

[The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Poetry](#)

["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)

[Writers' Craft Box](#)

[Writers' Challenge!](#)

[Book Reviews](#)

[Pay It Forward](#)

[Submission Guidelines](#)

[Feedback & Questions](#)

[Artists' Gallery](#)

[Indie Bookstores](#)

[Literary Arts Patrons](#)

[Scrapbook of Six Years](#)

[Archives](#)

[Inscribing Industry Blog](#)

Come in...and be captivated...

Writers' Craft Box

What this section is intended to do:
Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself. Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools



"Arts and Crafts" N.M.B Copyright 2008

that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

Craft Box Contributor Bio- In a press release, Amazon called Martin Crosbie one of their success stories of 2012. His self-publishing journey has been chronicled in *Publisher's Weekly*, *Forbes* online, and Canada's *The Globe and Mail* newspaper. Martin's debut novel, *My Temporary Life*, has been downloaded over one hundred and fifty thousand times and became an Amazon top ten overall bestseller.

He's also the author *How I Sold 30,000 eBooks on Amazon's Kindle: An Easy-To-Follow Self-Publishing Guidebook* (2014 Edition), *Lies I Never Told*, and Amazon bestsellers: *My Name Is Hardly*, and *Believing Again: A Tale Of Two Christmases*.

Martin was born in the Highlands of Scotland and currently makes his home just outside Vancouver, on the west coast of Canada.

The Deep, Dark Secret of a Self-Published Author

by Martin Crosbie

Have you ever had a secret that was so deeply hidden that you didn't even know it was there? I have. Let me tell you a story. After three years of working hard I've reached a point where I have a tiny sliver of recognition within the self-publishing community. Occasionally I'm even mentioned in the same articles as David Gaughram or Hugh Howey. I'm proud to be associated with David as we've both written self-publishing guidebooks and although I wish my sales levels were on par with Hugh's they are not. I am from time to time referred to as one of the authors who adhere to a "pay it forward" philosophy in the same vein as Hugh though, and I'm very pleased to share that association. The bulk of my income today comes from royalty checks that Amazon is kind enough to send to me and I interact with readers daily. My life is good, and I'm very grateful for all the nice things that have happened to me.

My story has become familiar to readers of self-publishing blogs. There are many of us who are called Amazon success stories, in fact the mighty corporation even referred to me by that actual description in a press release. After being rejected by traditional publishers and agents over and over again, armed with a book that I felt readers wanted to read, I utilized some initiative, the stars lined up correctly, and I managed to find readers for my books, lots of readers. Now, five books into my writing career, I'm teaching workshops, speaking at festivals and writing events, and having more fun than I could ever have imagined. But, that's not where the secret lies.

Eight months after I released my first novel I'd managed to sell over twenty thousand e-books. It's a big number and I'm very proud of it but many of my colleagues have exceeded that figure and continue to do so. I believe in producing a book that can stand spine to spine with any traditionally published book. I employ professional editors, cover designers and formatters, and before publication, my work is judged by beta-readers who are never shy about telling me where the deficiencies may lie. Readers expect and deserve a professionally produced product and I've found a way to deliver it. Because of this professionalism many Indie authors have helped shift the perceptions about self-publishing. In some quarters, the reactions that readers have when they hear about self-published work are more positive, and that's a good thing.

Personally, I've changed a little myself over the past three years too. Today I'm more balanced than I was when I first managed to steer my book into the top ten of Amazon's rankings. I've come to understand that there will be days when I sell lots of books and some where the downloads barely sputter in. That's the nature of sales and I'm accustomed to it. At first though, I was erecting walls. It's strange, I helped tear down the walls that the gatekeepers used to keep me from connecting with readers and then I raised a different type of wall.

