



Celebrating 30 Years

Winter
2024

PENWHEELS

For Escapees Writers... Published or Not

Prompting You!

Inspiration from CarolAnn Quibell

We're off to a good start! Thank you to **Janetta Fudge Messmer** [p 3] and **Sabine Hartmann** [p 4] for submitting their contributions using my prompts this month. I know you will enjoy reading them as much as I did.

Prompts can be fun, but they can also jumpstart ideas you may not have thought of – thus providing a new angle for your writing. That's called **INSPIRATION!**

The next benefit of prompts is providing a bit of **FOCUS** – giving you a starting point.

Let's not forget **SKILL BUILDING** which can challenge you to explore genres, styles, or themes you may not normally write in.

WRITER'S BLOCK – a prompt might just be the trick to getting past the blank page you keep staring at.

Finally, **STRUCTURE** – some prompts may give you a challenge like writing a specific word count or specific theme, which may help you become more disciplined.

Will you join me? [See page 4 for details!](#)

From One Year to the Next

Editor's Note

First, my apologies for any errors in this issue (not that I don't beg forgiveness for boo-boos in **any** issue!). After dodging the nefarious Covid-19 virus in all of its intrepid variations, I was laid low by it right at the deadline for submissions.

Fortunately, we'd just had our vaccinations and were in our peak protection period for them, so after several days of feeling the worst I've felt for a long time (but enjoying all the ice cream my sweetheart hubby kept bringing me) I was back at it. You have the results in front of you.

It's been awhile since I've written this, so I'll repeat it here: **This is YOUR newsletter** ☺ If you have ideas, please share them! If you have an urge to send something, give in to it! And if you'd like to try something out—as CarolAnn is doing with the Prompt Challenge—let me know.

As our masthead says, Penwheels is for Escapees (and former Escapees) writers **published or not**. We don't hear much from those of you not publishing—but would love to! Make YOUR 2025 Resolution to send something to [Ellen](#) for the Penwheels Newsletter ☺

Oh! And here's an incentive: contributors to the 2025 Prompt Challenges from CarolAnn will each receive a FREE BOOK by one of our excellent Penwheels authors. Thank you to all published members who are making their work available for this give-away!



Ellen

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... and much more!

Braggin' Rights

from Joanne Alexakis



No Penwheelers were included in recent issues of *Escapees* magazine... ☹ {If we happened to miss something you contributed, please let us know!}

Kay Black did publish a book! See the announcement elsewhere in this newsletter. Congratulations, Kay!

Little Free Library



Green Valley Community
Garden, AZ
The sign says "Solitary Bee
Garden"
{Thanks, Jaimie!}

Going to Quartzsite? Don't miss the Party on Plomosa!

January 22, 2025
2pm to 5:30pm Mountain Time

If you'd like to man a table promoting
Penwheels in 2026, contact Joanne Alexakis at
joalexakis@earthlink.net

It's a great way to meet other Escapees!

Jaimie's Tips

from Jaimie Bruzenak



If you are thinking of publishing your book, beware—and read this article in the 8/31/24 issue of *Writers Weekly*! "How to Tell if That So-Called 'Publisher' is REALLY Located in the U.S.!" by James M. Walsh, Esq:

<https://writersweekly.com/this-weeks-article/how-to-tell-if-that-so-called-publisher-is-really-located-in-the-u-s>

And don't forget to see part two: EXTREME AUTHOR ALERT – PART II: 19 Signs You're About to Get Scammed By a Foreign "Book Publisher":

<https://writersweekly.com/angela-desk/extreme-author-alert-part-ii>

Looking for an online
writing community?
(Other than ours, of
course....)

I'm a member of The Creative Academy for Writers, and I think you should be too. Come join me!

<https://creative-academy-for-writers.mn.co/share/t3ud6K3aOpAu9UXV>

See you there,
CarolAnn Quibell



Prompting You!



Where Am I?

By Janetta Fudge Messmer

[From the prompt: "Looking out from your RV you realize you're not where you thought you parked the night before. What happens next?"]

As I scramble out of bed in the hotel, I bump into a wall. My nose catches the brunt of it. It's then I notice the darkness. It fills every inch of the room. I raise my hand in front of my face and can't see it. "What is going on?"

Panic fills my five-foot-two-inch frame as I reach for the lamp on the side table. But my fingers smash into a cabinet. Confusion seeps in along with the fear. All I want to do is get away from whatever is going on.

I rush to the end of the bed; then, it's as if the floor gives way. Lurching forward, I face-plant into another hard surface. Feeling around on the wood, I find a knob. I pull on it, and the door opens.

Even though my instinct tells me not to, I reach inside and touch items made of cloth. The urge to scream tries to overtake me, but I clamp my hand over my mouth. "I don't want to alert anyone until I know where I am."

But everything is telling me I'm in my RV. But how is it possible? I parked it inside the closed-in garage a week ago in Idaho. I'm in Colorado visiting family, and we're skiing at Breckenridge. "Linda, is this a joke? Because if it is, it's not funny."

My sister didn't answer, and all I know is I HAVE TO FIND MY PHONE. If this is my camper, it'll be where I plug it in. I plead with the Lord, "Please, let it be on the counter so I can turn on the flashlight and find out if I'm crazy or not."

A dozen steps forward, I hit the sink cabinet with my hip. "And to my left is what I'm looking for." My hand lands on it, and I push the side button. The front screen illuminates, but instead of me on the back of a 3-wheel trike, I'm standing at the foot of the Eiffel Tower.

"What is going on?"

I turn on the flashlight and glance around. It's not my hotel room. It's my RV. But I see the marred place near the front door is fixed. I move the beam of light behind the TV, and it's repaired. I open the bathroom door to see a brand-new shower door.

"This has to be a dream, but I'm seeing it with my own eyes. Where am I?"

I return to the living room and garner the courage to open the blind. The brightness makes me blink, and I fall back into my recliner. Its softness envelopes me, and I drift off to sleep.

"Debbie, wake up. I saw you blink. Wake up."

I try to open my eyes, but they're like they're glued shut. Then I hear beeping and the smell.... Finally, I open my eyes and say, "Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital. You skied into the side of an RV."

Books for Lovers of Words

Looking for a gift for someone who loves words? Or maybe you found (as I did) Donna Gates-Smeall's 2023 series of articles on etymology fascinating? Then Patrick Foote's *The Origin of Names, Words and Everything in Between* (despite the grammatical error in the title... or maybe that was intentional?) looks like an interesting pair of volumes. Find the first one here: <https://www.amazon.com/Origin-Names-Words-Everything-Between-ebook/dp/B07CVMNQN7> Or check him out on YouTube....

