are you worried about? He's harmless. And if he's so famous, why didn't you recognize him when you met him?"*

*"You don't get it. He pulled the greatest hack in history. He nearly got a President of the United States impeached, not to mention how many Wall Street tycoons were canned from their cushy jobs. I'm not worried about him hurting me. He's a good guy. The problem is that he is royalty to the hacker community. He has fans, lots of them, including me."*

His professor, Dr. Deirdre Jennings gained notoriety when she published a paper, while working on her doctorate, about harnessing power at a quantum level. She was hired by a small, but respected university, in the hopes that she would put them on the map as a physics powerhouse, but in the end, they still just treated her like a woman with less to say than any male professor.



There is one other main character, but he isn't revealed until you reach the surprise ending, so I won't spoil it here.

**What themes are found in this exciting adventure?**

The book is riddled with cases of government excess, and how certain elements of the government might act now and ask questions later. Their fears are not entirely unwarranted as you will find foreign intrigue and even conspiracy theories having their roles. The professor in particular must battle the misogyny in her attempts to gain funding.

The intrigue builds towards a cataclysmic showdown between the naval powers of the world, and I'm not going to spoil the conclusion here. I like to think that I've included enough comedy in some of the scenes to balance out some of the more horrific things that take place.

Among my many reader responses, the more technical readers loved how it gets into the mind of a programmer and develops an idea into something very real. Several non-technical readers loved the depth of the characters and the love stories that are intertwined throughout the book. I'm especially proud of an 84 year old great grandmother who didn't understand most of the computer stuff, but loved the characters anyway. My therapist thinks almost all of the characters are me.

**How long did you work on this novel?**

I spent between 12 and 14 months writing this novel. Partially due to its size, but also because this was actually my first attempt to write a novel and I was developing my own technique as I went along. I tend to write my books in layers, going over it repeatedly in two to three dozen sets of revisions.

**Tell us what other types of writing you enjoy doing as well as fiction.**

I only write fiction, but I have written several genres of fiction. I have several books that mix intrigue with fantasy and science fiction. I have a couple romantic comedies, a crime novel, a pair of books about the harsh life twelve thousand years ago, science fiction, and fantasy. (Some of these are still waiting for their release dates.)

**Is this latest novel a standalone read or part of a series?**

This is the first book of a three part series. Part two will be released in late May, 2025, and I am currently working on the third and final installment.

**What are you working on next?**

I'm currently working on the last book of this series, but I have another romantic comedy to be released in late February. I've been told by a respected psychic that I should write more romance. I'm taking it under advisement.

**Where can readers find you and your work online?**

I have a website: [www.jordynatlargebooks.com](http://www.jordynatlargebooks.com). You can also find me on Amazon by searching for Jonni Jordyn.



Jonni Jordyn was born in Oakland, California in 1957. She started writing at an early age, writing music, poetry, short stories, radio, film, and stage scripts. She didn't start writing novels until later in life, after she retired from playing music, and found herself travelling away from home for extended periods. She currently lives in Denver, Colorado.





# THE TOP 5 MISTAKES PUBLIC SPEAKERS MAKE AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

*Elayna Fernandez*

Whether it's on a live or digital stage or in the boardroom, leaders, influencers, and high-achievers understand the power of public speaking to inspire, impact, and move people to action.

However, in my almost two decades as a professional speaker and event organizer, I have noticed that many speakers fail to leverage the stage to build their credibility, attract, reach, and retain their ideal clients, and exponentially grow their business and their bottom line.

I've compiled a list of the top mistakes I constantly see from aspiring and new speakers that we should avoid when we want to share our message and stories with the world.

## 1. Lack of training - or the wrong training.

Many people waste their time trying to figure out the speaking business on their own or waste their money on cookie-cutter programs, taught by people who are not on the speaking trenches and have not achieved the results they crave. Many of my clients were so tragically misled and deceived that they almost gave up on becoming speakers altogether. To avoid this frustrating and traumatic experience, make sure you learn from someone who shares from a place of experience and who is in touch with the speaking industry and knows about the business of speaking and has the receipts to prove it – from pricing to pitching to performing – and beyond!

## 2. Focusing on visibility before being Stage-Ready

One of the mantras of my community is “value over vanity.” Getting paid to speak has nothing to do with how popular you are online, but with how your speaking brand resonates with the people you feel called to serve.

Being stage-ready means that you've intentionally:

- developed magnetic speaker assets that showcase your wisdom, your expertise, and the value you bring to transform individuals, teams, and organizations;

- chosen strategic and compelling talk titles that grab attention and get you booked;
- written powerful abstracts for your keynotes that event planners are willing to pay for;
- crafted meaningful keynotes with transformational stories that will authentically connect with your audience;
- determined how to price your talks and identified the right stages for you to maximize your impact and your income;
- BONUS: A compelling speaker reel to show off your charisma and versatile stage presence.

## 3. Not preparing enough for a talk opportunity.

Preparation breeds confidence and connection. The right guidance can help you sharpen your talk delivery, manage speaking anxiety, and master your talk performance with unshakable speaking confidence on a live stage to become an effective, eloquent, and engaging speaker.

Rehearse and choreograph your talk until it becomes natural. Never rely on notes to remind you of your talk or rely on slides to convey the message for you.

Writing your speech can help you organize your ideas and be clear on what you want to teach, but it is as you read what you wrote out loud and practice it that you can create a conversation with the audience. You will notice any jargon that needs to be replaced with simpler words that the audience can understand. As Brené Brown - with whom I'll be sharing the stage this year at Mom2.0 in Florida - likes to say: “Clear is Kind.”

Preparing also means having the equipment, materials, and even clothing you need for the speaking opportunity. Shopping for outfits is my least favorite part of speaking, but it is essential that you consciously choose what to wear in a way that matches your brand and the event setup. For example, last year I organized events at TEDx and the United Nations, I informed the speakers what background color would be ahead of time - you



don't want to wear all black at an event with black draping behind you!

And finally, you want to know exactly how long you are allowed to speak so you can end on time. When you don't stick to the time, the program suffers and organizers might incur even more costs. Speakers who go over time become hard to trust and seldom get invited back to speak at an event or recommended to others.

#### 4. Having an agenda

The most powerful speakers understand this: your talk is not about you and not for you.

Interact with them in a conversational tone.

Make eye contact with as many audience members as you can.

Focus on your audience and what they need to hear.

Don't speak too quickly. Pause so they can take it all in!

Acknowledge them and their journey.

Leaving any agendas behind will ease nerves and prevent disappointments. I always say that when you focus on service, fear disappears. My 11-year-old daughter and I were invited to speak in India and we practiced these principles as we delivered speeches in front of 700,000 people who spoke a different language. It's all about how you make the audience feel!

#### 5. Not being part of a community

Speaking can be a profitable and exciting profession, yet lonely. Our friends and family members may be dismissive and unhelpful even when doing their best to be supportive. We're often aboard a plane or in a hotel room, either getting ready for the presentation or taking a break after the performance. And everyone you know is in full event mode.

I have found that it's essential to be part of a community where you can connect and mastermind with speakers and storytellers on the same journey as you. Your peer group will support you, encourage you, and keep you accountable as you test and refine your talk, and build your speaking business.

Avoiding these 5 mistakes will help you step into the spotlight and shine on stage as a powerful speaker, presenter, and communicator.

Remember, the world is waiting for your words!



Award-winning Storyteller, Story Strategist, and Student of Pain, **Dr. Elayna Fernández** is the host of the Transformational STORYtellers show and the visionary behind the Transformational STORYtellers Community, a safe space where impact-centered leaders learn to harness the power of storytelling to impact the world. She's also the bestselling author of many books, including The Gifts of Pain series, a collection of vulnerable and brave stories from authors of diverse backgrounds and walks of life using Dr. Fernández's powerful S.T.O.R.Y. System of Transformational Storytelling.

An immigrant to the U.S.A., Dr. Fernández recently received the Presidential Lifetime Achievement award and was named a Woman of Influence by SUCCESS Magazine. She has spoken on prestigious stages worldwide, including TEDx and the United Nations. Her work has been featured in national and international media.

Findo more at:

<http://thepositivemom.com>

<https://thegiftsofpain.com>

<http://instagram.com/thepositivemom>





## INTERVIEW WITH TONG GE

### Hello Tong Ge, you came to Canada in the late 1980s. Did you know English when you arrived?

Yes, I was an international student. To be accepted into graduate schools in North America, we had to pass an English test called TOEFL, short for the Test of English as a Foreign Language. However, this test only prepared us for basic English skills. Even for academic studies, it was far from sufficient—let alone for creative writing.

In the early days of my graduate studies, I struggled to keep up with the professors during lectures and couldn't take notes quickly enough. I often had to borrow notes from my classmates afterward. When working on assignments, I relied heavily on an English-Chinese dictionary, looking up countless unfamiliar words and writing down their Chinese meanings before starting the task.

Another challenge was that the English we learned in China was entirely textbook-based. As a result, we were taught formal terms like "man" and "woman" or "male" and "female," but not informal ones like "guy" and "gal." We knew "dollar" but not "buck," "bad" but not "sucks," and "why" but not "how come." Once, during a class, after a professor finished proving a mathematical formula, he exclaimed, "Bingo!" I raised my hand and asked what "bingo" meant.

### Can you think of a moment when you first realized that language has power?

I first realized the power of language when I began reading Lu Xun in senior high school and college. A prominent Chinese writer of the early 20th century, his essays and short stories offered unparalleled

insights into the social, political, and cultural issues of his time. He fearlessly criticized outdated traditions and government policies. His writings are sharp, profound and biting—like a sword cutting through social injustice, ignorance, indifference among the uneducated masses, and the darker aspects of human nature. His work left an indelible mark on society and history, influencing generations of Chinese writers and intellectuals.

One of his most remarkable works, *The True Story of Ah Q*, in my opinion, far surpasses Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Mo Yan, the 2012 Nobel Prize-winning Chinese writer, once said he would gladly trade all his works for a single story as powerful as *The True Story of Ah Q*.

### You are bilingual. How do you think this affects your writing?

I have to say that my mother tongue is both a blessing and a curse when it comes to writing in English. It is a blessing because I can draw inspiration from the Chinese language, especially its poetry, sayings and proverbs, which make my Chinese stories feel more authentic. However, Chinese grammar is very different from English grammar. For instance, we only have one tense—the present tense. We don't have plurals, and our verbs don't change according to the subject. The way we use prepositions is also very different from English.

