

**What Authors, Teachers and Publishers Are
Saying About Writers' Tricks of the Trade:
*39 Things You Need to Know About the
ABCs of Writing Fiction***

“Getting lost somewhere between the twists and turns, red herrings, and the “invisible said”? Fiction writer Morgan St. James has been there, done that and she shares her best insider tips in *Writers Tricks of the Trade*. Every author needs a toolbox to help them get around corners, navigate tortured plots, and blast past the inevitable writer's block. An alphabet soup-to-nuts compendium of useful advice with no belabored prose, her tips get right to the point, so you can get on with the writing.”

~Carolyn Hayes Uber, Publisher, WorkingTitlez.com

“*Writers' Tricks of the Trade* is one of those rare books that you can read over and over. Read it through once, but keep it handy whenever you are blocked. You can open it to any page at random and find inspiration. The best part is that Ms. St. James gives us ways to deal with every aspect of the writing life, from creation to sales. A great book.”

~John Brantingham, Professor of English, author of *East of Los Angeles*

“Author Morgan St. James has managed to cover nearly everything about writing fiction in a breezy and easily understandable manner. My first thought upon taking a look at *Writers Tricks of the Trade* was, “Why wasn't there something like this around when I began writing?”

~Marilyn Meredith, author of the *Deputy Tempe Crabtree mystery series*.

"No one is born a writer. We all need a few tricks up our sleeves and St. James is the one to give us a few. And she gives them in a warm, readable style."

~Carolyn Howard-Johnson, author of the multi award-winning series of *How To Do It Frugally* books for writers, www.HowToDoItFrugally.com

"Whether you are a novice or an experienced author, you'll find this book so full of vital information, you'll want to explore every page. Best of all, it's written in clear, lively prose."

~Maralys Wills, author of *Higher Than Eagles and Damn the Rejections—Full Steam Ahead*

"Having watched Ms. St. James progress as a writer into an author, I applaud her effort in guiding new writers into this, at times, frustrating industry. *Writers' Tricks of the Trade* is a no nonsense approach to the basics all new writers must know to become well-known authors. After all, as the old adage says, 'You have to know the rules before you can break them.'"

~Jo A. Wilkins, Author, President, Henderson Writers' Group

"Regardless of genre, writing can be a mystery. In these 'Thirty-nine Steps' for aspiring scribes, Morgan St. James makes the conundrum far less daunting. Great, real-world, career-tested tips within these pages!"

~Megan Edwards, author of *Roads from the Ashes: An Odyssey in Real Life on the Virtual Frontier*

"Comprehensive and accessible, *Writers' Tricks of the Trade*

goes far beyond the standard guides. The author shares real-life lessons and provides the foundation for success in an increasingly crowded market. An essential resource for writers at any stage in the publication process!"

**~ Linda Lou, author of *Bastard Husband: A Love Story*
*A tale of starting over Vegas Style***

Writers Tricks of the Trade is cleverly presented in alphabetical order for easy access, and you can also use it for inspiration as well as reference. Randomly pick a chapter to read before you begin your writing day. You'll refer to this handy, user-friendly book on the ins and outs of writing and marketing often.

~Jackie Houchin, Reviewer, www.jackiehouchin.com

Morgan St. James has written a terrific book that every writer should own. This is a modern, street-smart, working handbook from an author after my own heart. Get smart. Get inspired. Get this book.

**~Tony N. Todaro, Author of "*True Light*", "*Nexus of Swords*", "*Eyes of God*", and "*What Comes Around*".
*President and Co-founder of the Greater Los Angeles Writers Society.***

WRITERS' TRICKS OF THE TRADE

*39 Things You Need to Know About the
ABCs of Writing Fiction*

MORGAN ST. JAMES



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all of the people who helped me in my journey from novice to novelist, and later to speaker, presenter and columnist. I learned from every one of you. To my husband Hubert Kottlove, who supported me every step of the way and to my mother Rosetta. Although she left us in 2007 as she approached her 97th birthday, her spirit is always in my corner urging me on. “You can do it, honey.”