If language bloopers are more your thing (or amuse someone you know), *Anguished English: An Anthology of Accidental Assaults Upon the English Language* by Richard Lederer is filled with sentences like this one, from the section called "Schoolishness": "The amount of education you have determines your loot in life." On Amazon here:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B001P81GPE>

Everyone submitting to the Prompt Challenge will receive a FREE book from a fellow Penwheels member!

See Sabine Hartmann's response to another prompt on the next page. And Join in the fun! Prompts for the Spring 2025 issue are also on the next page.



Prompting You!



The Accident

By Sabine Hartmann

[From the prompt: "There's been an accident – what happens next?"]

There had been an accident. The news spread like wildfire and a fair number of people had already hurried to the cliff where firefighters kept them away from the edge. Hikers, joggers, and people on a short day trip alike craned their necks while carelessly stomping minuscule, fragile ecosystems to dust. Some were taking selfies. A few young women angle their devices so as to include that handsome firefighter in their pictures. Others recorded videos, setting themselves a few feet apart from the crowd and speaking earnestly, as if they were reporters from channel 7. Maybe they were reporters; it's hard to know these days.

Speculations of what had happened went from a selfie gone wrong, to a suicide, to a push that may or may not have been an accident. No one seemed to know who had fallen, though several attention-seekers tried to tell the fire chief what they thought they saw. When a news van stopped in a cloud of dust next to the firetruck, these same people quickly swarmed the reporter and cameraman.

A man and his young son stood near the cliff. Their quiet conversation with a firefighter was punctuated by barking from a black lab whose leash the man was holding. It looked as if the dog wanted to leap over the edge. People surmised that they were a search and rescue dog and its handler. Indeed, the cliff formed a ledge, looming over dense shrubbery studded with rocks fallen off the overhang. It could be tricky to find an unmoving person in the brush. Surely that's why they had the foresight to bring in the dog. It could probably already smell the accident victim and was eager to begin searching.

The handsome firefighter had donned a helmet and climbing harness secured to a rope tied to the firetruck. When the young man stood on the edge, ready, the onlookers lifted their phones in unison, trying to catch his earnest face before he disappeared. Silence fell and the crowd strained to follow his progress by listening to the muffled noises of his descent. A tiny cry from below pierced the stillness. A shudder went through the assembly: whoever was down there was still alive.

A basket was lowered over the edge and, soon, the order came to pull it back up. The black lab went wild when the basket reappeared, revealing the black muzzle of a tiny puppy, tightly secured by a heavy blanket. Ohs and ahs rose from the crowd when the pup was reunited with its mother.

Soon, the firefighters had gathered their gear and came to shake hands with the pet parent, scratching the dog behind her ears and admonishing the puppy to be more careful. The crowd dispersed after taking a last selfie, puppy, handsome firefighter and all. The news van had already departed, and the boy tightened a red harness around the puppy's belly, so that the adventurous dog wouldn't be able to wriggle out of it again.

Prompt Challenge Guidelines

- Three prompts will be provided in each Penwheels Newsletter. Pick one!
- The maximum word count is 500 words!
- Please put a title and your name on the document.
- I challenge you to share your writing! Please send your inspirations to me for publishing in our Penwheels Newsletter. Don't be shy!

Do you have a favorite prompt? Forward it to me and I'll use it in the next PROMPT CHALLENGE. Please, I do need some help with this and would appreciate your input.

I am really excited about this project and am looking forward to working with you!

CarolAnn

Penwheels Prompt Challenge

Maximum 500 words

- #1 – Why is my grandmother's face in the mirror?
- #2 – The yellow and gold leaves glittering in the sunlight bring me back to my past.
- #3 – The abandoned motorhome in the farmer's field looks lonely.

Deadline: February 1, 2025

Subject Line: Penwheels Prompt Challenge

Email your submissions to CarolAnn at

loracvs@gmail.com

Ready, set, go.....!

Thank you, Janetta and Sabine for sharing where CarolAnn's prompts led you. Join the fun—see the side panel for Spring issue prompts!



My Favorite Time of the Year

by Donna Gates-Smeall

I thought I would share why I love the Winter Season and a mini story about my 9th birthday celebration.

You see, I was born on December 22nd in the year 1958. My mom struggled with balancing my birthday and Christmas wishes every year because the holidays were always a family-centric event, involving a huge family dinner at either my grandmother's home or our own home.

Every year we scraped by, but one year Mom decided to try out something new as she knew I would be up for anything new. So she asked me if we could celebrate my birthday on Christmas Day on my 9th birthday. I had been sick with the flu so my "party" was with family only... which usually meant with my cousins and their parents.

After careful consideration, I figured that would be just fine as I might get more than one birthday present this year. Imagine my surprise when I woke on Christmas Day and hunted for my birthday present in amongst the Christmas piles. I didn't find one single birthday wrapped present. Turning to my mother, I asked her where my birthday present was.

"Um, pick one of the Christmas packages out. That is your birthday gift and the rest are Christmas presents," Mom replied. I stared at her, horrified that I was being told to take a Christmas present and call it my birthday present.

"But, Mom!" I groaned. "You don't understand. My birthday present should be a birthday-wrapped present, not a Christmas wrapper on the present." I added, "I guess that means no birthday cake or party favors either, huh?"

Mom said, "No, Grams is fixing the cake as usual. Your cousins will come over and help you celebrate your birthday."

I was disillusioned to say the least. As Christmas Day rolled on past, I spent a good bit of time thinking about my mother's logic. When the New Year celebration came around, I announced to my mother, "If you want to do my birthday this way from now on, that is fine but..." I paused. "...when your birthday comes around in September, you will have to wait until Christmas to get your birthday present," I finished.

I grinned cheekily at my mom, who was stunned into silence with her daughter's logic.

"Um, no thanks," she said. "I am happy with getting my birthday presents in September."

"Okay then, I will stick with getting my birthday gifts on December 22nd and the Christmas ones on the 25th of December," I stated firmly.

Now getting back to why I love the Winter season so much: it is all about family for me and giving back to my friends and family during a special time in history. Thanksgiving would herald a huge family gathering at Grandma Dick's home where she would bake all day before the meal, then pour out all her baked, cooked and delicious offerings to feed all fourteen of us.

Then one of mom's sisters or brother would volunteer to hold Christmas at their home each year. This we did until the year before my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

I began to miss those huge get-togethers soon after Grams passed away. My world during my formative years included all my grandparents, my cousins and their parents, and my mother (single and worked six days a week). I love the colorful season, the planning of gifts I either made by hand or bought with a small amount of allowance I had scrounged up to get some tiny trinket for each family member.