If I try to think about it logically, I always get it wrong. As a result, it's much harder for me to consistently write grammatically correct sentences, especially when writing fiction in the past tense. That's why I've had to hire freelance editors to edit my entire manuscript, twice.

### You write and publish both in English and Chinese. How does your writing process differ between writing in both languages?

The process isn't much different, but the effect is. For example, when writing in Chinese, I can incorporate local dialects from specific regions in China, which adds authenticity to the setting. It's also easier for me to differentiate characters' speech. For instance, an illiterate person would speak one way, while a highly educated person



would speak another. While I can achieve this to some extent in English, it's not as effective as in Chinese.

Additionally, I don't make grammatical mistakes when writing in Chinese. For Chinese readers, all the footnotes and the list of major historical events in the English edition could be removed, as there's no need to explain historical figures, events, or cultural references—they're already familiar with them.

**The *House Filler* is a very impactful title. Can you walk us through your thought process when coming up with it?**

In traditional Chinese culture, a woman who married a widower was called a "house filler," a direct translation of the Chinese term 填房 (*tian fang*). The protagonist, Golden Phoenix, was born in a time when a woman's beauty was not measured by her looks but by the size of her feet. The smaller her feet, the more desirable she was considered. As a result, Chinese parents typically began binding their daughters' feet at the age of four or five.

Golden Phoenix, having lost her mother at an early age, didn't start the foot-binding process until she was six. Consequently, her feet never reached the ideal size of "golden waterlily" feet. Additionally, she was trained as a seamstress and became her family's breadwinner, further delaying her opportunity to marry well. Having missed the ideal marriage age, she eventually married a widower and became a "house filler."

**The novel is full of major historical events in China's history. It's almost like a multigenerational family saga. What inspired it?**

It is a multigenerational family saga and the first book in the "*China China*" series, focusing on my grandmother's story. The second book centers on my mother's story, while the third is based on my own. My mother has been telling me our family's

story ever since I was a child. Growing up, I witnessed firsthand what my parents went through and later experienced the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and the subsequent economic reforms in China myself. The trilogy is inspired by my family's history.

**Writing historical fiction is not easy. What was your research process like?**

In addition to my mother's narrative, I interviewed other family members and relatives. I even returned to Phoenix's hometown in 2015 to meet with relatives and conduct further research. I walked around the block where Golden Phoenix's family complex once stood and took a boat tour of Lake Yang and Lake Pan, both of which are described in the book. I also immersed myself in fiction from the 1930s and 1940s, conducted extensive online research, and thanks to the Internet, I was able to purchase photocopies of local newspapers from that era online.

**If you could cast a movie inspired by *The House Filler*, what actors would you hand pick?**

First and foremost, it must have an entirely Chinese cast. Unfortunately, since moving to Canada, I haven't had the chance to watch many Chinese movies and have become unfamiliar with the current movie stars. I'm only familiar with those from the 80s. Therefore, I would choose Gong Li to play Golden Phoenix.

**What is your favorite genre to read?**

Literary fiction, historical fiction, also good fantasies, science fiction and mystery/thrillers.

**Are you working on anything right now?**

I am currently translating "The House Filler" into Chinese. I also have other projects on the go, but they are in developmental stages currently, and I will be prepared to discuss them another time.

Interview by blogger **Marina Raydun**.

Born and raised in China, **Tong Ge** came to Canada in the late 80s as an international student. She has obtained a Master of Science degree from University of Saskatchewan in 1992. Since 2012, she has written under both her real name and the pen name Tong Ge, publishing poems, prose, and short stories in both English and Chinese across North America, England, and Taiwan. With four literary prizes already received, she is also a finalist for five others.

Find out more at <https://tong-ge.com/>.





## CREATE A CATCHY, ATTENTION-GRABBING TITLE TO HOOK READERS LIKE A PRO

*Vicky Oliver*

One little-known secret of the publishing world is that often the writer does not come up with a book title in a vacuum. That is, she likely *has* a title she loves for her manuscript, but all of the promotional aspects of launching a book are now so analyzed that often the title changes along the way.

My bookshelf teems with book proposals carrying different titles than what were ultimately published. The acquiring editor at the publishing company has to balance the author's dream title with what the sales department feels will sell. As recently as ten years ago, the sales department was mostly concerned with what would sell in bookstores such as Barnes & Noble. Today, a title also has to work across numerous online platforms and social media feeds. What's more, content that starts as a book could potentially end up as a Netflix series, so "catchiness" is a consideration.

A great title should hook readers. By "hook," I mean it describes the book's content with an economy of words, tantalizes readers to learn more, and should be easy for podcast hosts to pitch.

From my experience, sometimes the title comes directly out of a piece of text. That is, I'll be writing a chapter and suddenly a certain phrase will play in my head. "Hmmm," I'll say to myself. "That might make an interesting title, not just for this chapter but for the whole book." When that happens, I'll commit the title to a list and move on. I have hundreds of alternate titles on these lists and change my mind

— a lot — about which ones are good enough to present and which to keep to myself.

Some titles come to me easily. Some take weeks or months to hammer out. An agent or editor may suggest a title, or the suggestion could come from someone on the editorial board of the publishing company. The fate of your original title is uncertain, so it's good idea to not get overly attached to a particular title. After all, as a writer, your ultimate job is to sell the book through the various channels.

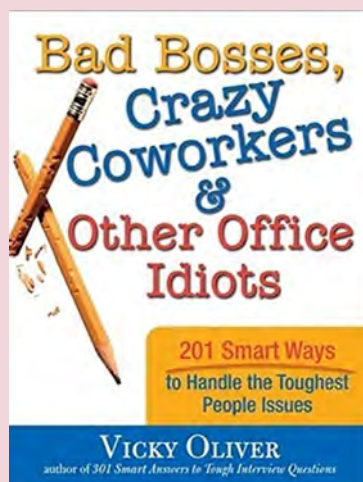
Here are some more factors to consider when crafting your title:

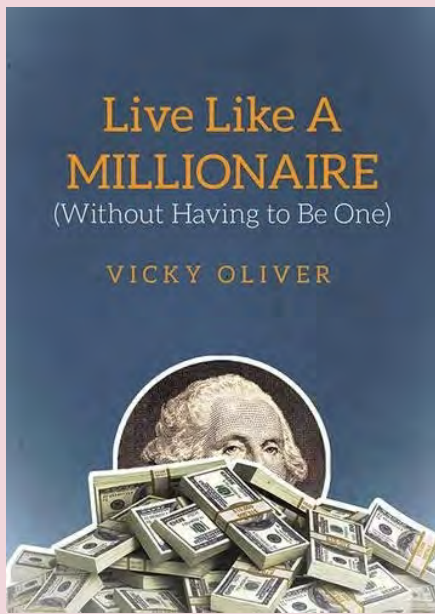
**1. Does it give you goosebumps?** It may sound silly, but a title should excite you. I write lists and lists of titles, but then I turn off my computer and see which titles I remember *without* looking at them. If you can't remember a title, discard it and move on. Recognize that, ideally, you will be promoting your book for at least five years. Your title should make you proud of all the work you put into the book every time you say or hear it.

**2. Who is the target market?** We all want to write international bestsellers, but the truth is: you need to narrow down your audience. If your target market were just one person, who would it be? Is the person your age or younger? Is the person your gender? Did the person who will read your book attend college? The more closely you can picture your target, the better chance you will have of crafting a title that will appeal to them.

**3. Does it have pizzazz?** Quite often a good title has a sing-song-y rhythm to it and is fun to say. Think *Catcher in the Rye*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Think *The Devil Wears Prada*, or *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Pay attention to how the emphasis on separate syllables sounds when you tie the words together. Alliteration, or words that repeat the same sound ("good grief"), are also catchy and therefore easier to remember.

**4. Does it make clear what the book is about?** You may, as I described earlier, love a great phrase that appeared as you were writing your book





— but make sure it also encapsulates the book’s message. For instance, “A Devil-May-Care Cavalier Flair” has some appealing elements, but it won’t meet your requirements if your book is about how to become more empathetic.

**5. Will it fit on the spine?** Can your title easily fit on the spine of the book without diminishing its readability? Picture someone reading your title on the spine while perusing similar books in a bookstore. Your title should leap off the shelf, knock on the person’s shoulder, and say, “Buy me.”

**6. How will it sound when translated?** Hopefully your book will not only be printed in the U.S. but will become a smash success around the world. Can

your title be translated easily into languages other than English? Put it into your translate app and test out in a few prospective languages. Does it suddenly double the amount of words? Are any words possibly untranslatable — or require a lot of explanation?

**7. Is a subtitle needed?** If you believe your title is titillating, but think it needs a tad more explanation, this is where a subtitle can help. Realize, though, that it may not fit on the spine. Also, make sure to consider all the above tips when deciding on a suitable subtitle.

Even though you are the book’s author, recognize that other minds will weigh in when devising the title. Everyone wants to add their input — let them! Stay flexible. Keep your mind open to other titles. You may want to send out a list of your top titles to a group of trusted, voracious readers and invite their responses — finding out which title attracts them and what it promises to deliver. You could also put out a survey on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn or another social media feed and ask your followers to “vote” on the best title. Then, share the feedback you receive with your publisher’s marketing team to have a bit of say in the process.

A great title will give your book a rocket boost into the bookselling universe. Don’t resist the committee approach to its development, but do add your ideas and insights to the process. You may offer one that lands.



**Vicky Oliver** is a leading career development expert and the multi-bestselling author of five books, including *Bad Bosses*, *Crazy Coworkers & Other Office Idiots* (Sourcebooks, 2008), and *Live Like a Millionaire (Without Having to Be One)* (Skyhorse, 2015).

She is a sought-after speaker and seminar presenter and a popular media source, having made over 901 appearances in broadcast, print and online outlets. Vicky Oliver is Nonfiction Editor at *LIT Magazine*, the Journal of the New School Masters in Fine Arts Creative Writing, and teaches essay writing at the New York Writers Workshop.