OTHER BOOKS BY MORGAN ST. JAMES

Women on the Edge

Silver Sisters Mysteries co-authored with Phyllice Bradner

A Corpse in the Soup

Seven Deadly Samovars

Vanishing Act in Vegas

Writing as Arliss Adams:

Devil's Dance

The Devil's Due

Stories in these Anthologies:

Chicken Soup for the Shopper's Soul

Chicken Soup for the Soul: Celebrating People Who Make a Difference

The Mystery of the Green Mist and Other Stories

Dreamspell Nightmares

Dreamspell Revenge

The World Outside the Window

Writers' Bloc II

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To my family who supported my ambitions and my sister Phyllice Bradner who co-authors the Silver Sisters Mysteries. We learned from each other. To Scott Garrett for his brilliant cover, and good friend and author Mike Dennis who shared so many of his resources to make this book possible.

To all those who read or have read my columns in Examiner.com and take the time to comment and to the people who attend my workshops and talks—this book is for all of you.

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INTRODUCTION

I've had many careers in my life, but never thought writing would be one of them. However, in the late 1970s I became a writer somewhat by accident. This book offers a quick reference for many of the daily challenges a fiction writer faces. Picture it as a platter of *hors d'oeuvres* seasoned with suggestions.

Talented authors have devoted whole books to some of the individual topics I've touched upon between these covers, but this isn't that intensive type of book. I personally have shelves filled with books I refer to constantly when I need in-depth information. You will find some of them listed in the back. This is more of a guide—a potpourri of tips and tricks that cast a wide net over the art of writing fiction. The majority of the topics are suitable for both published and aspiring writers. A few of them are followed with hands-on exercises.



Back in the 1970s my partner and I owned an interior design firm in Studio City, California. Through a mixture of talent and luck, we designed some very interesting projects. A few of our clients were sports figures or people in the movie business.

Designers West, a prestigious West Coast design magazine, approached us about writing an article for them. Of course, we said yes. What incredible exposure for only the price of writing an article. But there was a hitch. We were designers, not writers. The photographers took photos to accompany our article, and the deadline for submitting the copy inched closer and closer. Then the deadline date picked up

momentum, speeding toward us like a train roaring into the station. The day before the submission was due, we had nothing—*nada*, not even a word.

Even though the wastebasket overflowed with crumpled papers, we rejected each stab at writing the *how-to* article about a beautiful wood floor my partner created from packing crates. The remaining hours ebbed away as the sun descended in the summer sky—a reminder of how little time we had left. So we sipped wine and commiserated. We had failed and would look like fools. Fortunately, desperation sometimes spawns genius. The idea of writing our article like a noir mystery instead of a serious techie piece penetrated our air of defeat. The editor might hate it, but anything was better than coming up empty-handed.

There were no computers back then, just trusty typewriters. We brainstormed, and the words literally flew from my fingers to paper. “The Case of the Disappearing Crates, or Things Are Not Always What They Appear To Be” took shape.

The detectives on TV are not the only ones constantly solving seemingly unsolvable problems. In fact, the head of Burton Advertising jokingly calls us the Starsky and Hutch of the design field.

This day started like any other day. We were sitting there in our Ventura Boulevard Studio reviewing blueprints and drinking tea when the telephone rang.

By midnight, we had the equivalent of a one-page pulp fiction mystery. Our design sleuths searched waterfront docks, freight depots and industrial area warehouses, hunting for crates. The piece wrapped up with the phrase “case closed.” The editor loved it. That story ran in the August 1978 issue of *Designers West Magazine*.

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When I went to the supermarket and saw the magazine on the stand, a wonderful feeling invaded my soul. I was hooked. I was a writer. I still have a copy of that magazine, and if you would like a copy of the story, just email me at stjameswriter@gmail.com.