I developed an "us" and "them" mentality. I had beat "them". I was published, connecting with readers, hitting numbers that many traditionally published authors weren't able to get close to and I was pretty proud of myself. I wrote blogs detailing how I'd managed to outmaneuver the maneuverers and I proudly called myself an Indie or self-published author. I developed and promoted my online personality, because that's where I was finding my readers. After a rapid learning curve I began to practice online etiquette. It's easy to forget, as we post on Facebook or tweet on Twitter that there are real people on the receiving end of our messages. In real life we filter before turning our thoughts into dialogue. We have to follow the same rules online. When I began to approach every post or message as though I were talking to a friend everything changed. Instead of promoting "buy my book" posts I began to talk about me and tried to show who I was and what I was about in my online conversations.

I'd never encountered an industry where peers shared information so freely and I tried to repay that by helping others and "paying it forward"—or helping without expecting anything in return. This was a period of growth for me as I learned to respectfully utilize the tools that are so accessible. Conversely, while I was experiencing this period of growth I was shunning everything connected with traditional publishing because I'd been denied access to their club. Secretly though, so secret that I didn't even recognize it myself, I craved their attention.

I attended a writer's festival in the fall of 2012. It's a local event but draws some very big names. The festival is geared toward matching authors with agents. They hold some fantastic workshops that help writers improve their craft but the carrot dangling at the end of the stick, and it's dangled constantly over the course of the three days, is a ten minute meeting with an agent. There are classes teaching authors how to write query letters and the agents and publishers in attendance are treated with reverence. Success

stories of the handful of authors who have signed with agents in the past few years of the conference are bandied around. After signing, some authors await the right publisher to step up while others have their books in various stages of production. Those who have begun the process are sure to have their books released within the next year or two, the conference announcers proudly tell us.

While sitting in various workshops I checked my smartphone from time to time, watching as readers downloaded my book or reviewed my book or posted messages discussing my book. Meanwhile, at the conference, all ears listened as Mr. New York super-agent gave his keynote speech and tilted the scales in his direction with his multi-syllable words and questionable logic. While he spoke I thought about how much writing I had to do to finish my work in progress and whether I might be able to release my next book by the end of the year. I'd be back in my online community soon enough and I'd post details of my trip into absurd land. Then, it happened. The secret that was so secret I didn't even realize I had it—appeared.

The main event at this particular conference is called “Idol”. The setup is similar to the television show of the same name except instead of singers competing with their vocal talents authors compete with the first page of their work. It's held in an almost-auditorium size hall and everyone wants to be the one to win. Five agents sit behind a table at the front of the hall facing the crowd. There is always a full house. The wire baskets where you drop the first page of your work sit at the front of the room and authors march up and either shyly or proudly drop in their single piece of paper, that includes no identifying labels. The master of ceremonies randomly picks a page and reads until two of the agents raise their hands. Then, he stops, the agents comment on the problems with the manuscript, which they've determined from the first few sentences, and the next page is read. The winner or winners are the authors whose entire first page is read without the hands of two different agents going up. Some years there are no winners and some there are several.

“Idol” had been spoken of throughout the conference. The question inevitably was whether you were going to submit your work. Some had to be coerced. Others were relying on winning the prize. The prize was a meeting with an agent and who knows, that may even lead to representation. And, down the road that could lead to publication. On the day of the event I found myself with a photo-copied page in my hand and I

dropped the first page, minus my name, into the wire basket. I did it myself. No one forced me too. My online world awaited me. I was selling books as I sat in the workshops. Yet, I politely submitted my work to the land that had rejected me with one hundred and thirty form letters.

I found a chair in one of the back rows and sat and waited. The format is the same each year. The well-known traditionally published author, he with the monotone, commanding voice reads the author's words and speaks into a microphone. The first few entries were shut down quickly. The agents responded by saying they felt no connection with the protagonist, four sentences into the work. Or, they just weren't excited by the plot, again, four, sometimes five sentences into the work. A couple of enticing introductions made it into the second and then third paragraph but inevitably a hand would go up and then another of the agents, sensing perhaps that they needed to jump on the bus in order to have their voice heard, also raised their hand. It looked like there would be no winners this year.