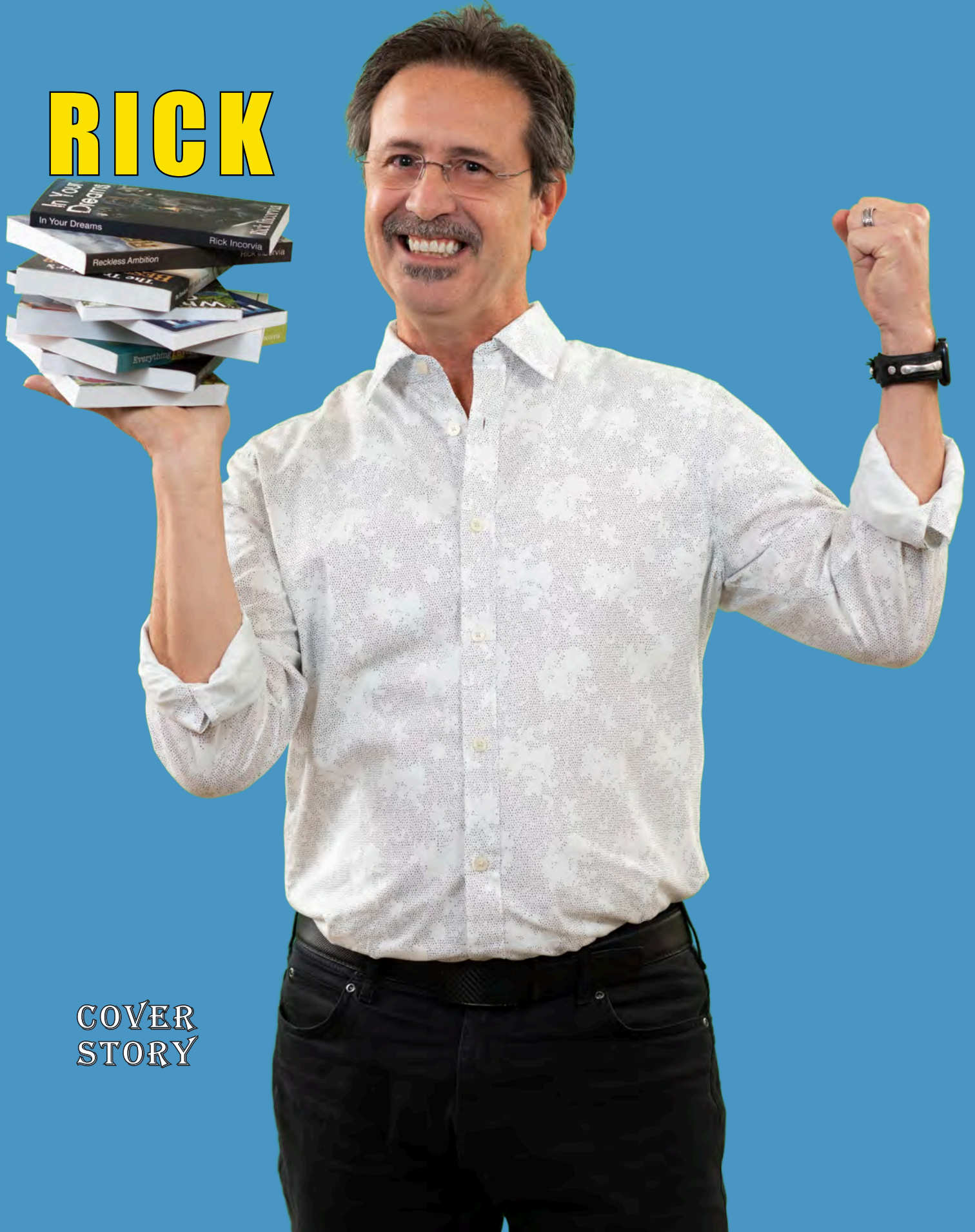
For more information, visit [vickyoliver.com](http://vickyoliver.com).





# INCORVIA

# RICK



COVER  
STORY

## INTERVIEW WITH RICK INCORVIA

**Hello Rick, welcome to The Relatable Voice Magazine. You grew up in a household with eight siblings! How did that environment shape your personality and influence your storytelling?**

Growing up with four older brothers, an older sister, a younger brother, and younger twin sisters was mostly awesome—though I didn't always appreciate it as a child. The dynamics were constantly shifting, and I was often a risk-taker. Some of my brothers applauded my behavior, while others warned me that I was reckless, naïve, and a dreamer. I had no idea how lucky I was until I got older. Now, they're my best friends—the ones I can trust to give it to me straight. Not that their opinions stop me from being myself; I can be pretty bullheaded . . . and still a reckless, naïve dreamer.

**Your journey has taken you from a small town in Ohio to Los Angeles, Florida, and beyond. How have these experiences shaped your perspective on life and writing?**

Yes, I was a big fish in a little pond (Ohio), then a small fish in a big pond (Los Angeles). That alone

will give you plenty of perspective. Now I live in Florida, enjoying the sunshine and hiding from the occasional hurricane. I tend to write about the thoughts swirling in my head. An entire book might unfold during a walk in the woods, as I imagine the lives of a squirrel, an owl, or an ant. Or, as with my latest book, *Chasing Gwin*, the story took shape during a 17-day cruise along the Danube River from Austria to Bulgaria.

**You describe yourself as fearless, fun, and friendly. Do you think those traits have helped you navigate the ups and downs of life, including your time in real estate and writing?**

Absolutely. I haven't traveled the entire world, but I've been places that few have—some of them only in my imagination, and others in real life. I'm a bit of a thrill-seeker, and I've done the usual stuff: skydiving, parachuting, zip-lining, etc. But I've also taken trips I had no business taking. For example, a jet ski journey from Key Largo to Key West: one wrong turn could leave us stranded—or in “pirate territory.” We made two. I went with two of my brothers, and we were definitely scared. We faced





sharks, we were stranded, and battled a storm that could've toppled boats. I came away from that trip with a newfound respect for my brothers. Those thrills are forever stuck in my mind (and often exaggerated) as the years go by.

**You've shared that you love sports, gardening, and kayaking. Do these hobbies ever inspire your stories or help you overcome writer's block?**

Absolutely. My hobbies—whether it's sports, gardening, or kayaking—often spark my creativity and help me push through writer's block. I'm a healthy mix of competitiveness and reflection: I love to win, but I also know I'm fun to beat. I can be a

trash-talker during competition, yet I find it fulfilling to see the joy on my competitors' faces when they get the upper hand. Don't get me wrong—I always play to win, but I'm well aware that I'm not going to win them all. That blend of determination and acceptance is what keeps me grounded and, in its own way, fuels my storytelling.

**What's something surprising about you that most people wouldn't know, aside from wrestling an 8-foot alligator?**

Hold on—we can't just skip over wrestling an eight-foot alligator. There I was, in my backyard, minding my own business, when an eleven-foot alligator trotted down my makeshift boat ramp. I immediately called a trapper. When he finally caught that monster, he was struggling and called out to me and my nephew: "I need one of you to help—he's too strong!" Picture a big guy in shallow water on the back of this gator, trying to keep its jaws under control while it thrashed. I just shook my head. My nephew ran to help, taping the gator's mouth shut

while the trapper held it down. I got teased for months for staying on the sidelines and taking a video.

Fast-forward a few months later, and an eight-foot gator shows up at our dock. This time, I was ready to play. Once it was on land with its mouth taped shut, I climbed onto its back to hold it down while the trapper went for more tape. I did my best to keep its head pinned, with one leg on each side of its powerful tail. The gator thrashed wildly, nearly rolling me more than once. It's a ride I'll never forget.

Wait... what was the original question again?

**You've written across multiple genres, from action-adventure to romance. How do you decide which genre to tackle next?**

I don't really choose which genre to tackle—I just let the monster out. When something takes hold in my head, I can't sleep. Some people read, some meditate... I write. My wife often catches me typing away in the middle of the night. I'm drawn to exploring the human condition, so my work often features characters facing unique challenges. One of my books has a character with schizophrenia, another with dementia, and yet another with Intermittent Explosive Disorder. I've also written about life after death, time travel, cancer, and the



fine line between a gift and a curse. Honestly, I don't feel like I'm in control of what I write—it just pours out of me.

**What is the most rewarding part of connecting with your readers, especially when they share their reactions to your stories?**

I get such a thrill when I see someone reading one of my books. Just last night, I was walking through a festival and spotted two women sitting on a bench—one reading aloud to the other. I couldn't make out the words, but then one asked, "Who's the author?" and I watched the reader flip to the cover. I recognized it immediately, and a moment later, I heard her say my name. I couldn't help but walk over to them. We ended up chatting for about ten minutes, and they insisted I sign the book. It absolutely made my day.

**Your latest book, *Everything I Ever Wanted*, is deeply personal. What inspired you to write this story, and how did you feel about sharing it with the world?**



This story is set in the year 2027—five years into the future from when I first conceived it. I wrote it for two reasons. First, it helped me analyze my life and steer it toward happiness and fulfillment. By imagining a particular future, I hoped to help create it for myself. But, it took a dark turn.

Both of my grandmothers had dementia, and, at the time I started writing, my mother was struggling with it. My gene pool leans heavily toward my mother's side, so I don't know if or when dementia might affect me. It's such a difficult disease to control—like trying to write a thesis while someone is erasing your hard drive. This book became an outlet to express my fears, hopes, and desires in case the "dementia beast" does strike me. It's deeply personal, and I promise it delivers both laughter and tears.

**The theme of trust is central to the book. Was there a moment in your life that made you reflect deeply on this topic?**

When your wife, children, and grandchildren have to remind you how you know them, it can be both deeply unsettling and incredibly moving. While writing this book, I called my grandchildren and posed a scenario: "Imagine you're visiting me, and I no longer remember who you are. Your mission is to share stories of our time together so I can understand our relationship." Their responses were so touching.

Writing this book was a real eye-opener—I realized I truly do have everything I ever wanted, even if someday I might not remember it.







**Jennifer, your wife, is described as a bit of a hero in your latest book. How did she influence the story, and what was her reaction to being such a significant part of it?**

**This book reveals your fears, doubts, and desires. How did you navigate being so vulnerable, and what do you hope readers take away from it?**

Jennifer didn't like the book—at first, it was simply too personal for her. I shared very private moments involving her, my ex-wives, and my children, and I exposed many of my own weaknesses.

