

CraftFest XX Recording Schedule (2025)

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INDIE PUBLISHING IN A NUTSHELL with Matty Dalrymple (CF01)

TWISTS OR VILLAINS: WHICH COMES FIRST? with Samantha Skal (CF02)

ACTION SCENES: COMPEL READERS TO TURN THE PAGES with Isabella Maldonado (CF03)

PLOT ELEMENTS AND WRITING TECHNIQUES FOR SPY FICTION with Adam Sikes (CF04)

HOW THE REAL WORLD AFFECTS THE FICTION MARKET with Mark Tavani (CF05)

THE MOST IMPORTANT PAGE YOU'LL WRITE with Chris Pavone (CF06)

CREATING COMPELLING OPENINGS with Karen Dionne (CF07)

CONTRACTS 101 with Cheryl L Davis of The Authors Guild (CF08)

FIRST PAGE CRITIQUES with Neil Nyren & James L'Etoile (CF09)

CONQUERING THE MUDDLE IN THE MIDDLE with Hank Phillippi Ryan (CF10)

WORDS THAT THRILL: CRAFTING KILLER DIALOGUE with Tosca Lee (CF11)

WRITING A NOVEL, ONE CHAPTER AT A TIME with Oyinkan Braithwaite (CF12)

SO YOU'VE WRITTEN A NOVEL: 10 THINGS BESTSELLING AUTHORS DO TO MAKE THEIR MANUSCRIPTS SING with David Ellis & Alex Finlay (CF13)

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY: WHAT EVERY AUTHOR SHOULD KNOW with Dwayne Goetzel (CF14)

THE ART OF THE SLOW BURN: CRAFTING PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE THAT RIVALS ACTION with Anne Burt (CF15)

LEARN CRAFT SECRETS FROM A TWO-TIME THRILLER AWARD WINNER with Jennifer Hillier, Interviewed by K.J. Howe (CF16)

CRAFTFEST LUNCH: FINDING THE PERFECT NARRATOR FOR YOUR NOVEL, with Gregg Hurwitz & Scott Brick (CF17)

TROPE VS. CLICHÉ with Jaime Levine (CF18)

ANTI-HEROES: WRITING IMPERFECT CHARACTERS with Darby Kane (CF19)

ASK ME ANYTHING with C.J. Box, Neil Nyren, & John Sandford (CF20)

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SHY AUTHORS with Sara DiVello (CF21)

CRAFTING A RIDE-OR-DIE MAIN CHARACTER with Elle Cosimano (CF22)

HOW TO BREAK RULES TO BREAK IN OR BREAK OUT with Allison Brennan (CF23)

CREATING GOOSEBUMPS IN YOUR READER with R.L. Stine, Interviewed by Heather Graham (CF24)

CRAFTING CHAOS, COMBAT, & CRIME with Jason Allison & Carla Hoch (CF25)

BEYOND THE BASICS – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW IN TODAY'S MARKET ABOUT FINDING AN AGENT with Lori Galvin & Chris Bucci, Aevitas Creative (CF26)

EVERY PAGE COUNTS with Donald Maass, The Donald Maass Literary Agency (CF27)

INSIDE A BOOKSELLER'S MIND with McKenna Jordan, Interviewed by Lisa Unger (CF28)

COMPUTER HACKING IN FICTION with Robert Hansen (CF29)

AN AGENT'S DEEP DIVE INTO QUERYING with Helen Heller, The Helen Heller Agency (CF30)

USING ONE-OF-A-KIND SETTINGS TO SET YOUR BOOK OR SERIES APART with Tessa Wegert (CF31)

LONGEVITY IN THE AGENT/AUTHOR RELATIONSHIP with Dan Conaway, Interviewed by Stacy Willingham (CF32)

AN AUTHOR'S PROCESS with David Morrell (CF33)

VOICE MATTERS: IT'S TRICKY TO PIN DOWN, BUT TOO IMPORTANT TO IGNORE with John Copenhaver (CF34)

THE AUTHOR'S JOURNEY TO THE SILVER SCREEN (AND TV!) with Lee Matthew Goldberg & Susan Walter in Conversation with Peter Malone Elliott (CF35)

MASTERING CRAFT WITH WALTER MOSLEY with Walter Mosley, Interviewed by Samuel Octavius (CF36)