I had lulled myself to inattention and then the unthinkable happened. The moderator picked up a familiar looking sheet of paper and began to read the first page of my work in progress. He read it as I'd never imagined. My main character leapt to life and my words sailed over the heads of the assembled crowd and held them spellbound. I slunk down in my chair and moved over to one side. I could hear my words being spoken and from my stealthy position I could see the agents too. No one flinched. At the end of my reading no hands were raised and the crowd aggressively applauded.

I stopped breathing. I also could no longer hear with any clarity. Voices were carrying over chatter and the remnants of the prolonged applause. Perhaps it was timing. It was late in the hour and I'd outwaited them. They were tired and my words, unremarkable as they may have been, subdued them into a state of acceptance. No hands had been raised. I whispered to the woman beside me that it was my work that had been read. While I continued to stay low in my chair she couldn't contain her excitement. He of the monotone voice asked the crowd who the author was. I raised my hand. Heads turned and another round of applause broke out. The woman beside me continued to gush but she was shushed as the moderator moved on to the next work. He read three more but none met with any success. The judges had made their choice. There would be no more at bats for potential Caseys on this day.

At the end of the event the woman beside me squeezed my shoulder and told her neighbor of my good fortune while several others turned to see who the last author standing was. The moderator made his way through the crowd and pulled me toward the front table telling me that “they” were waiting for me. Two young agents from New York agencies were interested in my book. They gushed over my prose telling me that they were going to be fighting over the rights to my words. And, then they stopped talking and looked at me with their fresh, young smiles and waited for me to speak. And, I told them, very briefly my story.

The room had begun to empty in anticipation of the next workshop. Volunteers were moving chairs and tables and a few authors circled around me, listening to our conversation. And, I said the word. I did. I told them I’d self-published my first book and it had done very well and this was the second book in the series. It was a standalone novel and I’d be very happy to submit it in its entirety once it was complete or in its current form and I would also be very happy to give them a copy of my first novel too. One of the young ladies was not a poker player. When I said the word her smile faded and she folded her arms in front of her. The other kept smiling but the mood had definitely changed. Even a couple of the authors who had been circling us disappeared.

She of the frozen smile said to me. “Well, I’d still like to read it, both of them actually.”

And, her colleague, with her arms still in front of her, and a tight-lipped smile now on her face, nodded in agreement. Cards were exchanged and promises were made to connect shortly. I rushed to my vehicle to retrieve some books and ran back up the stairs of the conference center with two print copies of my first book in my hands. By the time I was at the main desk, leaving them for my new friends - the New York agents, the volunteers at the desk already knew who I was and were happy to make sure the agents received my books. For the last two workshops that I attended I did not hear a word. Visions of distribution in major bookstores and bestseller lists that I hadn’t been able to access danced in my head. My shoulder was slapped and celebratory hugs were exchanged for the rest of the day. I made the phone call home to my significant other and began the call with “Don’t speak; I have something very, very important to tell you. Just listen.”

The secret had been revealed. It was out in the open. After floating home that evening I logged in to my computer and let some of the members of my online community know about my potential good fortune. I told them how the agents told me they were going to be fighting over my book. I told them I was the only one whose work made it through the live vetting program. And, I told them I didn't know where it was going to lead but I was sure it was going to lead somewhere. Then, I checked my sales. At that point I'd released the first book of my trilogy and a collection of short stories and both had had a pretty good day. Readers had downloaded my work. That didn't matter though. I may just have snuck in the back door—the door I thought I hadn't wanted to enter.

On the Monday morning I received polite, friendly emails from each agent. One had read my entire first book during the plane ride home and that evening, and the other had started it. I'd sent them both a file containing my work in progress, which at that point was ninety percent complete and they had each received it. They sounded enthusiastic in their emails and told me they were looking forward to getting back to me. One month later I had not heard from them. I'd completed my new book and received it back from my beta readers and was re-writing and revising. One more month and I had my edits back from my editor; I was developing a cover with my cover designer and working on blurbs. I sent out a friendly reminder email to each of them.

I had responses back three or four days later. One had finished my book and thought she'd responded to me already. She said although my first book read well she felt it needed major revisions and was probably more suitable as a young adult novel. The new novel, although she still had the incomplete manuscript, needed also to be rewritten as a young adult novel. Agent number two did not feel either book was marketable. At that point, my first book was continuing to sell and was nearing twenty-three thousand paid downloads.