Closing on this note: I have made for you this little snippet of my history to share with you as you begin your own holiday celebrations. May you all have a blessed and joyful holiday season. See you in the New Year, 2025. Blessed be, Donna Gates-Smeall, Penwheeler Proud.

Do you have a favorite season? Which one? Why? Write about it and then send it in! And don't miss more from Donna elsewhere in the newsletter.



MARKET SHARE: Fun With LLMs

By Marguerita McManus



Linguistics has always fascinated me. I learned so much from Deborah Tannen's books years ago (*You Just Don't Understand, That's Not What I Meant!*). Now I'm intrigued by Large Language Models (LLMs). They are one small aspect of the use of artificial intelligence and they become easier to use every single day, which is something that concerns me: how will I keep up?

I decided to take online (work at your own pace) classes to understand how writers are using LLMs, and I've repeated several sections of each class because some of the things explained in the beginning just didn't *gel* until I actually *did* them. The classes were very well taught, starting from ground zero, and I did every exercise along the way but I can tell you that it's a lot to take in, even for some like me who loves taking classes.

Here's my progression: **Introduction to AI Basics for Fiction Writing** (free), **Intro to Raptor Write** (Raptor Write is an interface for using multiple LLMs that's free to use, but you need to buy credits with OpenRouter. Most people put in \$5-\$10); **Write Short Stories in a Shared World** (\$99); and most recently, **How To Prompt AI for Fiction Writing** (\$79).

During the short stories class I watched in absolute fascination as the LLM produced intriguing short stories which unfolded in the style she'd described, with a plot she'd chosen. *I'd read that book*, I thought, as the class continued, then we were given the **prompts** to use (which could be called 'requests' or 'commands' but in the linguistics of LLMs, 'prompt' is the word).

I did the sequence myself, choosing my own tropes, settings, etc. My first three stories were too generic for me. By the fourth, I'd improved my prompts. On the fifth go-around (we learn by repeating) I changed my prompts again and created a story I really liked.

Then came editing. The first three stories were tedious to self-edit and I almost ditched them. It took a significant amount of work to rewrite them into something I'd put my (pen) name on. By the time I self-edited the fifth one I was much happier. But all of the stories lacked my personal writing style; that's what I wanted most.

That goal spurred me to take my second paid class. Prompting is linguistics. You can't get a chocolate milkshake (in person or with AI) by asking for something cold and chocolate. I learned more about prompting and about getting an LLM to write using my own style. I wrote a novella that I really like, and given the prompts I used, the LLM added an interaction that had me laughing out loud, twice in one scene. I was really starting to have fun and look forward to using it more.

So, are writers using AI/LLMs to pump out hundreds of books? Sure, some are. Is that for me? No, and it was never my goal. I wanted to *learn* what the heck was going on. I feel I've accomplished that goal, and I did it in about three weeks, because I had the time. Authors are using LLMs for brainstorming, for organization, for streamlining their process, and for marketing.

When I learned how author/publishers are using LLMs for marketing, I had to try it. It's possible now to upload an entire manuscript and ask for timelines, synopsis, marketing blurbs, and very detailed analysis, of say, character traits or other specifics you may have forgotten—either to continue a series or for your own notes. That's where the easiest to use LLM came into play: Google NotebookLM will do all these things, AND create the most over-the-top podcast about your book you've ever heard. I laughed at every single one it created for me. If you're ever feeling discouraged, upload your MS and give it a listen (it's free and according to Google, it isn't used for training their LLMs).

And here's another upside. Feeding Notebook's rather dry synopsis into another LLM, I've been able to improve every single book blurb I have on Amazon. All of them are now much better than anything I could have come up with, and I actually thought I was good at blurb writing.

After polishing my short stories (wait for it, you knew it was coming) I tried two free AI image generators: Leonardo and DALL-E. They were helpful, in a "make me work harder to get this right" kind of way. Using them with Affinity Photo and Affinity Designer (similar to Adobe products at a fraction of the cost) I created ebook covers. I put it all into Vellum, and had 6 short stories to give away.

{Find out how Marguerita's adventures with LLMs concludes on [page 17](#)}

World of Publishing: Who Owns Your Book Cover?

by Margo Armstrong



If you have been writing and publishing for more than a minute, you have experienced intervals collaborating with traditional publishers, some more reputable than others. These arrangements usually come to an end for one reason or another. Often ownership questions pop up from writers who have been taken in by predatory publishers and want to cut their ties.

Writers published by small presses that have come on hard times and shuttered their doors have the same questions. While the larger issue of what to do to get out of a bad contract or when your publisher goes belly-up takes more time to explain, let's concentrate on one part of that equation: the book cover design. If this issue resonates for you, the one thing that comes to mind—first, last, and always—is to read your contract. Only there can you discern what the original agreement was, and what you signed off on.

Usually, the publisher retains the rights to the cover image. What this means is that if you part company with them but still want to self-publish your book on your own, you must come up with a new cover design. The publisher may have generated the cover through connections of their own. Or the photo is licensed and not transferable. It is possible to find out and license it yourself. The easiest solution would be to buy or create a new cover.

Small companies like canvasdiscount.com, fotor.com, and edit.org exist online. Buy a cover pre-made or create one yourself at canva.com.

Margo Armstrong is the author and publisher of over 20 books available on Amazon. Her book "Writing and Publishing Books for Fun and Profit" is available in eBook and Print format. Listen to her podcast "RV Lifestyle Expert" on your favorite podcast platform (now available on Amazon Music). Contact Margo at MovingOnWithMargo@outlook.com

Gifts for Writers and Readers

This is a clever book and tablet stand--holds your coffee and a pen, too! You might just want one of these for yourself :) <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C9ZWZ76C>

Love to read print books but your hands get tired? (Yep, we're all getting older.) Here's a clever gadget that helps you hold the book open: <https://www.amazon.com/Delonial-Silicone-Accessories-Handmade-Bookworm/dp/B097Z2YS3N/>

This is the first one I've seen that has different sized rings for different sized fingers :)

Of course, everyone could use another tumbler, right? Especially book lovers: <https://www.amazon.com/Book-Lover-Tumbler-Christmas-Librarian/dp/B0CJV2BPPY>

Or maybe a mug is a better fit: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CH7WZKKG/>

Something inexpensive but useful? How about a pouch to carry pencils, pens, maybe a cell phone or tablet? With a witty saying on it? Here you go: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CNGDR6F2>

How about a jigsaw puzzle of book covers? Too cool! And affordable: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B008DW23OI>

And if you really want to fall down a rabbit hole for book lovers, just do a search for "Book Journals"!



