

Freelance

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For the Love of the Land: Connecting Children to the Environment

MIRIAM KÖRNER

HONE YOUR CRAFT BY INTERVIEWING WRITERS

KATE FINEGAN

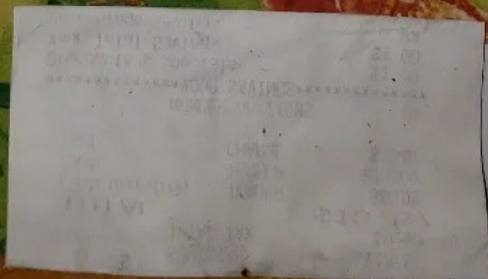
Na-No-Wri-Mo Could This Be Your Year?

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NEW BOOKS
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NaNoWriMo: Could This Be Your Year?

Bernadette Wagner

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A fundamental belief in “the transformational power of creativity,” delivered the first National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) in November 1999. The challenge for participants: write a fifty thousand-word novel in 30 days. Now an *internet-famous* organization NaNo provides year-round programming, resources, and support to writers around the world. Last year, 413,295 writers registered to take part. I was one of the 51,000 who claimed success.

It wasn't my first NaNo. More than a decade ago, a poem I wrote wanted to be children's novel, so I signed up thinking I'd rattle it off. Ha! I'm still working on that one. I tried a nonfiction project in 2014. Nope. But in 2021, I broke through and hit the finish line with an idea that grew into a 51,000-word first draft of a work of fiction for adults. And, it was not what I'd expected!

That's possibly because I'm a “pantser.” I write by the *seat of my pants*, so to speak. I let the words lead and trust I'll get to where I need to be. It's an act of faith, I suppose, to write that way. But it's a draft, a first draft, no less, so I know there will be many changes in the future. For me, simply meeting that fifty thousand word challenge felt fantastic!

Others, however, feel better with a different approach. Planners sit down with an outline, an agenda, notes for scenes, backgrounds on characters and plot and begin the challenge with a plan to get where they want to go. I do that, with second drafts or short nonfiction, like this piece. I wrote an outline and started filling it in before turning to the article itself.

Pam Bustin, award-winning author, playwright, and former Regina Public Library Writer-in-Residence and Michelle Dickie, aka Smeef, a NaNoWriMo veteran participant and community liason, call themselves PLANsters. Bustin is a veteran of 5 NaNos. She says she dreams of planning but “I usually fly by the seat of my ever-so-stylish writer panties!” (I didn't ask where she found the undies.) I did find diving into the unknown to be a fun and exciting part of NaNo, but I come from poetry and do it more often than not.

“Plans are good,” Bustin added, “Outlines and story maps make us feel a bit safer as we head into the unknown.” But she warned of “death by stalling.” Instead of plunging into the unknown, “folks get hung up on editing or crafting things on a sentence level during NaNo,” and spend time fixing instead of pushing the work forward. But she thinks having company along the path is important to getting through. The international nanowrimo.org site connects writers with message boards, online word count tabulators, “friends” to follow, and community leaders like Michelle set up Discord app channels for chats, timed writings, updates, and more.

I met Michelle Dickie through the Discord channel for Saskatchewan participants. She’s completed 9 NaNos and has “tried all kinds of prep methods.” When she had a story to tell but believed she “had no way of writing it” she found NaNo and wrote. She says sometimes planning works for her and sometimes “it’s just a huge bother.” Tired of the labels, she now focuses on the story and its needs, thereby avoiding feelings of frustration when a NaNo label doesn’t fit. “It’s about commitment to the vision more than commitment to the identity.” Still, she acknowledges that “these labels are really important to making the writing world more accessible and to start envisioning yourself as a writer, especially in the beginning.”

My draft novel sat unread for almost a year. I landed a grant for another project and set it aside. Then, in September 2022, I read the full manuscript for the first time. Not a great work of fiction, but a work of fiction, nonetheless. Some sections worked well. Others I couldn’t remember writing. The storyline was ok. I pulled 20 pages from it and shared them with writer-in-residence, Pam, thinking her feedback would guide my NaNo2022 work. I became a NaNoRebel. Instead of writing another fifty thousand words, I revised the one I already had. I took Pam’s comments and suggestions as well as my own ideas about what it needed and worked on the manuscript, basing my word count on time spent editing and rewriting. It was every bit as challenging as writing the first draft, maybe moreso. I was exhausted by the end of November, but I landed another win.

Once upon a time, I didn’t believe I could write fiction. Well, a children’s lit manuscript and now, an adult fiction manuscript have shown me that’s not true. Yes, both needed work after the

first draft, but that's the nature of writing anything, isn't it? It may be work to land a first draft, but really, the real work begins after that first draft is complete, after you see what you have, and where it might be going.

No matter your style, or even what genre you write, you can do this. Even if you don't get to 50k, you'll have some words. And where there's words, there's possibility.