Jennifer is my rock; without her, I'm a runaway train. If you'd like to meet an angel, just read the book. But like my other works, these feelings were trapped in my head and needed to come out.

Around that time, my mother—who was 97 years old—was slipping deeper into dementia, compounded by Sundowners syndrome.

My siblings and I came together to take care of her. I was particularly close to her, so it was heartbreaking when we had to move her to a facility dedicated solely to dementia patients. I met so many brilliant people there who no

longer remembered who they were, except for a few fleeting moments on a good day.

It was both heartbreaking and inspiring, so I tried to put myself in their shoes.

In writing this book, my thoughts raced faster than my fingers could type. I almost didn't publish it, but I'm so glad I did—the reviews have been wonderful. I believe people crave genuine honesty, especially about the fears we're too afraid to share.

This story reveals my own fears, doubts, and desires, and I hope readers walk away feeling less alone with theirs.





**Rick Incorvia** is an American author celebrated for his diverse storytelling that spans multiple genres, including action, adventure, mystery, historical fiction, crime, fantasy, and romance. Growing up as one of nine children in a lively household, he developed a vivid imagination and a passion for storytelling. His father once remarked, "You sure can tell a whopper of a story. We should have named you MaveRick," highlighting Rick's early talent for weaving tales.

Rick's literary works are known for their engaging narratives and well-developed characters. His bibliography includes titles such as "The Traveler," "The Wrong Side of the Glass," "Bobby's Cabin," "When I'm Gone, Everything I Ever Wanted," and more. All his books have received outstanding reviews for their ability to prompt readers to think deeply about life, death, love, and the human experience.

Beyond writing, Rick is an inspiring speaker who encourages aspiring authors to bring their stories from concept to completion. He has been a guest speaker at various events, including the National Library in Amman, Jordan, and the Imagine Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida. His works have also been translated into Arabic and are used in classrooms internationally, reflecting his global reach and impact.

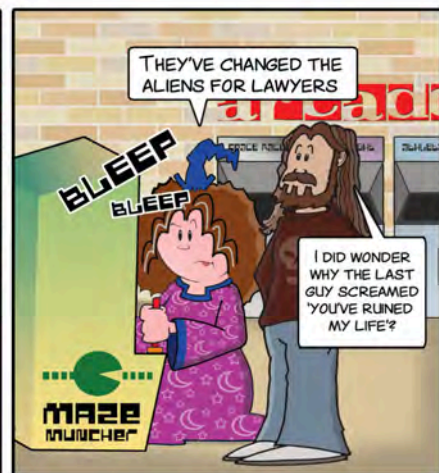
Rick's journey from a creative child in a bustling family to a published author and motivational speaker showcases his dedication to the craft of storytelling and his desire to inspire others through his work.

Find out more at [AuthorRickIncorvia.com](http://AuthorRickIncorvia.com).





# LIL' BIT WITCHY by Andy Case



Lili' bit  
**Witchy**

Andy Case is an internationally published Children's book illustrator and cartoonist, with over 30 years professional experience.

Find out more at: <http://www.andycaseillustration.com>



## NEW DOCUMENTARY OUT NOW: THE FALL OF DIDDY



**Wendell Hanes** is a multi-award-winning composer and songwriter, known for his work on Nickelodeon's Emmy-nominated show *That Girl Lay Lay*, Netflix's Emmy-award winning show *Family Reunion*, and Janet Hubert's upcoming animated feature *JG and the BC Kids*. His music for the hit Nickelodeon kids show *That Girl Lay Lay* has over one million views on YouTube. Wendell has thousands of credits scoring commercials, movies, TV shows, and network themes.

He has worked with major artists including Nicki Minaj, Drake, Lil Wayne, Busta Rhymes, 50 Cent, and Pharrell Williams. He is also the author of the popular book series *The 30 30 Career: Singing on and Producing Music for Commercials*, and the *Chef Maia*, and *Dallas Amadeus* children's book series. Recently, Wendell served as both the **music composer and producer for *The Fall of Diddy***. Wendell is an Ivy League Honors graduate of Brown University.

Find out more at [www.volitionsound.com](http://www.volitionsound.com).





## TWENTY-FIVE-TO-LIFE

*Stephen G. Eoannou*



When I was sixteen, our parish priest was murdered. I was in bed reading when the news broke. I heard my father running up the stairs and knew something was wrong. My father never ran. I tossed my book aside and met my parents and sister in the hallway outside our bedrooms. That's when he told us that Father George was gone. My parents cried. My sister and I looked at each other, knowing that life had changed completely and forever. My dad called other Greeks searching for answers and comfort that comes with shared loss.

Father George had returned to the church after officiating at a wake. He walked in on a burglary in his office. He reached for the phone. Twenty-one-year-old Billy Royle reached for his .38. Father George was shot four times in the back. The murder devastated our Greek community. Collectively, we waited for evidence to be announced, suspects to be named, arrests to be made. We turned our T.V.'s and radios louder when the news came on.

A month would pass before the gun was recovered on 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Arrests came soon after. I studied newspaper photos of Billy Royle, his eighteen-year-old brother, and their neighbor, also eighteen, who were arrested with him. What struck me then, as it strikes me again now as I sort through those old

clippings, was how much the three looked like my friends and me. They wore their hair long and parted in the middle the same as we did. The clothes were identical. The difference was Billy's arrest record and the second-degree murder charge facing them. All three were convicted. Billy was sentenced to twenty-five-to-life.

I thought of Billy often during the years that followed. A decade later, when the desire to become a writer burned hot, I was convinced Father George's murder would be the basis for my first book. It'd be a coming-of-age novel based on a senseless death that marked my own coming-of-age. I gathered all the newspaper articles I could find on the murder and began writing. The novel was titled *A Quiet Prayer*, and it became a quiet, unfinished failure. Maybe the story was too big for me then, beyond my skills as a writer. Maybe I was still too close to the subject matter, even after all the time that'd passed. I spent more years than I should've trying to make that novel work. I finally set it aside and moved on to other writing projects.

Even after I gave up on *A Quiet Prayer*, Father George and Billy Royle continued haunting me. I knew I had to try to write about them again. This time I wrote a short story titled "Slip Kid". I explored if the similarities between Billy and I ran deeper than hair styles and motorcycle boots. What if I grew up in his tough westside neighborhood instead of in my safe suburban one? Would my friends and I have walked past that church on Delaware Avenue and thought it was an easy target, too? That nothing could go wrong? Would I have panicked when Father George walked in on us and reached for that phone? It seemed more than possible. *Slip Kid* was published first by *Hunger Mountain* and later became the centerpiece to my short story collection, *Muscle Cars*. I thought I was done with Billy Royle after that. I assumed he'd die in prison. I was wrong. After 45 years behind bars, Billy was granted parole, and I find myself again writing about him.

Last summer, our parish held its annual Greek Festival. I bartend all three days, just as my father



once did. One of the other bartenders had a current photo of Billy on his phone. He passed it around so we could see what a sixty-six-year-old Billy Royle looked like in case he showed up looking for trouble. I didn't think he would, but I wanted to see that face again. I studied that pic and didn't see the resemblance between us anymore. He's pale in the photograph, like he'd smoked too many cigarettes and seen too little sunlight. He looks smaller than me but lean and hard. There's a toughness about him that must come with serving hard time. He's not smiling in the photograph. It looks like he hasn't smiled since 1979.

I've published two novels since my failed attempt at writing about Billy in *A Quiet Prayer*. My first, *Rook*, is based on the true-life story of bank robber Al Nussbaum. *Yesteryear*, published a year after *Rook*, is a fictionalized account of how playwright Fran Striker created The Lone Ranger, complete with stolen diamond rings, a missing body, and a foiled assassination

attempt. My third novel, *After Pearl*, is a noir mystery and will be published this May. *Pearl* is the first in The Nicholas Bishop Mystery Series. Oddly, I never intended in becoming a crime novelist. I assumed I'd write literary fiction. Yet here I am, three books in, and I wonder if the years struggling to write about Billy and the murder has somehow shaped me as a writer and guided me down this creative path. I also wonder about all the other unintended consequences that occur when a trigger is pulled. Perhaps exploring those consequences, trying to make sense of them, is why I write and read crime fiction in the first place.

**Stephen G. Eoannou** is the author of the award-winning short story collection *Muscle Cars* and the novels *After Pearl*, *Yesteryear*, and *Rook*.

He holds an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte and an MA from Miami University.

*Yesteryear* was awarded the 2021 International Eyelands Award for Best Historical Novel, The Firebird Book Award for Biographical Fiction, and Shelf Unbound's Notable Indy Books of 2023. *After Pearl* is the first in The Nicholas Bishop Mystery Series.

<https://sgeoannou.com/>





## LOST STORIES

*Fern Brady*

One of the worst things that can happen to an author is to lose files. The pace of life today makes working digitally from the beginning the most productive path. This leaves you vulnerable when the technology breaks down.

When I was younger, I wrote mostly by hand. I used composition books which I decorated with cut-out pictures from magazines, stickers, and hand-drawn sketches on the covers. Later, I started writing in beautiful notebooks with lovely covers that I chose not to mess with, so I added the pictures and stickers to the inside pages.

The process of writing by hand gave me a chance to slow down the creative flow. Since I'm a very good typist, word-processing the work is always faster. Going from a handwritten story to typing it up allowed for revisions as I went. This first revision pass during the word-processing was an integral part of the writing flow for me.

As life became busier, I had to move away from writing my whole first draft by hand to straight up typing it into the computer. I don't think it really affected the quality, especially since I have powerhouse critique groups, feedback writing communities, and amazing developmental editors.



However, it did leave me vulnerable to technology failures.

Back in June of 2024, the external hard drive I had been using as my primary back up system fell from my table. I thought nothing of it, but when I went to access it some time later, the files wouldn't load. Apparently, the thump with the floor messed up its insides, and now I would need to take it to an expert to see if we can recover any of the items stored therein. Haven't had time to do that yet.