FIRST CHAPTERS: The Art of a Genre-Perfect Opening

Fiction Tips by Debra Sanders



Every novelist knows the first chapter needs to hook your audience. It's more than just a beginning—it's a promise to your reader. While the fundamentals of strong opening chapters remain consistent across genres, each fiction category demands its own "special touch" to appeal to that audience.

Before diving into genre specifics, let's acknowledge what every first chapter needs:

- A compelling hook that raises questions
- Introduction of a distinctive voice/POV
- Establishment of the story's tone
- A clear sense of time and place
- Something that disrupts the protagonist's normal world

Now that we've established the fundamentals, let's address the opening chapter particulars for these popular genres. Keep in mind that these suggestions are generalized and may need additional details when working in a sub-genre such as Romance (enemies to lovers, mafia, romantic suspense, time travel) or Mystery (traditional, cozy, paranormal, historical, mystery-thriller, mystery-romance).

ROMANCE

Romance readers expect emotional engagement from page one. Your first chapter should:

- Introduce either the protagonist or both love interests
- Establish what's missing in their life/what they yearn for
- Hint at the central conflict that will keep them apart
- Create immediate romantic tension or anticipation

Avoid opening scenes with the protagonist waking from a dream state, starting with a dream, or the protagonist contemplating their loneliness with their mirrored reflection.

MYSTERY

Mystery openings need to plant the seeds of intrigue right off the bat:

- Present the crime or inciting incident within the first few pages
- Introduce your sleuth and showcase their unique investigative style
- Plant subtle clues or red herrings that will matter later
- Create immediate questions that demand answers

Avoid dense backstories or lengthy character histories before getting to the crime.

THRILLER

Thriller readers crave immediate intensity and a fast pace. They are here for the action and intrigue.

- Start with action or imminent danger
- Establish high stakes from the first paragraph
- Create a sense of urgency that propels the reader forward
- Introduce the threat or hint at the antagonist's presence

Avoid slow build-up to the action or long, descriptive paragraphs without tension.

{What about Fantasy and Science Fiction? See Deb's conclusion on [page 17](#).}



Jaimie Bruzenak in Maine

This past August, Jaimie Bruzenak spent more than two weeks in Maine. When she saw the Maine Authors Book Festival advertised she noticed "it was on the way to where we were going so my friend and I stopped. They had a pirate theme. I thought that quite interesting. They had a nice setup."



No, this is not Jaimie in the pirate's cap... It's one of the Maine authors ☺



Jaimie found this LFL (below) "In front of the library!" in Brooklin, Maine.

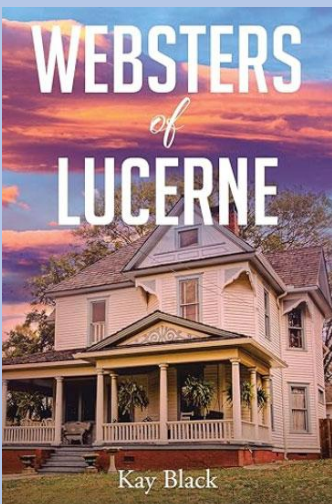


If Charlotte's Web or The Elements of Style mean anything to you, then you'll appreciate Jaimie's photos of EB White's house, also in Brooklin. (BTW, he's a lesson in not being discouraged: he got fired from an early job at the Seattle Times, but went on to be, you know, a renowned author.)

Where EB White wrote...



...and lived.



New Book by Penwheeler Kay Black!

When black lung disease snuffs out the life of Walter, a retired coal miner, his grieving widow, Emma, develops a plan to restore their community from the ravages of the coal mine era. Her diverse family is drawn into her plan to change the course of their small Pennsylvania town as well as their own lives. Surprises await them as they attempt to follow the plan. This is a love story: love of family, home, community, and a faith that takes them out of their comfort zone and into helping their neighbors and newcomers not only survive but thrive. They deal with the past while building a future full of hope, promise, and redemption.

Get your copy here: <https://www.amazon.com/Websters-Lucerne-Kay-Black-ebook/dp/B0BYHQPCDW/>

Member Profile: Joanne Alexakis

When you ask most RVers who have done any fulltiming to describe the worst thing that happened to them, you'll usually hear about breaking down in the middle of nowhere (usually in the middle of the night), struggling to repair a leaky roof, maybe an accident. Meet Joanne Alexakis, our steadfast membership coordinator. "We survived nine feet of snow in a three week period. I stood on top of our fifth wheel and shoveled (carefully) snow off our roof as [husband of 48 years] Nick steadied the ladder."

Seeing fulltime RVing as an adventure is true to Joanne's nature. Joanne and Nick headed out in 1994. "Our last parent had just passed away, so we no longer had a need to stay in Minnesota to care for them," she says. And stay on the road they did, for nearly thirty years, swapping the RV keys for apartment keys only because an East Texas rainstorm totaled their rig "and we decided to start a new career," she says.

In those many years, they traveled the USA. "I feel lucky to have lived in so many places; to have experienced soggy humidity and 'but it's a dry heat' attitudes; to come to understand people's different livelihoods; I can closely identify with a variety of areas and feel like each is 'home'. There is no 'Best Place in America' to live."



Lucky is right. I've read about the annual buffalo roundup at Custer State Park in South Dakota—no small shakes getting to see it, much less help with it, which Joanne and Nick were able to do as camp workers there. "Herding those magnificent bison, guiding them through the corrals for health checkups, and branding that year's babies" was "exhausting, exhilarating, so exciting!"

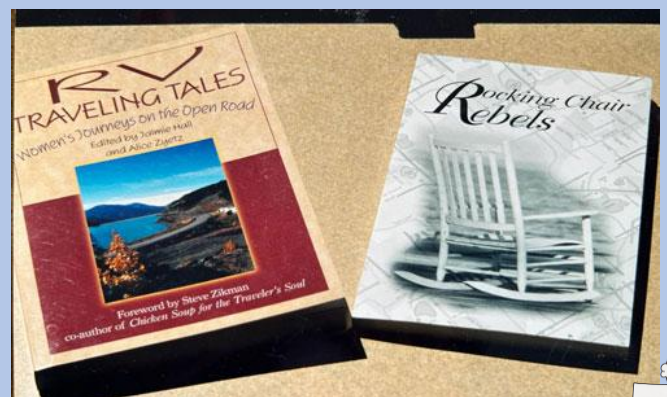
The park's proximity to Sturgis meant being able to see the parade of bikers as they rode through the state park. "It was hypnotic! Loud engines, leather, and tattoos!" She adds that she did eventually get a tattoo (should what her tattoo is be a future Penwheels contest?).