Still working as an interior designer, I wrote many more articles for *Designers West* and also wrote for other magazines and newspapers, covering a variety of topics as far afield as dementia to barter.

In the late 1990s my sister Phyllice Bradner and I decided to write our own funny mystery series. We both had lots of publication under our belts and figured it would be a snap. After all, she won Alaska Press Club awards for her journalism, produced the copy for political campaign pieces for the Governor of Alaska and a U.S. Senator. Her tour book and cookbook are still listed on Amazon. As for me, I had many published articles and feature stories. How hard could it be? Looking back, we had absolutely no idea what we were getting into.

Rejection notices piled up for our first Silver Sisters Mystery. The discouraging lesson we learned was credentials in one segment of the writing world do not mean you know the "Tricks of the Trade" of another. In our case, despite our publication credits, we were ill-prepared to write fiction. Our writing was professional, but contained many *faux pas*. It turned out that techniques that screamed *yes-yes* in our body of work were complete *no-no's* in fiction.

Unlike many unpublished authors, we actually received quite a few personal responses from agents. Although they rejected our submission, the notes said they could see we were polished writers and mentioned areas where we were missing the boat. A big weakness was understanding point

of view. At the suggestion of one agent, we researched, found and hired a manuscript evaluator. In the process we learned the craft of writing fiction. After a year and quite a bit of rewriting, *A Corpse in the Soup* was published and launched the series.

In the ensuing years I attended many writers' conferences, took workshops and continued to learn. I now give workshops on the very things I didn't understand back then.

Fast forward to early 2010. Through the years I'd learned so much, I was delighted to be able to share it. I'd taken on writing the column *Writers Tricks of the Trade* in two editions of the online newspaper www.examiner.com. Each column presents an overview of another aspect of writing fiction. Many of the topics I presented in workshops and talks at writers' conferences and writers' group meetings found their way into my columns.

I'd wanted to write a "how-to" book for quite some time, and in many ways this book brings me full circle. I started my writing career with how-to articles, and now I'm covering a craft I am passionate about. I love teaching in a fun way. *Writers Tricks of the Trade* is a compilation of the conversational, lighthearted information in my columns dealing with the many of aspects of writing fiction. Topics have been expanded, edited and augmented to best offer an overview of what writing fiction means.

It's a bit of the approach I took when studying interior design. I never finished my degree because I was mainly interested in taking courses critical to the design field I aspired to enter. I didn't have time for ones I knew I wouldn't use. Even though I lacked a degree, or membership in ASID, through my self-imposed curriculum I became Director of Design for two developers, established design

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departments and trained designers who had the degree I didn't. I wrote many articles targeted to degreed designers. That's my objective with this book. To give you things you can use immediately, but allow you to pick and choose areas for further exploration.

Just like food in a buffet, many well-written books are there for the choosing. *Writers Tricks of the Trade* is your appetizer—a little about a lot of things.

Bon appétit!

MORGAN ST. JAMES

✦ CHAPTER 1

A is for AGENT

An agent wants to represent me ~ Things to consider before you sign a contract

The six sweetest words an unpublished, or in some cases published, writer yearns to hear are, “An agent offered me a contract.”

All the hard work has paid off. It's time to reap the rewards. Or is it? Many reputable agents evaluate an author's work with an educated eye. When they are enthusiastic about an author's work, they often offer representation contracts in accordance with accepted guidelines. Unfortunately, there are as many or more who call themselves *agents* just waiting to see how much they can get from their next pigeon.

The legitimate agent is dedicated to promoting their clients' work, negotiating contracts and much more. They take on a client because they feel the author's work is professional, compelling and most important, something they can sell to a publisher. But what about the sharks who offer the moon and don't even deliver a little piece of green cheese? Their mission in life is to relieve the “publish-me” hungry writer of as many dollars as possible.