The tragedy of this, of course, is that I had not thought of putting all the files into the Microsoft Enterprise server I use for Inklings Publishing. We have super amounts of storage as part of our business subscription and it would not have been a problem, but I just didn't think of it. So much was lost on this drive. Among the items seemingly gone was a story I had been writing about a University of Houston history professor who goes back to Viking times and brings a bunch of them here to the new world. The ripple effects being that Native Americans don't end up wiped out by European colonization later on, because the Vikings who arrive integrate with the natives and fortify them. Vikings were known for their willingness to assimilate new things into their culture, which is why



so much of their culture ended up a victim of christianization. (As a Christian myself, it pains me



to say that, but religious institutions are never true to the heart of the spiritual belief they represent).

Anyway, I searched for it but couldn't recall the file name so I believed it was completely gone. During the MLK weekend, however, I remembered what I had given it as a title. I did a search and it popped up on one of my smaller thumb drives. I was so pleased to see how much of the story was recovered, that I spent the long weekend finishing the tale.

So, my Viking time travel alternate history romance is off to developmental editing, and who knows... might be a great release for 2026/2027.

**Fern Brady** is the founder and CEO of Inklings Publishing. She began her professional life as a foreign correspondent, and taught for 15 years in Alief ISD. She has published numerous short stories, two children's picture books, and a couple of poems. Her debut novel, **United Vidden**, which is book one in her Thyrein's Galactic Wall Series, was given a glowing review by Dr. Who Online, the official site of the fandom. **Love's Call**, which is book one of The Dragon and His Kitten, released in 2023. She also has a graphic novel collaboration, **Mr. Landen's Library**, with the amazingly talented Rosa Maria Garza. She has returned to the leadership of the Houston Writers Guild, with whom she served as CEO for four years previously, and is a full time teacher again for Cy-Fair ISD.

Find out more at <https://www.fernbrady.com/>.





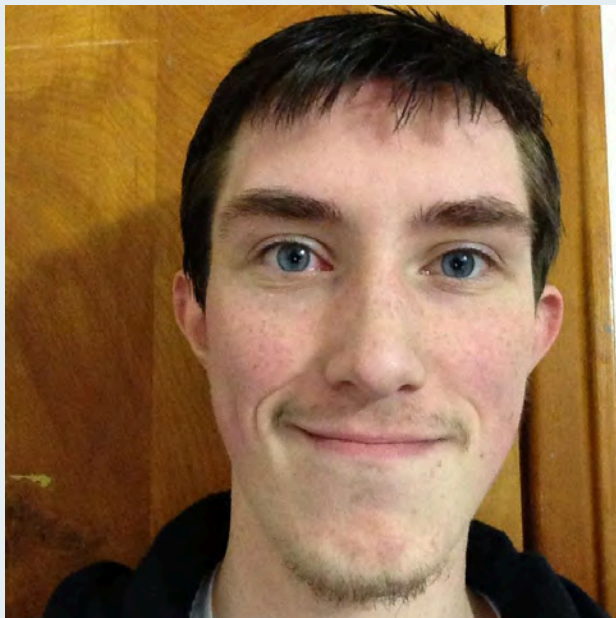
## FILMMAKING IN THE MIDWEST

*Jared Wignall*

Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to act, and later on, I also wanted to make films. When I was in high school, I was able to get into a film class during my last two years, which allowed me to begin my acting and filmmaking journey.

Now, while I may not necessarily have any sort of name recognition, I am someone who has been able to work quite a bit in and around my hometown of Des Moines, IA, on local film projects. The people I often work with are Dan Brown and Josh Brown of 3B Entertainment, a local film company. I've done quite a lot with them, from acting in their projects to doing camera work, setting up lights, diffusing the lights, or even helping create necessary shadows when shooting in sunlight. Many of their projects have been small, short subjects, but I've helped them quite a bit on a feature horror film of theirs called *The Harvest*, by acting and doing whatever other duties they needed from me. For the most part, though, I was primarily an actor.

I was able to play three characters spread out throughout the film, from being a demon in a hellish nightmare scene to a scarecrow distinguishable in a crowd of scarecrows by wearing a blue flannel shirt and a hat atop my scarecrow mask. The film was not easy to make, as crowdfunding failed to attract enough attention to get the necessary funds.



Thankfully, another film company in Iowa noticed the project and agreed to help produce it, which allowed the film to move forward.

Once the budget and principal cast were finalized, we began shooting the film in the summer of 2017. I remember in April of that year, we started cleaning out the house—a farmhouse 90 minutes away from Des Moines—which was perfect for the film. It served as the home of the main antagonist, an old man who worships Satan and uses past victims as scarecrows to kill for him. The house was as perfect as could be. It was old and hadn't been lived in for a while, but with the amount of cleaning we did, it became good enough to shoot in.

Unfortunately, once shooting commenced and we filmed a few essential scenes, including the Hell scene I was in, it became apparent that, while the location was great, it wasn't practical in the long run since most people didn't live near the house. After several weeks of trying to figure out where to continue filming, one of the directors decided to use his own home as the main location. He lived on a farm, and they decided to shoot primarily inside his home while using exterior shots of the old house to maintain the creepy vibe. From there, filming went pretty smoothly, though at some point, the Hell scene had to be reshot.

I remember traveling out to the location on various weekends in 2017 and 2018. In 2019, there was a pause in production as we reassessed the status of the film. A significant portion had been shot, but two performers—who were essential to the film's ending—dropped out, which created a lot of challenges. After reworking the script, a new ending was shot in the summer of 2020. In this version, I appear on screen without any mask or makeup, playing a scumbag character who might not survive the night in the old man's home.

The new ending seems to have worked well, but due to some new scenes needing to be shot, the film hasn't been released yet. The hold-up has been funding for special effects in certain scenes, such as the Hell sequence, which is understandable. It's



better to take the time to get the necessary funds to achieve the desired effects than to rush through and end up with a less-polished product.

Independent filmmaking like this is not easy. I've written scripts of my own that I hope to make one day, with me starring in them. Working with the

Brown Brothers has taught me a lot about filmmaking, from being on set to helping out wherever needed. Additionally, I've written three books, which I believe have strengthened my writing skills and will help me craft even better scripts in the future.



**Jared Wignall** was born and raised in Des Moines, IA and born on May 16th, 1994. He is an actor in films and projects in and around the Des Moines area as well as working behind the scenes whenever additional help is needed, mostly with Dan Brown and Josh Brown of 3B Entertainment. He has written multiple scripts and written three books, a western called *The Wandering Sheriff*, a book of three short satires called *Downtime* and *Conversations* and a crime book *Happy Holidays*, all of which can be found on Amazon. He hopes to make his first feature film, *Journey of an Addict*, in the near future by starring and directing the film he wrote for himself.

Find out more at [www.instagram.com/jaredwignallofficial/](https://www.instagram.com/jaredwignallofficial/).





## FOLLOW YOUR FATEFUL DETOURS

*Roger Leslie, PhD*

No matter what our goals or how grand our dreams, we're never alone. Life is looking out for us, clearing a path along sometimes unexpected routes that speed us toward the fulfillment of any dream.

Knowing the shortest path between two points is a straight line, I lasered my focus on my lifelong dream of becoming a published author. I immersed myself in literature by earning an undergraduate degree in education. By day I taught high school English. Weeknights and summers, I spent writing. After eleven years, I only enjoyed scant publishing success for articles and stories, not books.

Determined to learn all I could, I earned a master's degree in creative writing. Teaching by day and taking classes at night burnt me out as a teacher. The May I earned my degree, I was determined to be an author, not just a teacher and aspiring writer.

The week my graduate diploma arrived, the principal called me into his office. Our librarian was retiring, and he offered me her job. My immediate thought was to refuse. I had set my path (two points, straight line—I would not let myself be detoured right out of my big dream). Besides, because my degrees were not in library science, I would have to earn 27 more graduate hours for library certification. I didn't want to go back to college—again. I wanted my summers and afterschool hours to write.

My principal really wanted me to take the job. "As a librarian, you wouldn't have essays to grade, which will give you more time to write."

He had a point.

"And you'd get a raise."

I did have a student loan to pay.

"Because you already have your master's, I could put you on emergency certification. The job would be yours immediately. You'll have 18 months to complete your library science hours."

This wasn't the lasered path I planned to take to writing success. More than anything, I didn't want to interrupt my writing schedule by going back to college.

Yet so many elements converged at once. The month I completed my master's, the librarian retired, and the principal wanted me for the job. Suddenly my determination felt like stubbornness. I decided to step out in faith and follow what I hoped would be a "fateful detour."

That summer I enrolled in classes at the University of Houston, Clear Lake, the only local university that offered the certification I needed. At the time, the program was run by two professors, Dr. Maureen White and Dr. Patricia Potter Wilson.

Dr. White liked the book reviews I wrote for her children's literature class so much she sent some to *Booklist*, the nation's preeminent book review journal of the American Library Association. Out of the blue one day, I received a box from ALA. Inside were seven galley proofs for me to review, a letter welcoming me to the staff of *Booklist*, and information about writing reviews, meeting deadlines, and receiving payments. No application. No interview. Just an instant part-time job where multiple reviews, that included my byline, were getting published in one of the most prestigious magazines in the country.

It gets better.

Libraries Unlimited, a large, respected publishing house, asked my other UHCL professor, Dr. Wilson, to write a new book on library programming. She agreed only if she could find a coauthor. Because she knew I was an aspiring writer, she asked me to write the book with her. Her background was in



elementary education. Mine was in secondary ed. At our first brainstorming session, we realized we had not one, but three books: one for elementary schools, one for middle schools, and one for high schools. Within months of thinking going back to college would detain my writing dream, I signed a three-book contract with one of the most respected publishers in my field.

Being a librarian also introduced me to many publishers at state and national library conferences. My next six books published after the library science volumes came directly from making those professional connections. They only happened because I accepted that library job.

Before you even get an inspiration to be, have, or create something, life has already set in place



everything and everyone you need to help you make that dream come true. But the path you intend to take might not be the one that fulfills your dream. Trust life and follow your fateful detours.



**Dr. Roger Leslie** is a scholar in the fields of success and education. Through major literary houses, medium and small presses, and his own publishing house, Leslie has published fiction and nonfiction books in multiple genres: historical fiction, inspirational self-help, spirituality, writing and publishing, movie reference, teaching and librarianship, biography, history, and memoir.

Leslie has won numerous national awards including ForeWord Book of the Year, The Ben Franklin Award, and Writer's Digest's #1 Inspirational Book of the Year. At its inaugural event, Leslie received the Houston Literary Award for his body of work.