Traveling meant she was able to get closer to her brothers and in-laws who lived in Southern California. But for Joanne, travel meant making connections with others she would not have otherwise met. "I still communicate with SKP Boomers we met boondocking in 1994 in the Sonoran Desert. I shared a lifestyle with friends at CARE and Rainbow's End in Livingston, Texas. I line danced and beaded with the talented folks at North Ranch in Congress, Arizona."

And of course she got swept up in the Escapee Birds of a Feather group, the Penwheels. "Over the years, I have submitted articles to the Escapees magazine. I contributed pieces to books: *Rocking Chair Rebels* compiled by Janice Lasko and Kay Peterson; and *RV Traveling Tales: Women's Journeys on the Open Road* edited by Jaimie Hall Bruzenak and Alice Zyetz. These women offered much encouragement and lots of praise."

"I edited the Penwheels newsletter, then I took the membership position over from Betty Prange—and just kept on with it. I like to keep up with who is doing what," she says.

We're grateful Joanne feels this way. 'Membership Coordinator' is much more than a title: Joanne fields new member updates and requests for information from the Escapees HQ, among other things.



***Thank you for all you do for Penwheels,
Joanne!***

Reading Joan Didion's "Year of Magical Thinking"

by Donna Gates-Smeall



With the new year coming up, I was giving thought to what I was going to write about in 2025 when one of my best friends lent me a book by Joan Didion. Didion is known for her brilliant clarity and brutal honesty about her thoughts in writing. She also is a great instructor who wrote some writers' tomes to help us writers get in our "mode" for writing. (More on the writing tomes in the next issue of "The Year of Magical Thinking" by D.G. Smeall.)

Didion's books were greatly lauded by my college professors and especially so by my Advanced English for Teachers professor. I didn't have enough time and hours to complete my book reading for any one class while in college at Pacific Lutheran University in Puyallup, WA.

Just a note of brutal honesty about me: I never am able to complete all reading assignments due to faulty vision. My eyes fight a daily battle with me where they tire quickly after two or three hours of reading or writing at the computer. So you can see, there is a pattern to this reading and writing thing for me. I mentioned when I first did my Cambridge Dictionary of the English Language articles that "I never had enough time to finish my class readings."

Indeed, I was the tortured turtle who plodded slowly alongside my classmates while they raced through one assignment and on to the next one. I had to utilize some special tools to insure that I would get the gist of most of the materials our professor assigned.

Those tools were made for visually impaired students. First, I had a note taker for each class I studied. The notetaker was paid for his/her services and was often selected by my class instructor to insure that I would get the best notes from the class.

Then secondly, I had the use of a magnifier system whereby it would enlarge the text in the textbook so I would not have to strain my eyes over time. When I was in my dorm room, I had this magnifier, plus my eyeglasses were made with a prescription for computer reading. I also had audio tapes of someone reading the textbook to me so I could maximize my absorption of said material.

Well, enough of the extraneous prattle about my college years. Let's head back to Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Joan baldly shares her life and the traumas, real or imagined, in her life when she lost two beloved family members.

As a writer myself, I find Didion's writing refreshing and an eye-opening look at how she coped, which in turn has made me take the time to imagine how I would manage under circumstances similar to hers.

Within my mind, I have some thoughts about life, death, and coping with a lost loved one. In my family (extended as well as immediate), we find life ordinary; death is an ordinary occurrence in our lives where our loved ones have instructed us to "carry on" living as you might and to remember them at their best, brightest, and shining self rather than to dwell on their condition as their hour of passing approaches.

Yet when one member or another (perhaps a pet) passes, the reality of their being gone is delayed upon announcement of their passing. I find myself still reaching for the cell phone to text someone no longer there, wherever that may be. I know I am fortunate to still have my parents living and enjoying memories with me and my husband plus our family (three sons and one daughter-in-law).

{Read Donna's conclusion on the next page}

Reading Joan Didion's "Year of Magical Thinking" (Concluded)

by Donna Gates-Smeall

Truth is: I am dreading the hour that I get "the call" that one of my parents has passed. For then, I will have to walk Didion's walk, hopefully coping as well as she did when her husband and child passed away.

Since I have just started digging into Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, I am hoping to find some great nuggets of wisdom for living life in that year of magical thinking. For this is my topic for the new year (2025): Explore the year of magical thinking.

I am closing on that note with the "come on in, the water is warm" salutation I love using, to invite you into my world as I explore the magical thinking in 2025.

Donna Gates-Smeall is an accomplished writer with two books (Com-PEN-di-um and Forever Friends [co-written with Karol Barkley of Tacoma, WA]) under her belt, plus plans to write a few more in her lifetime. She has two Associates degrees and a BA in English.



Two Influences... by Darlene Miller

Pearl Buck and Marjorie Margolies's books were a great inspiration to me. Both women were writers who were passionate about international adoption. I read everything that I found from Pearl Buck. I even visited her grandmother's house in Buck County, Pennsylvania, which was a museum dedicated to Pearl Buck. I bought a book that was signed by Pearl Buck several years before. Sadly, the book was lost in my many moves.

Marjorie Margolies wrote a book which was put into a Reader's Digest Condensed Book called *They came to Stay*. It was about the two girls that she adopted from South Korea. I attended a political speech at the Iowa City Hospital compound where Marjorie Margolies Mezvinsky gave a speech for her new husband, Ed Mezvinsky. He was running for congress from Iowa. After the speech, I went to the cafeteria. It was crowded. I saw Mrs. Margolies-Mezvinsky sitting alone so I asked if I could join her. She said, "Yes." She was friendly as we talked about her adopted Korean daughters.

Later, Marjorie gave birth to two sons and adopted several Vietnamese sons. Counting the step children from her husband's first marriage, she now has eleven children! Counting my birth, step and adopted children, I only have eight.

You may have heard about her son, Marc Mezvinsky. He married Chelsea Clinton, the daughter of former U.S. President Bill Clinton and former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on July 31, 2010. Marc and Chelsea Mezvinsky have three children so now Marjorie is a grandmother to some famous children.

Yes. We adopted a little Korean girl. Myun Jae Ra was thirteen months old when she arrived at O'Hare Airport. We named her Karol Ann Klein. Karol has brought so much joy to my life.

Darlene Miller has been a Penwheels member since 2002 and has published seven books, including her newest title, "Surviving Disasters and Finding Grace." You can find many of her titles on Amazon and other booksellers.