My second book went through the same professional process as my first (beta readers, editors, formatters, cover designers), and I was fortunate enough to be able to release it in time to get it into the hands of all those readers who received kindle e-readers over the holidays. I instigated the marketing strategies that I knew were working and immediately reaped some rewards. My book cost me approximately one thousand dollars to

produce. I earned this back within a few days. All of the reviews coming in were four and five stars. My new book hit number one in two categories, including the all-important suspense genre. And, it took my first book with it propelling it back up the charts. One of the agents had left the door slightly open and mentioned that if I was interested in making the changes she'd be happy to re-visit. I politely declined.

Since my secret was revealed, I've released two more books including a guide to help authors self-publish. Sales go up and down but I still sell books every day. When I teach my self-publishing workshops there are sometimes professionals from the traditionally published industry who attend. They're always interested in what we're doing over here and we treat each other with respect. Just as I look for ways to connect with readers they're attempting to find ways to get their authors' works into the hands of those same readers. In fact many of the methods that self-published authors have employed to bridge the gap are now being utilized by traditional publishers. It's a magnificent time to be a writer. Readers are accessible to us in ways that weren't previously possible. Perhaps in the future instead of labelling a book as self or traditionally published we'll comment on the quality of the story or the author's voice. It's coming. Walls are being torn down and secrets revealed every day and this is a very good thing.



Craft Box Contributor Bio- Robert Boucheron is an architect in Charlottesville, Virginia, website: boucheronarch.com. His academic degrees are from Harvard, a B. A. in English, and Yale, a M. Arch. His stories, essays and book reviews appear in *Atticus Review*, *Bangalore Review*, *Cossack Review*, *Digital Americana*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Outside In Literary & Travel*, *Poydras Review*, and other magazines.

On Keeping a Journal

by Robert Boucheron

Nobody past a certain age keeps a diary. In his essay "The Years of Wonder," about his trip to Alaska in 1923, E. B. White writes: "In those days, I kept a diary, entering in it whatever was uppermost in my mind. I called it my journal; the word 'journal', I felt, lent a literary and manly flavor to the thing. Diaries were what girls kept."

Despite the published diaries of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, both of whom lived in seventeenth-century England, White has a point. May Sarton titled five of her books as journals, starting with *Journal of a Solitude* in 1973. Echoing many who undertake such a project, she says: "I hope to break through into the rough, rocky depths, to the matrix itself. There is violence there and anger never resolved."

You can use a journal to blow off steam, unload worries, curse like a sailor, and get your feelings out. Or you can use it to slow down, be quiet and thoughtful, get in touch with yourself, and become a better person. Journaling can be a technique to gain control over a scary mess—a health crisis, a job search, or an addiction. It can be a spiritual exercise, a way to grow internally. It's a place to say what cannot be said.

William Butler Yeats wrote meditations in verse, including “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” in 1929. He could be speaking of the journal process in the last stanza:

I am content to follow to its source

Every event in action or in thought;

Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!

The contemporary poet Roseann Lloyd, among others, teaches people how to journal at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, and at universities in the area. She says: "Journals and diaries can be workshops for the soul, laboratories where we can investigate and examine our lives, our secrets, hurts, resentments, memories and joys."

If you are a writer, a diary or journal is required, or at least highly recommended. But the reasons are different. Sure, you can rant and rave, or achieve inner peace. But for those of us in the word business, personal insight is overrated. A journal is to our trade as a tape recorder is to a reporter, or a camera is to a photographer.

Capture the world as it passes. Paint your impressions as they occur. Jot down descriptions of people and places, the shape and color of a cloud, or the how the lady on the porch shook the rain from her umbrella. Eavesdrop on conversations and transcribe them, to be used later as raw material for dialog. Try out phrases, sketch ideas or stories, outline an article, and keep a running list of titles that may come in handy.