SHOW OR TELL: NOVEL WRITING VS. SCREENWRITING with Matthew Quinn Martin (CF37)

WRITING KILLER SUSPENSE with Melinda Leigh (CF38)

CREATING PLOTS FOR PAGE TURNERS with Robert Dugoni (CF39)

PITCH PERFECT: CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE PITCH - Deputy Director ThrillerFest / PitchFest Susan Lee with Agents Caitlin Blasdel, Liza Fleissig, Sandy Lu, & Alec Shane (CF40)

CraftFest Descriptions:

INDIE PUBLISHING IN A NUTSHELL with Matty Dalrymple (CF01)

This session is designed specifically for first-time authors looking to explore various options for publishing their work. Matty demystifies the process of indie publishing ebooks, print, and audio, providing participants with valuable insights to make informed decisions about their publishing journeys. By the end of this class, attendees will have a solid foundation in independent publishing, empowering them to make informed decisions about the publishing path that best suits their work.

TWISTS OR VILLAINS: WHICH COMES FIRST? With Samantha Skal (CF02)

Knowing your villain is key for developing twists that work, but how do authors keep their villains fresh? This class will explore how to create twists by understanding what makes a villain tick, and how magic often comes from knowing the story that's NOT on the page.

ACTION SCENES: COMPEL READERS TO TURN THE PAGES with Isabella Maldonado (CF03)

Action scenes do not always mean car chases, shootouts, and brawls. Any scene can be made more active by using certain techniques — and they don't have to include explosions. Whether they are likable or not, characters must be interesting and have agency. This class provides an overview of how to create a dynamic scene that compels readers to turn pages, and how the best action scenes have components that are both internal and external to the characters.

PLOT ELEMENTS AND WRITING TECHNIQUES FOR SPY FICTION with Adam Sikes (CF04)

This panel explores the unique elements and techniques for writing spy fiction. It includes a brief discussion about the real world of espionage and intelligence agencies. It then

focuses on the basic components of spy fiction, the unique facets of character and character arcs, ways to develop intrigue and conflict in an espionage context, and the various writing styles that comprise spy fiction. The panel will give attendees a deeper understanding of what makes a novel fall into the spy fiction genre and also help them write authentic stories that are entertaining.

HOW THE REAL WORLD AFFECTS THE FICTION MARKET with Mark Tavani (CF05)

Many thriller writers advertise the timeliness of their concepts—and speculative fiction writers often taken pride in being one step ahead of the moment. But timing is a double-edged sword. While it can work for you, it can also work against you—first with editors, but also down the line with booksellers, reviewers, and readers. How much should a fiction writer factor in what’s going in the real world when conceptualizing, writing, and pitching their book? And what do you do when the real world complicates or undermines your plan?

THE MOST IMPORTANT PAGE YOU'LL WRITE with Chris Pavone (CF06)

Every single book makes its way through the publishing ecosystem largely on the strength—or weakness—of a one-page description. From book proposal to agent query, from editorial-board meeting to sales conference, from publisher’s catalog to Amazon page, from flap copy to publicity pitch, again and again every book is presented to the people who matter via one page. That page starts with you.

CREATING COMPELLING OPENINGS with Karen Dionne (CF07)

The opening of your novel is the one chance you have to grab the reader. In this class, you’ll learn how to craft unputdownable fiction from the very first word — and keep readers turning pages.

CONTRACTS 101 with Cheryl L. Davis, The Author's Guild (CF08)

Learn all about contracts with Cheryl L. Davis of The Author’s Guild.

FIRST PAGE CRITIQUES with Neil Nyren & James L'Etoile (CF09)

First Page Critiques: You know that old saying, “You only have one chance to make a first impression?” Turns out that is excellent advice in the publishing world. Imagine the hundreds of submissions agents and editors receive. In this panel, attendees will learn how to avoid the common mistakes authors make in their opening pages, and how point-of-view, tone, character, setting, and the opening drama must all come together to make that first page stand out.