Donna and Darlene have shared books and authors who have influenced their writing and lives. What books have influenced you? Share your story at penwheels@yahoo.com

2 Months, 20 States and 3 Provinces, 10,000 Miles:

My First Road Trip as Retiree – Part 1

by Sabine Hartmann

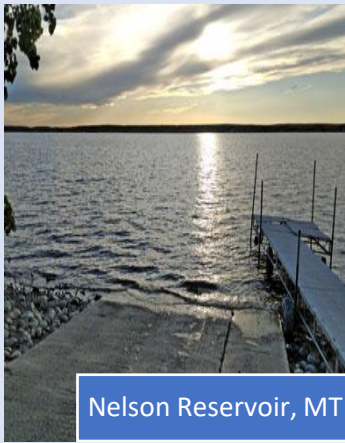
I love road trips. I used to be a full-time RVer until my son was born and I became sedentary for his sake. But there were mornings when—while driving to work—I was tempted to just continue driving....

I've been thinking of this trip for a while; the goal was to visit a friend in Maine, starting from my home in Boise, Idaho. I only do minimal planning, leaving things open to what might happen. Using the iOverlander app I saved on camping and only spent about \$300 on camping fees during my two months on the road. (Though I did sleep in houses or camped in friends' yards for half the time.)

Some of my friends wondered how I could possibly travel as a woman alone. No worries. My main problems turned out to be the bugs and heat, especially since I couldn't figure out a way to add bug screens to my minivan. My friend in Maine finally had a solution (after more than half my trip was over): put the screens on the outside. It works!

I hit the road on June 5th and headed east to I-15 and then north to avoid a looming heat wave. I loved the wide open spaces of Idaho and Montana, sometimes with the peaks of the Rockies forming the backdrop, peaks that still wore snow caps in early June.

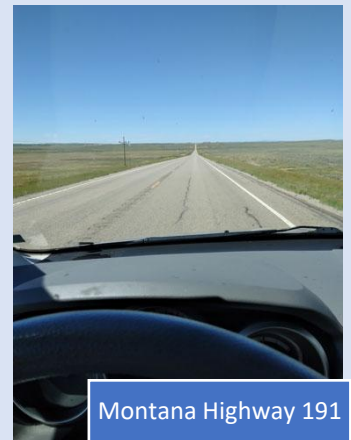
The landscape changed from green hills to desert to mountain cliffs and back to hills and then desert again. I enjoyed Montana where I found great campsites, situated at a river or lake, that were entirely free and even came with a clean outhouse. I've found free camping in North Dakota and Minnesota as well. It is amazing just how welcoming small communities are to the weary traveler.



Nelson Reservoir, MT

I remember with anguish that Montana highway 191 must be one of the loneliest highways in the country (after Nevada...) where I would see another vehicle only now and then. There, birds would rest on the pavement; I'm not sure why. They flew off at the last moment and I killed several of them when a wind gust messed up their escape plan. Worse, when I stopped a couple of hours later, I found a dead bird stuck in the front grill of my car and I had to wrench it out. What a sad experience!

From Montana, I followed US Hwy 2 due east.



Montana Highway 191

At a tourist information stop, I was handed a photocopied list of low-cost camp opportunities along this highway, covering several states. I thank the volunteers who have compiled this list for us travelers.

In Minnesota the landscape became forested. I love forests but soon got scared of them when I noticed too many dead animals lying along the road, reminding me to not drive at dusk or by night, if at all possible. Once, in northern Wisconsin, when night had surprised me, a deer crossed the freeway just a few feet in front of my van. Surprisingly, it had crossed four busy lanes without harm. At 70 mph, there was no time to even tap the brakes! The deer appeared like a ghost... there, in front of me, but already gone by the time I saw it.

Amazing! The deer and I got to live another day.



City Park in Bagley, MN

{Don't miss more of Sabine's cross-country trip in the next issue!}

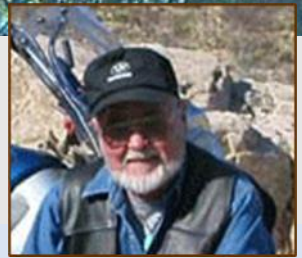
Have a travel story to share? We'd love to read it! Needs editing?

Photos prepped for use? No worries!

Just send what you have to penwheels@yahoo.com and Ellen will help ☺

People you meet along the road:

Laura by Lew Leistikow



We were parked on our RV lot at The Ranch, a co-op RV park in Southeast New Mexico. Laura, a newcomer to the park, was assigned a lot across the street from us. Any single woman traveling alone in an RV always draws the attention of the men, both married and single and this occasion was no different.

Although not that unusual, single women traveling in this way bring men out to ‘help’ them get parked and set up. In this case, one man who also happened to be single, rushed over to help her back her trailer onto the lot. He wasn’t doing a very good job of it and seemed to be making it more difficult for her to get the trailer backed properly onto the lot and near the utility hook-ups. I drifted over and tried to ease into helping her get backed in.

After she got her truck unhooked from her trailer and the trailer connected to the utilities, introductions were made, and we chatted a bit before she finished setting up. She was an attractive woman, tall, slender and soft spoken with a very southern accent. Her home was the far western edge of the Florida Panhandle, and she spoke in the slow, distinctive way of the deep south. We didn’t get into her history, but it was obvious that she had been ‘full-timing’—traveling and living in an RV—for some time.

Over the years, we were to become good friends and would get together whenever our travels brought us near one another. In the beginning, she kept her previous life to herself but as our friendship grew, it came out that she had been a judge in Florida and that she came from a family of lawyers.

She carried a motorcycle in the back of her pick-up truck and of course that brought her even more attention than merely being a single woman traveling in an RV. In fact, the man who rushed to help her get parked on that first arrival was also a rider, as were we and the motorcycle connection was to bring us even closer over time.

One day we noticed a large decal sign appeared on the windshield of her motorcycle that read, “Gypsy Judge,” quite appropriate. As time went on, she attended several motorcycle courses to hone her already notable skill and indeed wound up teaching some of the same courses. She was an avid rider and often took quite long trips on the bike, camping along the way.

One time, she left her trailer behind to ride the bike from New Mexico back to Florida but detoured northward to Cheyenne just to visit us while we stayed at an Air Force campground for a few days. She pitched her tent behind our RV and after getting set up, we spent a pleasant couple of days visiting before she continued to Pensacola.