Leslie is in demand as a teacher, coach, and keynote speaker. He leads FLY (First Last Year) courses based on his blockbuster memoir, *My First Last Year*. He draws from decades as an author, editor, and publisher to coach writers in groups and individually. He is also a sought-after speaker for his lively, entertaining keynotes relating award-winning movies to any topic or group.

For more, visit [RogerLeslie.com](http://RogerLeslie.com).





# SEOUL





## A JOURNEY OF CULTURE SHOCKS AND SELF-DISCOVERY

*Victoria Ivasyk*

Don't they cook at home? That was the first culture shock—and subsequent question—that popped into my mind after my first ten minutes in Seoul, South Korea.

The stroll from Songjeong metro station to my Airbnb apartment in the suburbs of Seoul took no more than ten minutes. In this short period, I saw at least thirty restaurants, and about half of them had Korean barbecue on the menu. Groups of people in office attire, ranging from two to ten in size, were happily grilling, eating, drinking, and smoking outside while I hungrily absorbed the atmosphere around me during my first-ever Asian adventure.

With more than thirty countries under my belt, I was not a beginner explorer, but most of my travels had been in Europe and North America. With Seoul as my first Asian destination, I wasn't just seeing a new city—I was opening the door to a new world full of wonders, along with a few culture shocks.

My plane landed in the afternoon, and by the time I reached my apartment, it was already dark. I knew from my research that Asian cities look different at night with their neon signs and illuminations. In Canada, where I live, I rarely experience this festive atmosphere of lights and buzz—mostly only during the Christmas season. But here, it felt like I could have it every night!

For those who've never considered Seoul a tourist destination or know little about it, here's a brief introduction: Seoul is one of the largest cities in the world, with more than nine million residents. Before my trip, I imagined it as very crowded and intimidating—but I was wrong!

Yes, Seoul is vast with a large population, but its geography is unique. The megalopolis is spread among multiple mountains, visually dividing it into smaller parts—like many smaller cities within one. The districts are far from repetitive; older houses







neighbor modern skyscrapers, and traditional hanok homes sit beside sleek glass-and-steel administrative buildings. This contrast is striking at first but has a certain charm—you never know what you'll see around the next corner.

Seeing the mountains so close and abundant gives you the pleasant feeling that nature is always within reach. If you feel outdoorsy, you can choose between a long hike in the mountains to the north or a quick uphill stroll to the nearest hill. There's always a great view if you're in the mood for one.

My plan was to stay in Seoul for six days before moving on to Osaka. Six days is definitely not enough to explore everything this city offers (not even a tenth of it). The amount of free—or almost free—entertainment here surpasses any other major city I've visited. The closest comparison would be London with its many historical collections. However, Seoul isn't far behind, with its



numerous free or extremely inexpensive history museums, palaces, art galleries, and modern art installations.

Each morning, you're only limited by how much entertainment you can consume that day, not by what else there is to do.

I won't dwell too much on the food scene—we all know Asia is *the* place for tasty, rich, and flavorful food. Being a soup lover, I tried all the unusual Korean soups and soup equivalents I could find, and I never had one I didn't like. Whether it was in a cheap eatery or a fancy restaurant, I loved every bite (or better to say sip). Even the plastic tray





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우가  
김치경

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센터  
어시장  
활어산

황소곱창  
조로

맥주  
마트

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부동산  
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이웃  
바다야기

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마트

두집  
포차  
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옥  
동로관점  
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ALV

ALV  
WINE







meals from the deli section of the nearest supermarket, which I grabbed a few times on my way back to my Airbnb, were delicious!

Now that I'm back from my trip, I wonder why I waited so long to visit. The regrettable answer was fear—that thing that often keeps us from experiencing the only truly valuable thing we're here to do: experience this world in all its differences and unity.

My main fear was the language barrier and the worry that I wouldn't be able to communicate if I got lost or needed help. It's a common fear, but in Seoul, the moment you step off the plane, you're connected! This city is a mobile connection mecca—free internet is everywhere. Central streets, parks, museums, and cafes all have free mobile hotspots. I never even needed to buy a travel SIM card during my six-day visit.

Transit from the airport was very easy too—you just buy and load a transportation card at the train station entrance, and you're all set. All signage includes English translations. I felt safer in Seoul than in any North American city and most European ones.

Another major fear of mine was how my body would adapt to Asian food. This worry, likely fueled by bad movies, ended up being completely unfounded. I had the best culinary experience of my life—without a single food-related issue.

Reflecting on all these fears now, I realize how easily they could have kept me from one of my most rewarding travel experiences. I'm grateful for everything I've learned, and now I'm revisiting the list of fears I've collected, both consciously and subconsciously, throughout my life. One trip can be the beginning of a much larger transformation, and I thank Seoul for this unforgettable experience.







**Victoria Ivasyk** lives in Vancouver, Canada, her fourth and probably not the last country of residence. She is sure that in her previous life she led nomadic lifestyles. Her husband agrees.



Having spent most of her life in the corporate world, working in marketing and finance, she experienced a “self-realization” in her early forties, recognizing that the corporate path was no longer fulfilling. She left the corporate world in 2021 and spent the following years traveling through Europe, North America, and South Africa, deepening her self-understanding. Her first month-long trip to Asia, at the end of 2024, inspired this article about these first days in Seoul.

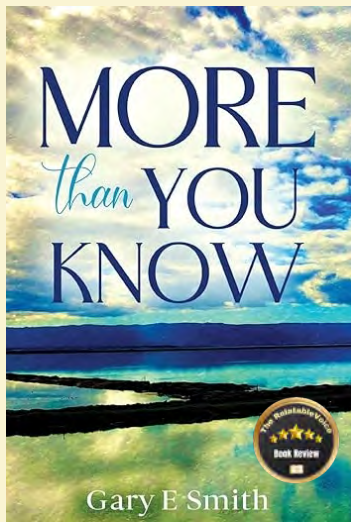
Victoria’s main passions in life are exploring the world and its cultures through books, self-inquiry, and personal growth. Writing, a passion from her teenage years before her office career began, has now become a powerful creative outlet, reconnecting her with herself.

Her recent travels have also inspired her to learn basic filming techniques, creating short video stories on Instagram: [@victoriafourways](https://www.instagram.com/victoriafourways).





## THE RV BOOK REVIEWS



### **More than You Know** by Gary E. Smith

The ninth book in the Warren Steelgrave adventure series caught my attention right from the first two opening sentences:

“I awoke to bright sunlight coming through the window.”

“Between the jet lag and the wine, I felt like shit.”

The casual yet detailed writing style drew me in and made me want to keep reading. After just the first two or three chapters, I was completely engrossed in the story and eager to know more.

Although the plot was quite complex—featuring international terrorists, bomb threats, the Italian police, American F.B.I. agents, and a powerful Mafia family—it remained believable and held my attention throughout.

It seems that the other books in this series, while featuring different plots, follow a similar pattern. For example, when reflecting on a past adventure, Warren Steelgrave says:

“Unfortunately, it ended up involving the Mafia and a Chinese espionage ring. We found ourselves in over our heads.”

The book consists of short, engaging chapters that are consistently interesting and kept me turning the pages to find out what would happen next.

The characters—particularly Warren, the three women vying for his attention, his friend Jack, as well as the policeman and the Mafia figures—are well-drawn and compelling. The author skillfully describes them in just enough detail for readers to form a vivid picture in their mind’s eye without being overwhelmed.



The settings in Italy and France are depicted authentically, showing that the author is well-acquainted with both countries. His descriptions of Florence, Milan, and Paris are rich enough to satisfy those who have visited these places and enticing enough to inspire curiosity in those who haven’t.

The inclusion of a few lovely photographs (taken by the author himself) was a delightful touch, adding another layer of charm to the book.

There are plenty of mentions of Martinis, wine, and coffee, alongside delicious-sounding bread, pastries, meats, and cheeses. Having spent significant time in both countries, I thoroughly enjoyed these descriptions, which added a delightful level of authenticity to the story.

The book is so well-written that I felt as though I (the reader) was living the adventure alongside Warren and Jack.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and wholeheartedly recommend it as a 5-star read.

*The RV Book Reviews*



A portrait of Gary Smith, a middle-aged man with short brown hair, wearing a dark plaid suit jacket over a white button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. His hands are crossed in front of him, resting on his arms. He is wearing a gold watch on his left wrist, a gold ring on his left ring finger, and a gold ring on his right ring finger. A gold chain bracelet is visible on his right wrist. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

## GARY SMITH

### **More Than You Know**

**“Love, lies, and secrets across continents—a writer's past comes alive as danger follows his every move.”**



## THE STORY OF AN UNLIKELY AUTHOR

### TURNING THE PAGE TO SELF-DISCOVERY

*Lulu Buck*

Becoming an author was never a straightforward journey for me, nor was it a path I ever imagined for myself. At times, even now, I struggle with imposter syndrome when I call myself an author. My journey was filled with unexpected detours, challenges, and moments of profound self-discovery. But those very twists and turns have shaped me and the stories I bring into the world.

Growing up as a first-generation American, my parents instilled in me the values of hard work and perseverance. They came to this country with very little. They were driven by the determination to build a better future for our family. I watched their sacrifices and learned to embrace challenges as opportunities to grow. Yet, despite their incredible support, I often felt the weight of expectations and pressure from them. I grew up completely illiterate in the English language until I was in the 4th grade. My mother discovered I couldn't read when she volunteered at my school. She volunteered at our reading table. When it was my turn to sit with my mother in the classroom to read I was terrified for her to learn the truth. When she did, she pulled me from that school and there began my Catholic school days. My love for reading and stories blossomed at John Newmann Catholic School when I repeated the 4th grade.

For as long as I can remember, I've loved stories. As a child, I'd get lost in books, imagining entire worlds and adventures far beyond. I never dreamed of writing my own stories. I was always told I would never be a good reader or a good writer. Being illiterate in the English language I was always behind. Low expectations for my ability to read or write were all I had ever known and believed. It was what inspired me to be a teacher. I was very proud when I graduated college to become a teacher. I wanted to be a teacher that believed in kids. I wanted to be a teacher that was patient with kids. Being an educator became my life's work.