CONQUERING THE MUDDLE IN THE MIDDLE with Hank Phillippi Ryan (CF10)

Your fingers are poised over the keyboard. You have a rocking first act to your novel, and you even have an idea of how to end your story with a twist and a bang and a shot at certain bestsellerdom. But, uh-oh. Now you've hit 36,000 words, and you have no idea what to do—how are you going to get from that great beginning to the kickass ending? You've hit the dreaded muddle in the middle. But USA Today bestselling author Hank Phillippi Ryan will show you how these central pages can be crafted to intrigue, surprise and delight your readers, and have them turning the pages as fast as they can. Never fear—with practical advice and a take-home list of never-fail specific tips, Hank will reveal the way to the magic in the middle.

WORDS THAT THRILL: CRAFTING KILLER DIALOGUE with Tosca Lee (CF11)

Sharpen one of the best weapons in your writer's toolkit: dialogue. In this pens-out workshop with NYT bestselling author Tosca Lee, you'll learn how to elevate your story with dialogue that reveals character, builds tension, keeps readers turning pages, and sets your story apart in the eyes of editors.

WRITING A NOVEL, ONE CHAPTER AT A TIME with Oyinkan Braithwaite (CF12)

You have a big idea, a first sentence, a solid ending; but somewhere in the middle, you lose the potency and zest you had at the start. I believe every chapter in a novel should be compelling. Let's work together to figure out how to do create chapters that get the story from A to Z, whilst also being captivating in their own right, so the reader has no reason to skip!

SO YOU'VE WRITTEN A NOVEL: 10 THINGS BESTSELLING AUTHORS DO TO MAKE THEIR MANUSCRIPTS SING with David Ellis & Alex Finlay (CF13)

Bestselling authors David Ellis and Alex Finlay team up for this panel to provide practical tips to make your manuscript sing. Early in his writing career, Alex interviewed nearly 100 bestselling writers – Lee Child, Michael Connelly, and Lisa Gardner, among others – about their “rules” of writing. Along the way, he realized that many literary legends identified some of the same rules. This CraftFest panel distills those bestsellers' rules into 10 practical tips – things you can do to immediately improve your manuscript. David amplifies those tips through his own experience as a New York Times bestseller, along with things he learned co-writing with none other than James Patterson. This course is not about “big picture” advice, but small, yet important, things you can implement right away to add a final professional touch and ensure your manuscript is ready for an agent or editor's eyes.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY: WHAT EVERY AUTHOR SHOULD KNOW with Dwayne Goetzel (CF14)

So, you've created something. Now what? How do you protect your work, your name, your rights? This session will touch on copyright, trademarks, licensing, works for hire and what publishing contracts REALLY mean. Get ready for a high-level look at what every author needs to know.

THE ART OF THE SLOW BURN: CRAFTING PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE THAT RIVALS ACTION with Anne Burt (CF15)

Are you writing a novel in which the fear factor comes as much from the dark recesses of your protagonist's mind as it does from the body count? Are you looking to build the kind of emotional intensity that keeps readers turning pages deep into the night? Anne Burt (coauthor of the forthcoming thriller PLEASE DON'T LIE with #1 New York Times bestselling writer Christina Baker Kline) shares techniques for crafting complex characters whose psychological struggles create escalating tension that rivals any action sequence, including specific strategies for pacing, misdirection, and the strategic release of information.

LEARN CRAFT SECRETS FROM A TWO-TIME THRILLER AWARD WINNER with Jennifer Hillier, Interviewed by K.J. Howe (CF16)

Delve into the thriller mind of Jennifer Hillier, who is a master of the psychological thriller — and our 2025 Spotlight Guest.

CRAFTFEST LUNCH: FINDING THE PERFECT NARRATOR FOR YOUR NOVEL, with Gregg Hurwitz & Scott Brick (CF17)

TROPE VS. CLICHÉ with Jaime Levine (CF18)

Whether with the plot, character, writing style, or setting, the themes and devices authors choose for their novels can start to sound the same across different genres. The most successful writers understand the importance of crafting a story that is unique. In this session, we'll discuss how to reinvent and refresh ideas to avoid clichés.

ANTI-HEROES: WRITING IMPERFECT CHARACTERS with Darby Kane (CF19)

There is a reason anti-heroes are so enjoyable to read and to write: they're complex in a way that dominates the page. Are they overdone? That's a different question, and we'll discuss that as well as how to create these perfectly imperfect scene stealers in a way that's authentic to your story.