About the time Eleanor and I decided to get married, we had also planned a motorcycle trip down to Big Bend National Park from The Ranch. As it was to turn out, this became a “Pre-Wedding Honeymoon” and Laura rode with us. One moment she was a chaperone and the next, she and Eleanor were treating me like a ‘kept man’, catering to me in various ways like pumping gas and cleaning my windshield at fuel stops etc. Later, she wrote a great article on the trip and submitted it to *Rider* magazine where it was published: “Three old riders, two motorcycles and one honeymoon, a week before the wedding. It doesn’t take much to justify a road trip, so Eleanor and I took Lew, her soon-to-be husband, on their honeymoon.”

One of her more remarkable rides was what is known as a ‘Four Corners Ride’. You hit all four corners of the lower 48 states. She bought a heavy Honda Goldwing motorcycle for this ride and loaded it with gear to last for the long ride; she departed Pensacola heading west. She had gained sponsors, as she was highlighting children’s issues on this ride. In her time on the bench, she dealt with a lot of cases involving children (custody, abuse etc.). On this ride, she wanted to bring attention to these problems along the way.

{Read Lew’s conclusion on the next page}

People you meet along the road:

Laura (Concluded) by Lew Leistikow

We drove to Pensacola to see her off, where quite a crowd gathered in the parking lot by her bike. We all wished her a good and safe trip, and standing by her son, we all waved as she rode out, heading for San Diego and the first of her four corners. Continuing clockwise, she hit the northwest corner of Washington, then east to Maine, and after the trip south to Key West, she returned to Pensacola. Along the way, she made several stops to address various groups about children's issues and even was interviewed for newspapers, radio and TV spots.

Quite a woman, this 'Gypsy Judge'. Now, several years after our first meeting, we still see her whenever we happen to be close by. The most recent meeting was when we had to evacuate from our home in east-central Florida as a hurricane approached. We wound up driving clear to Alabama and found ourselves parked next to Laura. After the storm passed, we returned to our home and Laura planned to head back out west toward Arizona. So, until we meet again....

#

Do You Dress as One of Your Characters at Book Signings?

[Darlene Miller did! Here's her description of two events.]

My book, *Surviving Disasters and Finding Grace: Preparing to Live in a World Without Electricity*, was released on May 18, 2024, at the Pella Book Store.

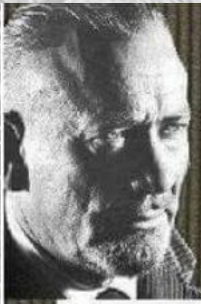
On Saturday, August 17, 2024, Terry and I took our RV to Illinois for a reenactment of Colonial and Civil War Eras. Of course, I did book signings. The children understood my children's book because they were reenacting, too. A couple of them spontaneously gave me hugs.

My next book signing date was August 24, 2024 from noon to 4:00 in Pella with Beverly Graves and Scott Vandenberg. I wore Grandma Rose's favorite hat and a modern dress which is the color rose. Beverly wore a construction workers outfit. Scott dressed like Elvis.

[See Darlene in her Grandma Rose's hat on [page 12.](#)]



Have you promoted your work in a unique way? E-mail Ellen about it at penwheels@yahoo.com



John Steinbeck's 6 Writing Tips

1. **Abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish.** Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page for each day, it helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.
2. **Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper.** Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on. It also interferes with flow and rhythm which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material.
3. **Forget your generalized audience.** In the first place, the nameless, faceless audience will scare you to death and in the second place, unlike the theater, it doesn't exist. In writing, your audience is one single reader. I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person—a real person you know, or an imagined person and write to that one.
4. **If a scene or a section gets the better of you and you still think you want it—bypass it and go on.** When you have finished the whole you can come back to it and then you may find that the reason it gave trouble is because it didn't belong there.
5. **Beware of a scene that becomes too dear to you, dearer than the rest.** It will usually be found that it is out of drawing.
6. **If you are using dialogue—say it aloud as you write it.** Only then will it have the sound of speech.

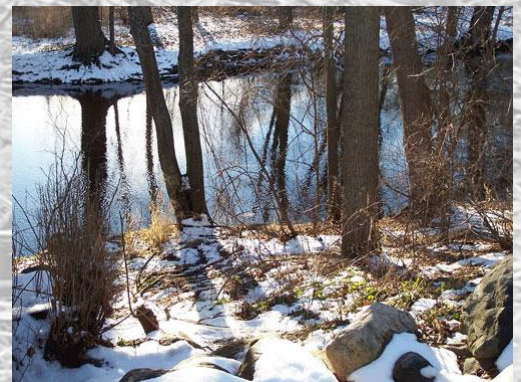
John Steinbeck
February 27, 1902 – December 20, 1968

FREE Stuff!

This might be the best marketing deal on the internet (best I've found, anyway): The annual **Guide to Manuscript Publishers: 291+ Traditional Publishers, No Agent Required** edited by Emily Harstone and made available by Authors Publish. You might have to sign up to be on their e-mail list, but this is a nice publication 😊

Here's the link:

<https://authorspublish.com/books/fall-update-the-2024-guide-to-manuscript-publishers-285-traditional-publishers-no-agent-required/>



DAILY SPECIALS 4PM - 7PM

MONDAY – Chefs Choice

TUESDAY – 2 Tacos, Nachos, Jumbo Burritos, Taco Salad, Carne Asada \$5.00 each

WEDNESDAY – Spaghetti, Salad, Garlic Bread \$5.00 (ask for other specials)

THURSDAY – Burgers, Patty Melt, Reuben, etc..includes fries \$9.00

FRIDAY – Fish, Shrimp or Combo \$8.00

How many boo-boos can you spot?

If You're Not a Reader...

...you can't be a writer. Sounds obvious, but I'm always surprised when I meet someone identifying as a writer (fiction or nonfiction... doesn't matter) who says they haven't read the types of books they want to write. There's a way to do that (unembarrassed plug: See my [Read to Write](#) book; let me know if you'd like a free e-copy), but there are some shortcuts, too. Here's one by Michael Woodson at *Writer's Digest*: <https://www.writersdigest.com/be-inspired/read-then-write-books-to-study-to-help-your-stories>

MARKET SHARE: Fun With LLMs (Conclusion)

By Marguerita McManus

What surprised me the most is how people with challenges (neurological issues, sight impairment, etc.) are using these tools to help them lead better lives. I'm all about anyone and anything that helps others. However, often people fear change and technology, and fear can lead to distrust and frustration, such as 'AI will take jobs.' I saw a meme that I believe summed the future up well: *AI won't take your job. People who know how to use AI will.*

I started working fifty years ago to support myself and at that time payroll was done on a ledger and there were typing pools in every large corporation and government. *Typing Pools*. I remember when word processors came out, then PCs... Oh, the hullabaloo about jobs that would be lost... and it never happened. Same with cars replacing horse and carriage. The list of examples is endless. In a recent talk, a leader in this industry said their only regret was not preparing the public better for the inevitable. You don't have to use any of these tools if you don't want to. But if you do, you'll understand how and why others are using them, and you might find that a tiny bit of it helps you. From voice transcription to improving blurbs to line editing, I'm diving in.