A huge loss in my life was when my husband passed away in December 2019. His four-year battle with cancer was a period of unimaginable pain and resilience. His strength inspired me daily,

but when he was gone, I found myself grappling with a grief that felt insurmountable. Then, just a few months later, the world shut down due to the pandemic. Isolation compounded my heartache, cutting me off from the mental health resources I so desperately needed.

In that darkness, I turned to creativity as a lifeline. Writing became my solace, a way to process my emotions and keep moving forward for my two sons. I poured my heart into words, and I allowed myself to dream again for the first time in decades. One of those dreams was to bring to life a story that had been sitting in my mind while working with teachers on the themes of acceptance, friendship, and finding beauty in our differences.

That dream became "*Sue's Sky*". Inspired by my own experiences and the lessons I wanted to share with children, I wrote the book to help young readers understand the importance of inclusion and community. To bring the story to life, I partnered with Chrys Zyx, a dear friend and talented artist whose unique illustrations elevated the book to something truly special. Together, we created a book that resonated deeply with children and educators alike, even earning accolades like the bronze medal from the International Latino Book Awards.

But the journey didn't stop there. Writing *Sue's Sky* opened the floodgates of creativity. I've since self-published additional books, including *Sue's Sky's* counterpart in Spanish "*El Cielo de Susana*" and



*“Magical Golden Whistle”*. Each book I write is not just a story; it’s a piece of my heart, a reflection of my journey, and a gift to the next generation.

The road to self-publishing was anything but easy. The publishing industry often feels like an uphill battle, especially as a person of color navigating spaces that prioritize profit over creativity. Yet, I’ve learned to embrace the challenges and trust that my stories have value because they resonate with children in ways that matter most. Children connect with my books, and that’s all the validation I need.

Along the way, I’ve had the privilege of sharing my work with educators, families, and communities. I’ve presented my books internationally, taught them in Uganda, and created lesson plans to help educators foster acceptance and teamwork in their classrooms. These experiences have reminded me why I embarked on this journey in the first place: to inspire children and help them grow into compassionate, creative, and confident individuals.

Today, I’m more than an author. I’m a mother, an artist, an educator, and a dreamer who has discovered the power of storytelling. I’ve found healing in words and purpose in sharing them with the world. My journey is far from over; in fact, I feel like I’m just getting started. There are countless stories left to tell, and I’m eager to bring them to life.

If there’s one message I hope my story conveys, it’s this: Never give up on your dreams, no matter how long they’ve been tucked away. Life may throw obstacles in your path, but those challenges can become the foundation of something beautiful. I turned my pain into purpose. Trust in your journey, embrace your creativity, and remember that it’s never too late to revive your dreams. For me, becoming an author wasn’t just about writing books; it was about rediscovering myself and finding joy in the process. And that, more than anything, is the story I’m proud to share.

Find out more at <https://lulubuck.org>.





## THE PATH TO BECOMING

*Tashena Anderson-Place*

Who am I to become, why am I here, and what is my purpose? These three questions often plague people of all ages and backgrounds. We are often caught in a tension between who we are influenced to be by our parents, closest friends, and family and who we think we should be to take up space in this world. I've heard people call themselves unworthy, full of fear, not beautiful, not smart, and undeserving when they should be calling themselves a masterpiece, a treasured possession, redeemed, and fearfully and wonderfully made.

In a world where women are constantly searching for their identity and a sense of belonging, I felt a calling to create a place where women can come to grow in their faith and their belief in themselves, all while building a sisterhood along the way. This community is called The Open Cup Collective. The Open Cup Collective gained its name as a branch off from the book I authored, *Fill Your Cup*, and the podcast I host, *Be Filled*. The concept behind the name of the collective is that we often ask for our cups to be filled but while doing so we place invisible lids of doubt, fear, rejection, shame, our past experiences or any type of limitations on the cup. Although others can't see the mess that is happening all around from the overflow, our hearts, minds, and spirits can. I want to give people who join this journey inspiration to lead lives with their lids off and cups filled with love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We can all become an open cup but keep in mind that the cup will always need to be filled and evaluated. I want everyone within the community to feel confident about the possibility of saying YES!

Yes, to purpose, yes to new outcomes, yes to confidence, and yes to hope!

Each year The Open Cup Collective embarks on a spiritual journey that is connected to a word. Last year, the word of the year was Surrender. We learned what it meant to address the negative thought patterns that often keep us from moving forward. We practiced surrendering and replacing these thoughts or beliefs with truth, and more positivity. You could say we did active mindset and heart posture reframing in our time together. It was a time full of vulnerability that left us ready to turn the page and begin understanding there is more than what the darkness has to say about us. We can do anything that we put our minds to as long as we understand that a lot of it cannot be done in our own strength. Sometimes we need others and our faith to get us past the roadblocks of life. There is so much power in community. In my opinion, it feels like an untapped part of our lives because we don't think we need or deserve it.

While I know a lot of the negative thoughts and feelings come from past hurts, The Open Cup Collective is a place of healing, restoration, and reconciliation. Our motto is that this collective will always be a place where all are welcome at the table. It is a no judgment zone. It is a place where we question, we embrace, and we step out bold and empowered to become the best version of ourselves. The version that we were created to be. The version that was meant to be before we thought we could determine how we should be.

I'll admit that everything that I am speaking of is not easy, but it is so worth it. It takes courage to admit there is something that could be hindering you, and it takes even more courage to admit it out loud. Did you know that when you do release the words out loud that very thing loses its power over you? Did





you know that at that moment you now know how to stand firm and say no more, I am worth it? My hope is that one day the blessing of community, embracing mind, and heart transformation will spread to the ends of the earth.

As the community leader, I walk alongside women from all walks of life and adult ages. I get to

embrace, pray for, and serve each woman that walks through the door. It is wonderful to watch how the spirit of this community has impacted the ladies that join. Before the end of our events, you can always tell that their bond has grown stronger. You would almost think they've known each other their whole lives. There are almost no words to describe it, and I am so thankful that I get to be a part.

As we embark on 2025, we are preparing ourselves for the next journey with our new word, Immersed. We will challenge ourselves to believe for more, step outside of comfort, and embrace life in a new way. The way we've been called to live. This will be the year to set the distractions aside and be intentional about who we are now and who we'd like to become. It's time to make a wholehearted commitment to do the soul work. Consider this a personal invitation to find us online or if you don't mind traveling to Florida, join us. There is a seat with your name on it. May this year be the year you truly understand who you were created to be.

**Tashena Anderson-Place** is a Christian author, an inspirational writer, and speaker, dedicated to empowering individuals to evaluate their cup of life.

She is on a mission to inspire and uplift readers through her words. With a heart full of faith and a passion for sharing the transformative power of God's love, Tashena has dedicated her writing career to spreading hope, encouragement, and spiritual growth.

Her deep-rooted faith in God serves as the guiding light in her life, motivating her to craft works that resonate with readers seeking a closer connection to their faith, self-love, and inner peace.

Find out more at:

<https://linktr.ee/tandersonplaceauthor>

[www.theopencupcollective.com](http://www.theopencupcollective.com)





## TO LIVE ANOTHER DAY. . . KAYLEEN'S QUEST

*Vickie Whitehead*

Kayleen ran through the house yelling and screaming, unsure how to control her emotions. Her oppositional defiance controlled her life. John and Sara, uncertain how to help her, move from New York to Frederick, Colorado, seeking professional help until a tragic accident happens. Sara's strong faith is weakened by her and Kayleen's circumstances, causing her deep depression. Kayleen doesn't remember who Sara and John are causing additional turmoil in the family.

The distraught John seeks help from Pastor Ray. They quickly bond. Ray reaches out to Kayleen where a strong kinship develops. Ray becomes a surrogate father, helping Kayleen regain her memories while Sara struggles. Through Ray's strength and commitment, Kayleen works through her accident, gains confidence in her new school, develops strong friendships, and becomes a leader in her class.

Kayleen eventually lives with John and Sara but remains unaware of her past. When she becomes curious, Sara and John tell her the truth. Kayleen feels guilty about how she treated her parents ready to make amends until another tragedy occurs. John again takes a downward spiral until Kayleen remembers some of her past. John regains his strength restoring his faith.



Time passes. Kayleen excels in high school and graduates, while John starts a ministry for needy and disabled people. He calls the organization Flight of Hope, sharing the idea with Kayleen and Ray, who become eager partners.

Dani, Suzy, and Lettie Blanchard become their first clients. Dani's husband, a successful lawyer, had become involved with the wrong client, Johnny Tiraldo landing him in jail. Dani and the children become destitute, living out of their car. Kayleen works with Dani, helping her interview for a receptionist's job at Mr. Fisher's law firm. Some of Tiraldo's men kidnap Dani after she reveals his deceptive business tactics. Kayleen informs Sergeant Darey of a small shack where she and John would spend some quiet time together, suspecting Tiraldo's men took Dani there. They find the disheveled Dani and place her into witness protection.

A year has passed, and needy clients are coming to Flight of Hope. Kayleen secretly meets her new client Joan. Believing she can trust Kayleen, she shares her story while advocating for her mother, Clara, and father Rob who worked for Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Fisher, a power-hungry lawyer, and extortionist, becomes unbearable to work for when Johnny Tiraldo enters their lives.



Mr. Fisher becomes controlled by Johnny Tiraldo after Tiraldo reveals what he knows about Fisher's extortion schemes.

In Rob's past, he was a proud and talented football player. Rob's coach, Jim Coleman, replaced Rob during one game because of his insubordination. Rob wanted to get even, so he framed Jim by falsely accusing him of abuse. Mr. Fisher discovered what Rob did to his coach and blackmailed him. Rob feels trapped, and Clara becomes aware of Mr. Fisher's illegal dealings. Now Clara, Joan, and Dana are running to escape Mr. Fisher who will stop at nothing to ruin their lives.

Seeking sanctuary with Kayleen, Joan and her family feel safe until one day, Ray and Kayleen realize Clara is missing. Kayleen walks around the corner looking for Clara and sees Dana crouched in the alley with a crazed man holding a gun to Clara's head. Kayleen grabs the child while the man continues to taunt Clara. Kayleen calls the police, coming quickly to rescue Clara and capture the man sent by Mr. Fisher to kill her. At this point, Mr. Fisher absconded from detectives tracking him down. Joan, Dana, and Clara want the peace that Kayleen experiences, so Pastor Ray and his new wife Laurie share the message of Salvation. They renew their lives, but Rob's past, and Mr. Fisher, still at large, haunts them.