This doesn't mean an innocent writer who fell for the scam couldn't have gotten an agent. Some fleeced authors are truly talented, but they jumped at the wrong deal. Others are writers who are not proficient at their craft and may never be at the stage where their work warrants publication. The latter group usually has convinced themselves that their baby will be a blockbuster. In fact they might be out shopping for the outfit to wear on *The View* at this very moment. Whatever the case, shady agents shower the hapless client with compliments, all the while painting brilliant word pictures of untold success. Who doesn't love being told their work is wonderful? These scam artists reel out the blarney as long as the writer continues to shell out money.

A personal experience with a scam artist

Early in our fiction writing experience, my sister and I received an acceptance letter from one such agent, who shall go nameless. The \$300 deposit, requested in advance, allegedly would cover printing and submissions. After the thrill of knowing an agent wanted us, the demand for front money niggled at us and eventually waved a giant red flag. The agency was listed in multiple literary agents' guides and had seemed legitimate. However, when we checked Preditors and Editors, we discovered numerous complaints against them. Although they did not list clients and would not divulge them, we did some detective work and found two authors whose work had been tied up for a few years. The only action they'd had relative to this agency was writing more checks for "advances." We decided to have some fun.

We emailed them thanking them for the contract, but let them know we searched the internet and found various complaints. Here is where we had the fun. In the next line

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we claimed we would still be willing to have them represent us, but wanted them to reimburse themselves from royalties in lieu of the requested \$300 deposit.

The response broke speed records. The very the next day their answer arrived.

Regretfully, Mr. Agent has suddenly become extremely ill. Therefore, he will not be able to take on any new clients. Unfortunately we must withdraw the contract and offer of representation.

Was this an amazing coincidence? After all, only a few days before they gushed about how much they *loved* the manuscript. Obviously they didn't love it enough to defer the \$300 until they made the big sale their offer letter alluded to. We later discovered our manuscript had needed lots of work at that point including rewriting big chunks of it. They would probably have offered the services of a dandy editor who would have kicked back a referral fee to them. Any questions?

Are you ready for “prime time”?

Here is what we determined our problem to be, and this part of the story is mostly for unpublished authors who are ripe for this common rip-off scheme. We wrote a good query letter, but the manuscript didn't stand the test.

Fortunately, after requesting and reviewing the manuscript, a few other agents offered sage advice. Both of us had been published but not in fiction. We clearly didn't understand point of view and many other nuances that weren't part of writing magazine articles, political print copy and, in my sister's case, a cookbook and touring guide. These helpful agents said they felt we were good writers and offered suggestions about what we needed to do to write fiction

successfully. In other words, we simply were not ready.

Of most importance, was the one who suggested hiring a manuscript evaluator for *A Corpse in the Soup* and said we should take workshops related to fiction. Once we learned more about the “tricks of the trade” of writing fiction, we recognized and fixed the problems in our manuscript.

Rule number one. When choosing an evaluator, editor or book doctor, make sure they have experience in your genre and their style is compatible with your style. Be leery if the *agent* who just loves your work recommends a dear friend who is also a wonderful editor and will polish the manuscript for thousands of dollars. Make sure to research that editor’s credentials before signing a contract or shelling out a deposit.

I heard one horror story at a writers’ critique group involving the recommendation of such an editor. This author confided that although the editor had no actual clients she could talk to, the woman had been married to an award-winning author and therefore must know how to edit and do a good job of it. That’s kind of like touching the hand of the maid who works for the cousin of a movie star. Marriage is not a credential unless it means she was the editor for her husband’s work. Yet the author relating this story was starry-eyed and couldn’t wait to send off her manuscript and check.

Before my sister and I hired anyone we had to agree upon the choice. Both of us were totally in tune with our evaluator although we never met her. The entire process was accomplished by email and phone because she lived on the East Coast, I lived in California and my sister lived in Alaska. The manuscript was rewritten with wonderful Jen as our instructor. Rather than sending us chunks of rewritten

material she discussed problem areas, made suggestions, then asked us to send her our rewrites. She even gave us reading assignments and recommended how-to books. The lessons we learned shaped the way we write today.

