



News & Views

It's time for Pitchapalooza!

WEDNESDAY, December 11, 2013, 7pm

▶ Our Panelists



Robin Tidwell

Robin is the author of women's dystopian novels REDUCED, REUSED, and RECYCLED, and lives in the St. Louis, Missouri area with her husband, Dennis, and their youngest son. She has a rather eclectic educational background, and finally finished her B.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies. She has held a plethora of jobs, appointments, and volunteer positions, and tries very hard to make it through one week at a time without a crisis.

Robin and Dennis are the owners of **All on the Same Page Bookstore** and **Rocking Horse Publishing** in Creve Coeur.

Robin is available to speak to any size group in the St. Louis metro area. Topics include writing, editing, publishing, marketing, bookselling, and promotion.



Kristina Blank Makansi

Kristina is the co-founder, editor and publisher of award-winning **Blank Slate Press**. Her experience includes working as an advertising copywriter, marketing coordinator, web and collateral designer, writer, fiction and non-fiction editor, and publisher. She has edited numerous business books, memoirs, and award-winning novels. She has designed and consulted on numerous book interiors and covers. Kristina is currently hard at work putting the finishing touches on her mystery, *Oracles of Delphi*, set in ancient Greece and has collaborated on a YA sci-fi novel, *The Sowing*, with her two daughters. She has a BA in Government from the University of Texas-Austin and an MAT (Masters in Teaching) from the College of New Jersey.



Lisa Mikker

Lisa Miller founded **Walrus Publishing, Inc.** in 2008 with the mission to contribute to the Saint Louis Literary Community by publishing talented St. Louis writers. Walrus Publishing has three titles in print thus far and has several more "in the works." Lisa is a member of the St. Louis Writers Guild, the Missouri Writers Guild, and a founding member of the St. Louis Literary Consortium. This year she is honored to serve as the Conference Committee Chair for the Missouri Writers Guild. Lisa has a B.A. in English from the University of Baltimore and an M.A. in English from the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

▶ Four key ingredients to a polished pitch include:

- Your book's hook (and benefit to the reader)
- Your book's summary
- Your target audience
- Your qualifications as an author

Several attendees will get to practice their **one-minute pitch** and receive valuable feedback from a panel of publishing professionals. The rest of the audience will learn from what the panelists have to say. It will be a great opportunity to learn the art of clear communication when it comes to describing your book.

▶ What Do Publishers Want in a Submission?

by Robin Tidwell

- **An interesting story.**
- **Coherent sentences.**
- **Good spelling and punctuation.**
- **And certainly a clean and polished manuscript.**

Many people know interesting stories; many of these same individuals have been told that they should write a book. That doesn't mean that their books will sell. A publisher looks for stories that appeal to a wide audience. For instance, a memoir or autobiography might be interesting to your friends or family, but not necessarily to the whole world—unless you have a “hook.” Perhaps you have accomplished a noteworthy goal or done something that has made an impact or survived a tough situation to which readers can relate.

Good storytelling ability doesn't always translate into written work; the opposite is true, too. You might be very funny in person but not on paper. You might be able to write a gripping murder mystery but mix up all the details in a conversation. Your novel has to be believable, and your sentences have to move the story along. All of your words must convey the story; you can't run off on tangents and leave loose ends.

Writing is a craft and one that you must study. You must be a reader before you can be a writer. You must learn how to write before you can type an entire novel. If you don't know about proper spacing and the use of quotation marks or the different uses of homonyms, you can't be a writer. If you don't know which tools to use in order to build a house, you can't build a house. Simple.

But you can learn. You can practice. You can learn to cut and measure and use a saw; you can start with small carpentry projects. Eventually, you can indeed build that house. The premise is the same: You cannot just sit down and write a novel. You must first learn all about your tools, your words, and the technical aspects of writing. You must practice with articles or blog posts or short stories before you tackle a whole book.

When you send a publisher a manuscript, if it's not as close to perfect as possible, it will be difficult to consider something that may be a good story but needs serious revision. Revision takes time; time is money. However, don't agonize and stress over any perceived lack of perfection. You can only edit so many times without losing your mind! But do make sure that the manuscript is free from repetitive errors, such as spacing issues or bad punctuation.