ASK ME ANYTHING with C.J. Box, Neil Nyren, & John Sandford (CF20)

Fresh from their smash 2024 panel, two #1 bestselling authors and their Thriller Legend editor address all your questions about thriller writing and publishing.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SHY AUTHORS with Sara DiVello (CF21)

Social Media for Shy Authors: How to Build Your Brand, Connect with Readers, and Sell More Books: What's a "brand," why do you need it, and how do you build one? What if social media feels icky, self-promotional, or too me-me-me? What should you post, how often, and when? What if you can't think of anything to say? How do you attract the #Bookstagram community (book influencers) and what about reaching readers? Whether you've been avoiding it, tentatively trying it, feel totally lost, or are actively looking to take your account to the next level, this workshop will empower you with the information and confidence to help you meet your goals. In her corporate career, former PR executive-turned-author Sara DiVello built and ran PR programs for multi-billion-dollar companies—and now she's sharing how these hard-won, insider hacks can help writers build a brand and attract followers.

CRAFTING A RIDE-OR-DIE MAIN CHARACTER with Elle Cosimano (CF22)

Learn how to create a main character who will steal the hearts of your readers and keep them coming back to your series, year after year. We'll review techniques for building a bond between your protagonist and the reader, and how you can maintain that loyalty over multiple books.

HOW TO BREAK RULES TO BREAK IN OR BREAK OUT with Allison Brennan (CF23)

Every writer — published and unpublished — wants to take their stories to the next level ... and we all get stuck. We're hampered by the so-called rules, we question story choices, and we don't know if our stakes are high enough or our conflicts contrived. Our insecurities often stifle our creativity. How do you free yourself from arbitrary rules in order to write a story worth reading? How can you break into this tough market ... or break out of the rut you're in? This session will help you do all that, and more.

CREATING GOOSEBUMPS IN YOUR READER with R.L. Stine, Interviewed by Heather Graham (CF24)

ThrillerMaster R.L. Stine has thrilled young people for decades, with over 400 million copies sold in his Goosebumps series. Join him as he's interviewed by fellow ThrillerMaster Heather Graham, who is the author of over 150 novels herself, and learn how to create goosebumps with your own stories.

CRAFTING CHAOS, COMBAT, & CRIME with Jason Allison & Carla Hoch (CF25)

Need to see the fight in real life in order to get it down on the page? Learn the basics of fighting through live demonstration and hands-on instruction, including hand-to-hand

fighting and weapons basics. Plus, learn how action can add depth to your character. This class is audience-driven and never the same twice.

BEYOND THE BASICS – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW IN TODAY’S MARKET ABOUT FINDING AN AGENT with Lori Galvin & Chris Bucci: Aevitas Creative (CF26)

Your manuscript is finally ready to query. You’ve done your research on pitching and writing a query letter, and you’ve identified the ‘right’ agents for your work. So why are you still getting passes? Here’s the insider secret: agents face this dilemma too, when they’re submitting your manuscripts to editors, and it can be confounding. Agents Chris Bucci and Lori Galvin from Aevitas Creative Management get real about the market today, sharing why you may be getting passes—from factors you can’t control (and need to stop worrying about) to things you can and should take charge of. Get closer to landing an agent and a book deal.

EVERY PAGE COUNTS with Donald Maass (CF27)

Middles can grind, moving the story along with mechanical effort and lack of spark. Luckily, there are ways to enliven every page, from dialogue twists to subtle reveals to reader misdirection and more. Discover sophisticated ways to make every page worth reading in this hands-on workshop.

INSIDE A BOOKSELLER’S MIND with McKenna Jordan, Interviewed by Lisa Unger (CF28)

Join us for a fascinating conversation with renowned bookseller McKenna Jordan, who is also our 2025 Thriller Fan. Learn about the inside workings of bookstores and how you can make them work for you.

COMPUTER HACKING IN FICTION with Robert Hansen (CF29)

In this session, we’ll dive into the flaws often overlooked in fiction through the lens of a life-long and storied hacker. From inconsistent plot structures to lackluster antagonists, we’ll explore how to streamline your narrative, sharpen your villains, and infuse your story with realistic tech lingo. RSnake will ruthlessly dissect tropes but also give you actionable tips to elevate your storytelling and leave your readers on the edge of their seats.