Is that a tall order, too much to ask? If you've never tried, a journal may seem intimidating. What should you put in? How often should you write? Should you let anyone read it, or is your journal strictly private? There is plenty of advice out there, all of it contradictory.

After several failed attempts, I started a journal in early 2002, except I didn't call it that. At an art supply store, I bought a large, bound sketchbook with a hard, black cover. I am an architect as well as a writer, so I wanted something I could draw in as well as make notes. I made rules and quickly broke them, but my "big black book" is now in its fourth volume. In its anarchist, unmethodical way, here is what works for me.

1. Make an entry whenever you like.

First thing in the morning over coffee, while waiting for a pot to boil, or just before bedtime. Skip a day, a week, or several months. Experts say that you should write every day, even or especially when you have nothing much to verbalize. I say phooey. Squander hours on a single entry, late at night when you should be asleep, on a sunny day when you ought to weed the garden, even or especially when you are sweating a deadline.

2. Be inconsistent. Be bad.

Use a pencil, crayon, felt-tip marker or whatever comes to hand. Use that fountain pen you received as a gift. Forget about grammar, punctuation and complete sentences. Indulge in a stream of consciousness so rampant, so laced with multiple adjectives, pathetic fallacies, mixed metaphors, bad taste, dependent clauses, and dangling modifiers that no one could possibly find a narrative arc, let alone a coherent point in this tangle of excessive verbiage.

3. Put anything in.

Some people recount their daily doings, golf scores, the weather, hot dates, hair appointments, and so on. All that is in my appointment calendar, which I save at the end of each year. My big black book contains drawings of houses; lyric poems; my mother's recipe for stollen; maps of imaginary cities; short stories; one-page biographies of authors; ditto of people I have met; notes for a novel; a year-end summary of a rather stressful year; copies of letters full of personal news and sent to friends; dreams, which I seldom recall; designs for domed churches, which no client has commissioned; and this epitaph copied from the gravestone of Jane Price, who died suddenly at age twenty in 1850:

She died to sin, she died to care,

But for a moment felt the rod,

Then springing on the viewless air,
Spread her light wings and soared to God.

4. Leave blank space.

This will be useful later on. Your journal is a tool to be handled, a mine to be exploited, and a cloth to be embroidered. Add to notes on a project, like that novel. Revise your first impression to make it more spontaneous. Comment on something you wrote years ago and now violently disagree with. Illustrate a story or a poem with artwork you clipped or a doodle of your own. I sometimes leave the back of a full-page drawing blank to reduce smudges and “bleed-through,” but this is vanity.

5. Never tear out a page.

You may cross out a word, draw a large X through an offensive paragraph, or erase something in pencil. You may make corrections, write in margins, and use colors. You may add pages as needed, as foldouts or inserts, using glue or tape, as I did with a series of poems that grew. But under no circumstances may you willfully destroy any part of your journal, which endures as a permanent record.

6. Leave the journal in plain sight.

On a shelf, on a coffee table, on top of the refrigerator. This way, you will be tempted to pick it up and note something tragic that just happened, or a joke you heard, or a scene for an opera libretto that popped into your head. Show the journal to anyone who might be interested. This will prevent you from wallowing in self-pity. Leo Tolstoy and his wife Sophia exchanged their journals and wrote furious corrections, but they were a special case. In my case, people look at the drawings and ignore the written passages.

7. Journal or blog?

Some are witty, and some are bores with a knack for posting, but all bloggers are attention-seekers. You are a writer. The internet will distract you when you sit down to write. Worse, it will put ideas in your head. Your head is already stuffed with ideas, which must be released before it explodes. If you keep a journal on a personal computer, stash it in a folder on the desktop, and bypass the chatter.

8. Assume it will be published.

Maybe not in your lifetime, but certainly after you are dead. For now, refuse to speculate on the future. Give all the juicy details in the present tense, express your emotions, dissect motives, repeat scurrilous rumors, and make yourself look good. Above all, give names and dates. They will prove invaluable as you ransack the journal for a memoir. And your literary executor, who will face the task of reconstructing your life, will thank you. Give her much to be thankful for.

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