Clara reveals more about their past when Dana collapses. While recovering, Dana tells the nurses that she saw a strange face in the window. Clara knows the man and is ready to take action, so she reveals a key that leads to a hidden box with evidence. Kayleen and Clara sneak into Fisher's office and retrieve the records that could put him away, but David Deiter, an associate of Mr. Fisher, finds out and tells him their plan.

Rob begins working with Rasco, an undercover detective trying to expose and capture Mr. Fisher. Two detectives and Kayleen hunt down Mr. Fisher hidden in a secret mine. Rasco chases him through the untamed wilderness stopping at nothing to capture Mr. Fisher.

With Johnny Tiraldo still at large in Shurba, Egypt, Kayleen and Rasco begin their perilous search to track him down. Rasco closes in on him sealing his fate.

Free to move on with their lives, Detective Ranser, Rasco, Kayleen, and Rob track down Liza and Nora, Jim Coleman's family, revealing a letter that clears Alex Blanchard's name. The families and old friends associated with Flight of Hope reunite, and Kayleen discovers her new quest, working as a detective with Rasco while John and Ray continue to run Flight of Hope. But Kayleen is never too far away!



**Vickie** has been happily married to her husband for thirty-seven years, residing in Westminster, Colorado. She is a recently retired elementary teacher. Her free time is spent painting, biking, hiking, paddle boarding, camping, reading, and an occasional horse ride. She and her husband help homeschool their three granddaughters and snuggle with their new twin grandbabies. Vickie is a strong Christian and attends Calvary Evangelical Free Church. Vickie loves to write stories related to her teaching and life experiences. She has written two novels and one children's book. Her Christian faith is interwoven in each story giving credit to God who gave her the desire and talent to write.

Find out more at [@vickie\\_1\\_whitehead](https://www.instagram.com/vickie_1_whitehead).





## MEXICAN CHOCOLATE BROWNIES WITH BLOOD ORANGE ICING

*Stacey Caron*

Henry & I don't celebrate Valentine's day in the traditional sense of a Hallmark card, a heart shaped box of chocolates and a dozen roses.

However, we do celebrate our love thru baked goods (and an occasional handbag).

I made these amazing Mexican chocolate brownies last year, and it was time to make them again for Valentine's day.

Mexican chocolate is a love or hate thing.

It is spicy, and has cinnamon and chile powder or cayenne pepper in the mix.

If you use the wrong chiles you can make or break this recipe, so learn to really love your chile powder before committing.

I used Aaron Sanchez's recipe, and used cayenne pepper, because I did not have the Pequin chile powder that he recommends, however, I did have Mexican cinnamon.

These were excellent.

I cut them into heart shapes and glazed them with blood orange icing. No food coloring involved, just squeeze a few tablespoons of a blood orange into some confectioner's sugar and voila! everything is pretty in pink.

Feel free to use your favorite brownie recipe and just add the cinnamon and cayenne pepper to the recipe.

It's key to use parchment paper in this recipe to line the baking dish, it will make the edges crispy, and you will be able to lift out the brownies once they are cooled to a cutting board so you can cut into heart shapes.

Get to work!

### Mexican Chocolate Brownies w/ Blood Orange Icing

(makes enough for a 9 x 13 pan)

#### Ingredients

2 sticks unsalted butter, plus more for greasing  
2 cups sugar  
4 large eggs  
2 teaspoons vanilla extract  
2/3 cup good-quality unsweetened cocoa powder  
1 cup all-purpose flour  
1 teaspoon ground Mexican cinnamon (canela)  
1/4- 1/2 teaspoon pequin chili powder or  
cayenne pepper  
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt  
1/2 teaspoon baking powder



## Instructions

Preheat the oven to 350F degrees.

Line a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with parchment paper, leaving an overhang on two sides. Press the paper into the corners of the pan and lightly grease the paper with butter (I forgot to grease the paper, and there was no sticking at all).

Melt the 2 sticks of butter in a nonstick saucepan over medium-low heat or in the microwave. Remove from the heat and let cool slightly. Add the sugar, eggs and vanilla to the saucepan and stir with a wooden spoon until combined.

Add the cocoa, flour, cinnamon, chili powder, salt and baking powder and mix until smooth.

Spread the batter in the prepared pan and bake until a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out fudgy, 25-30 minutes.

Cool in the pan on a rack, then use the parchment paper to lift out the brownies before cutting into shapes with your cookie cutter.

If you want to ice the brownies, then just mix 3 tablespoons of blood orange juice w/ 1 cup of confectioners sugar. Mix with a fork then put into a ziploc bag.

Place the icing into the corner of the ziploc to form a pastry bag. Cut a small hole in the corner of the bag to make a piping tip and drizzle in a zig zag pattern, or make initials or whatever you like!

Let the icing completely harden before serving.

I think I ate 6 of these. Amazingly good and so easy.



### **Stacey Snacks**

A recipe writer and home cook, established 2008, one of the first major cooking blogs.

I work in all aspects of food and wine, and travel mostly to France, showcasing new restaurants and wine bars and all things Paris.

I use seasonal ingredients to create delicious meals.

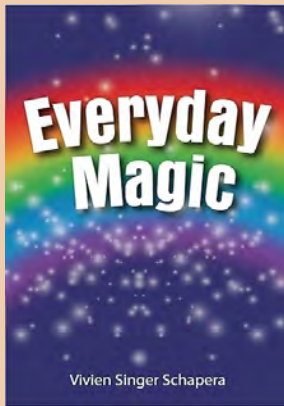
Find out more at:

<http://www.staceysnacksonline.com/>





## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS



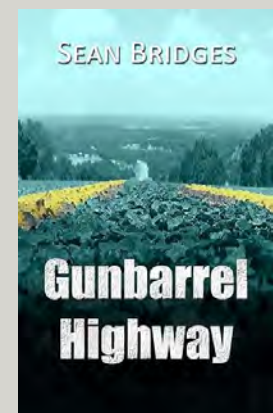
Everyday Magic will strike you in a spiritual sweet spot you probably didn't know you had. At its core, Schapera's second book is an elegant memoir that traces the lines from an outwardly quiet girlhood in stricken South Africa to the novelty of raising a family around the turn of the millennium in the US. Flowing through that simple fame come waves of self-discovery syncopating the rhythms of spiritual progress. The result is a concise and pleasing guide to the terrain of everyday magic, which yields fresh insights upon each rereading.

The author provides us with launch points to further study a variety of disciplines that she has integrated into a seamless and coherent whole. With the Alexander Technique at the core, Schapera shares her discoveries about nutrition, crystals, healing, shamanism, and other paths, and shows us how they all, in the end, share the common message: magic is within your reach and mine, every day. Allow it to happen.

Texas trophy wife Claudia Grant dies after she causes an early morning car accident. In the other vehicle, Daniel Morrison, an attorney struggling with a pending divorce and pill addiction, panics and leaves the scene.

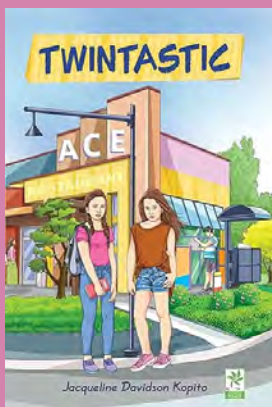
The victim's husband, congressional candidate Hayden Grant, is a corrupt politician who seizes the opportunity and places a million-dollar reward on Morrison's capture. Dead or alive.

Daniel is on the run. Roya Navarro, a determined San Antonio police detective, is hot on his trail with local law enforcement, county sheriffs, a hungry journalist, and trigger-happy citizens all across the Lone Star state out on the hunt for the bounty.

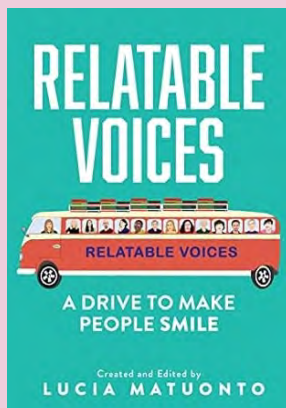


Sixth grade identical twins Alix and Jordyn couldn't be more different. Jordyn likes fashion and art, while Alix loves reading and science. One day, while cleaning the attic, the twins come across a dusty old diary that once belonged to their Great-grandma Rose. Next thing the twins know, the magical powers once possessed by Rose and her twin sister, Molly, have been passed on to them.

Suddenly, using only their thoughts, Alix and Jordyn can communicate with each other and move objects. They decide to use their secret powers to help save Ace, their parents' struggling restaurant. Otherwise, their family could be out on the street. At the same time, they deal with the daily grind of middle school, first crushes and tennis lessons. Using their powers, they have a bake sale, enter a science contest, and tutor their friends. But will it be enough to rescue the restaurant and save their family from ruin?



Bunky cannot wait for the summer holidays! Soon, his entire family, including cousin Rodney, his little Wolf Plum, and Bunky’s best friend, Rosalia, travel to the North Pole in order to visit Santa Claus. During their stay at the North Pole, Bunky will have to challenge himself while diligently studying for the Golden Decimal Mathematical Contest. As a result, he will learn more about himself and about the mysterious ways in which one’s noble dreams come true. Eventually, he will also encounter the Northern Star. Bunky and the Summer Wish is a story about perseverance, personal integrity, self-acceptance, and finding one’s true worth and inner strength in a world seemingly dominated by competition. While Bunky makes a wish upon a star on a warm summer evening, he also makes a solemn promise to do everything in his might to impress those whom he loves the most—especially his beloved Rosalia. Throughout the story, he will learn more about his true value as a person and discover the importance of holding on to one’s dreams while having faith in the righteousness of one’s heart. It is the story of an imperfect yet noble hero—the story of almost every reader.



This anthology is a collection of short stories designed to make the reader smile.

Inspired by the resilience the world has shown during the pandemic, Lucia Matuonto wanted to add some positivity, a little light distraction from all the doom and gloom, so she invited authors from all around the world to share their words.

Fourteen unique voices, adding their short stories to this new anthology.

The RELATABLE VOICES anthology is an exciting collaboration, featuring diverse tales of classic misunderstandings, uplifting love stories and much more.

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# HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY ♥