AN AGENT’S DEEP DIVE INTO QUERYING with Helen Heller: The Helen Heller Agency (CF30)

This will be a guide for writers who are starting to submit to agents. There’s an awful lot of advice out there from ‘experts’ that will actually doom submissions from the start. I’ll talk about how to select the right agent; how to approach that agent; and how to give yourself the best chance of having that agent read your material.

USING ONE-OF-A-KIND SETTINGS TO SET YOUR BOOK OR SERIES APART with Tessa Wegert (CF31)

Selecting the right setting for a book or series can help writers craft a compelling story, and it can also differentiate your work and attract loyal readers. This class will include strategies for choosing a setting that gives your book an edge. I'll help you determine whether a real or fictional location is best, and we'll look at existing books and series that use setting to really stand out in a crowded field.

LONGEVITY IN THE AGENT/AUTHOR RELATIONSHIP with Dan Conaway, Interviewed by Stacy Willingham (CF32)

Learn how agents build long-term relationships with their authors by helping those authors build blockbuster careers, brainstorm ideas, and navigate challenging times.

AN AUTHOR'S PROCESS with David Morrell (CF33)

ITW ThrillerMaster and Rambo-creator David Morrell describes the process he uses to prepare and write his novels. The steps include his written conversation with himself, his approach to research, his reasons for choosing a particular viewpoint, his name-selection chart, and the one thing he reminds himself always to do — as well as the thing he warns himself never to do.

VOICE MATTERS: IT'S TRICKY TO PIN DOWN, BUT TOO IMPORTANT TO IGNORE with John Copenhaver (CF34)

In crime fiction, voice is an elusive yet essential quality arising from the blend of character, tone, and authorial perspective, making it both challenging to define and crucial to discuss. As chair of the 2020 Edgar Awards committee, I found voice consistently emerged as a key criterion for exceptional works. This session examines the elements that shape voice, emphasizing its indispensable role in the writer's craft.

THE AUTHOR'S JOURNEY TO THE SILVER SCREEN (AND TV!) with Lee Matthew Goldberg & Susan Walter in Conversation with Peter Malone Elliott (CF35)

From Manuscript to Multiplex: The Author's Journey to the Silver Screen (and TV!): Award-winning authors and screenwriters Peter Malone Elliott, Lee Matthew Goldberg, and Susan Walter take you behind the curtain of all things book to film (and TV). Based on their multitude of experiences in the industry, they will discuss everything you've ever wanted to know—from writing manuscripts with high adaptation potential, to navigating the treacherous waters of film and TV representation, book option deals, and shopping agreements, to attaching talent to your projects, and much, much more. A good portion of this session will be an open Q&A—so come prepared and be ready to speak up!

MASTERING CRAFT WITH WALTER MOSLEY with Walter Mosley, Interviewed by Samuel Octavius (CF36)

ThrillerMaster Walter Mosley is a legend in the writing world, with more than sixty critically acclaimed books and a wide range of incredible characters from Easy Rawlins to Joe King Oliver. Join him as he's interviewed on his craft secrets.

SHOW OR TELL: NOVEL WRITING VS. SCREENWRITING with Matthew Quinn Martin (CF37)

What are the unique techniques and challenges of screenwriting compared to novel writing? What best suits the distinct demands of visual storytelling versus the immersive depth of prose? Attendees will gain insights into how to adapt their writing style for film or television and learn which mode best serves each individual story.

WRITING KILLER SUSPENSE with Melinda Leigh (CF38)

This session will focus on how to use story structure and other writing techniques to keep the tension high—and the pages turning—in your novel.

CREATING PLOTS FOR PAGE TURNERS with Robert Dugoni (CF39)

From your initial query letter to your published novel, the writer must convey that she understands classic story structure. Bob will teach the fundamental relationship between good stories and journeys and use in-class exercises and assignments to help students better understand story structure so they can evaluate their novel's plot. Students will also be better equipped to make educated choices on the opening chapter, to make critical judgments about the middle of their book, and to ensure that the ending brings into collision the forces the writer has set in motion to deliver an emotionally satisfying conclusion.

PITCH PERFECT: CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE PITCH with Deputy Director ThrillerFest / PitchFest Susan Lee with Agents Caitlin Blasdell, Liza Fleissig, Sandy Lu, & Alec Shane (CF40)

A PitchFest-focused session about what makes a pitch stand out.