Incorporating all four of the things publishers are looking for will ensure that your novel has its best chance of being published and will make you, as a writer, stand out—if not for this manuscript, then for another one at a different time. These four requirements will guarantee that the publisher to whom you submit will not roll his or her eyes whenever your manuscript arrives and that your query will be read before the delete button takes it away forever.

▶ A Five-Step Plan To Writing Great Characters

by Kristina and Amira Makansi

In my short career as an editor, I have found that one thing a lot of writers struggle with is building characters. I've always loved character development and found that one of the most beautiful things about reading is getting to know characters the way you know your friends. But as I read and edited more manuscripts, I started to see why authors love to use characters but don't always love to know them.

Characters are useful. They help drive the plot, they provide conflict, and they help your protagonist achieve his or her goal. But they can't merely be useful, because then they are just plot devices or objects. In fact, sometimes, your characters should struggle against you, against the places

you've put them or the ways you've used them. Sometimes, they should speak for themselves.

Here are five questions to answer for each character to make sure he or she is more than just a plot device or an objective to be achieved. You should be able to answer these questions for every single one of the characters in your book who has a speaking role, even a minor one. If you can't answer these questions, it's time to take that character back to the drawing board.

1) What does she want?

This is the most important question. Kurt Vonnegut once said, “Every character should want something, even if it's just a glass of water.” By giving a character a goal, something to move towards, she will become a driving factor in the story. Even if all she wants is a glass of water, she will take actions and make decisions based on her desire to achieve that glass of water. These goals can be anywhere on the spectrum from tiny to astronomical. One character might want to take over the world (the Brain), while the other one (Pinky) is content as long as she's with her best friend.

2) What is he willing to do to get it?

This will define your character's system of morality, which is incredibly important, as well as the personal lengths to which he will go. Is your character a lying, cheating thief who will do anything to achieve his dream? Or is he a tiptoeing sweetheart who wouldn't kill a fly even if it were standing between him and his heart's desire? Does your character want to save the city of Athens so badly that he will run twenty-six miles barefoot to achieve that goal? Or will your character give up en route to achieving his goal and hate himself for it?

3) Why does she want it?

This ties in to question #5 as well. Character history is incredibly important, and authors have to remember that their characters don't exist in a vacuum. Why does your character want that glass of water? Is she in a desert? Is she hung over? Has she been attacked by a vampire and needs water to replenish the blood running through her veins? Explaining why your character is seeking her goal will help define her history as well as the world around her.

4) What does he expect to gain from achieving this goal?

This might seem the same as question #3, but if you think about it, it isn't. The previous question deals with why the character wants to achieve his goal in the present. This question asks what the character hopes to gain in the future. Say your character wants to win the national poker championships. Is he doing it for personal glory? For status? For the prize money? If it's for the money, is it so that he can spend it all on himself? Or so he can use it to pay the medical bills for his ailing wife? The rewards your character hopes to reap by achieving his goal will say a lot about the character, himself—his motives, his intentions, his dignity.

5) Where is your character coming from?

Keeping in mind key factors, such as education, upbringing, family, and other aspects of personal history, will allow you to write deeper, more complex characters. If your character really wants nothing more than to be a star singer, but was mocked and bullied for her vocal talents in elementary school, she might be too afraid to go after her goal. That doesn't mean her goal doesn't exist or that she's not willing to go to great lengths to get it, but it does give her a new obstacle to overcome—her personal fear. And obstacles, as every author knows, are the key to writing interesting books. Similarly, your character might come from a loving, kind family, which gives her great self-confidence and strength but makes it harder for her to be independent or self-motivated. When you build a character's history, complexity and nuance will naturally unfold before you.

These are all fairly simple questions, and I'll bet you can answer them quickly and easily about yourself. But can you answer them about every character with a speaking role in your book? If you take the time to write out quick, one-sentence answers or even a few bullet points for each of these questions, your characters will take on new-found depth and personality, and they will make themselves heard on the page without being reduced to objects or plot devices.