Author Marguerita McManus writes quilting books and contemporary fiction based on life in her home state of Alaska. A snowbird RVer, she's happiest boondocking in the desert. Contact her at MMQuilts@gmail.com

FIRST CHAPTERS: The Art of a Genre-Perfect Opening (Concluded)

Fiction Tips by Debra Sanders

FANTASY

Fantasy requires a delicate balance of worldbuilding without losing the story.

- Ground readers in the familiar before introducing the fantastic
- Weave worldbuilding naturally into action or dialogue
- Establish one or two unique elements of your world
- Show the protagonist's relationship to the magical elements

Avoid information dumps about magic systems or complex political structures.

SCIENCE FICTION

Science fiction readers may be the most demanding of their opening chapter content. It should offer a balanced blend of technology and humanity.

- Establish the technological or scientific premise quickly
- Show how the advanced elements affect everyday life
- Ground futuristic concepts in relatable human experiences
- Create wonder while maintaining believability

Avoid detailed technical explanations or overwhelming readers with multiple advanced concepts at once.

A few common pitfalls of the first chapter include starting too early in the story's timeline, too much backstory, introducing too many characters at once, and long descriptive passages that do not move the story forward. Your first chapter sets expectations for the entire book. While each genre has unique conventions, the key to a great "first chapter" is respecting those details while finding fresh ways to engage readers.

Amazon Bestselling author Debra S. Sanders has published 12 fiction and non-fiction titles and is currently working on a traditional Agatha Christie-style mystery. You can learn more about her books and adventures at <https://debsanders.com>

You Can't Be a Writer...

...without being at least an eensey bit curious. Rebecca Makkai is curious about other people's houses, and she's found her way into them via Zillow. Take a look to see some of the weirdest decoration ideas you'll probably (hopefully?) never think of yourself:

<https://rebeccamakka.substack.com/p/lets-distract-ourselves-with-zillow>

And what a great way to imagine other people's lives! Always helps with fiction writing, you know.

Have you ever used a site like Zillow for writing inspiration? Which site? How did you use it? Tell us: penwheels@yahoo.com

Give in to the temptation to share!

Deadlines are always:

Spring Issue:	Feb 15
Summer Issue:	May 15
Fall Issue:	Aug 15
Winter Issue:	Nov 15

Publication is on the first of the next month.

DAILY SPECIALS 4PM - 7PM

MONDAY – Chefs Choice

TUESDAY – 2 Tacos, Nachos, Jumbo Burritos, Taco Salad, Carne Asada \$5.00 each

WEDNESDAY – Spaghetti, Salad, Garlic Bread \$5.00 (ask for other specials)

THURSDAY – Burgers, Patty Melt, Reuben, etc..includes fries \$9.00

FRIDAY – Fish, Shrimp, or Combo \$8.

When the food is good, how the menu is written doesn't matter; that's true with this little spot. Did you notice that *Chefs* should be *Chef's*? Or that *Spaghetti* should be *Spaghetti*? If so, give yourself two gold stars ☺

A priest, a pastor and a rabbit walked in to blood donation clinic.

The nursed asked the rabbit: "What is your blood type?"

"I am probably a type O" said the rabbit.

[Thanks, Jaimie!]

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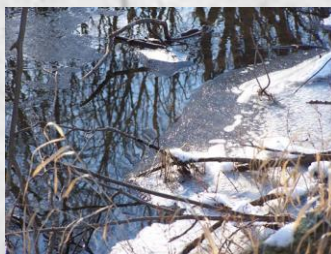
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**Congratulations to our
2024 Winners!**

Win-Win Contest: Sabine Hartmann
Columnist: Margo Armstrong

Winners were randomly selected (because every submission is worthy!)



If You Haven't Submitted Something to the Penwheels Newsletter

2025 IS YOUR YEAR!

Why should you submit something?

Anyone who hasn't submitted something in the last two years (since 2022) will AUTOMATICALLY WIN a prize! Anyone who has submitted in the last two years will be automatically entered into random drawing for a prize, too! Woohoo! You know what they say... More prizes = More chances to win!

How do you submit?

Simple! Just submit something for a 2025 issue. E-mail it (as a Word document if you can; if not, specify what you can send) to Ellen at penwheels@yahoo.com. Put "Win-Win Contest Entry" in the subject line of the e-mail. **Deadline for the Spring 2025 issue is February 15.**

What should you submit?

Articles on the craft of writing (how-to do something) or a personal experience essay (especially something related to your writing, RV travels, and/or involvement in Penwheels) are welcome. Word length: 500-750 words preferred.

Check out the Prompt Challenge for inspiration and send your results to CarolAnn at loracvs@gmail.com by February 1.

Poetry (up to 25 lines) and short stories (up to 1000 words) are also welcome.

Not sure? Go with your gut and send it in!

Who can submit?

Every Penwheels member! If you've never contributed to the newsletter before or if it's been a long time since you've sent something in, *you're especially encouraged*. **Chances of getting published in the newsletter: 99% 😊**

How will winners of the be chosen?

Winners will be randomly picked because every item is always of value.

When will winners be announced?

Winners will be individually notified by e-mail and announced in the Winter 2025 newsletter.

What are the prizes?

Prizes range from Amazon gift e-cards to free books by our members to handmade jewelry. But it's not about the prize, anyway, right? It's more about contributing to your favorite—no, MOST favorite—e-newsletter and supporting the work of your fellow Penwheelers.

Don't wait! Get started on your article today so it will be ready to submit!

Questions? Contact Ellen at penwheels@yahoo.com

Missing newsletters, notifications, or announcements?

All members in our database receive e-mail messages when a newsletter is published. Those messages include a link for downloading the newsletter and have a copy of the newsletter attached. Newsletters are also available here, with past issues: <https://ellenbooks.com/newsletter-archive/>.

If you're not receiving these e-mails, please send your name and SKP# to Joanne Alexakis (joalexakis@earthlink.net) so we can add you to the e-mail list or update our membership listing for you. It's possible we have an old e-mail address on file for you.

If you're no longer an SKP member but would like to receive announcements and copies of the newsletter, please notify Ellen the editor (penwheels@yahoo.com) so she can add you to the e-mail distribution list.

We don't want you to miss a single thing!

Hope you enjoyed this issue!