If you are lucky enough to get a personal message, even if the book is rejected, listen to what agent tells you. If you see a pattern forming—several agents saying the same thing—it's time to take a hard look at your work with an open mind.

What should the new author look out for to avoid being scammed? At the top on my list is the item that alerted us—Up Front Fees—and the list goes on from there. Always check sites like Predators and Editors and Writer Beware, as well as searching the internet for information about both the agent and agency.

Fees

An agent is supposed to make their money from selling their client's work and keeping a percentage as a fee. Most agents won't charge in front for their services. Sometimes disreputable agents cloak their grab for up-front money in a bogus description like "representation initiation fee," or "marketing fee," or a "retainer," promising to refund it from sales. If that's the case and they don't sell your work, it's not hard to do the math.

During a discussion about agents at a writers' group meeting, one woman said she was sad that she finally had to give up her agent. When asked why, she answered in a dejected tone, "I couldn't keep paying the \$2,000 a month retainer." This aspiring author had been ripped off royally to the tune of about \$8,000. When agents charge legitimate fees they are most often deducted from sales, not paid for in front or as a hefty retainer. This poor lamb had absolutely no idea what the agent was using her \$2,000 a month for

and upon further questioning we found she had never even received a list of submissions.

Signs of inept skills or bungling

Maybe an agent really is sincere, but just doesn't know how to do what it takes to sell your novel. If they are a part-time toll booth worker, but also work the phones in the morning before starting their regular job, or say they know they can sell your novel because their first cousin's wife's friend is in the business, all I can say is: beware. What training or credentials do they really have? What qualifies them to take your precious baby—the one you've nursed along and pinned your hopes to—and toss it out there waiting to see if it lands somewhere? Pitching a novel to a publisher or editor is a one shot opportunity—one shot only. If you burn all those bridges with the wrong representative, you usually can't go back to the well.

More about editing service referrals

"You have a wonderful, compelling manuscript and with a little editing it will be a blockbuster. Now let me recommend a great editor for you..."

Red flag number two. The agent may be recommending an editor, packaging company, or book doctor. The title means nothing. What it means is that if you are foolish enough to proceed that way, the "agent" will receive a gratuity from their pal, and you may receive a mediocre edit. I've been shown some editorial commentary and a review from alleged "New York editors" that could more easily win an award for fiction than the novel itself. The authors were innocent lambs, truly believing their book received an excellent edit or review (and an expensive one at that) because the editor was highly *recommended by my agent*.

One of those authors showed me her review and asked if I would read the manuscript and give her a quip (a one or two line review or comment.) I did look at the editor's review. The first several paragraphs extolled the magnificence of this novel, but the glowing review contained spelling, grammar and punctuation errors. It went on and on about the possibility of a publishers' bidding war because the novel was so good. Curious, I decided to read the first chapter. I never got past the first few pages. The idea was good, but the writing was awful.

Website, email addresses and how the agent presents themselves or their company

This isn't as high on the list, but is important. The cyber world has evolved and if a legitimate business doesn't have a website, it seems like they aren't really a business. It doesn't have to be super-fancy, but it should look professional, impart information and give some references that qualify them as an agent.

By all means, think twice if the agent's email address is something like agentsareus@funkysite.com. It most likely is a sign of rough waters ahead.

Most of all don't jump into anything without checking it out thoroughly. Visit websites that flag complaints, network with other authors, attend conferences and pitch your work, ask for recommendations wherever and whenever you can, but for heaven's sake, please never fork over your hard-earned cash to chase a dream before you know who you are dealing with.

Here are some worthwhile websites current at the time of publication. Without fail, always look up the agent, agency or publisher on [Writer Beware](#) and [Preditors and Editors](#). These are listings with various types of good information,

but all are very clear that their listing of the agent is not an endorsement. It's up to you to check things out.

Agent listings, some with “tracking record” feature

<http://www.writers.net/agents.html>

<http://www.agentquery.com/> (Includes a Query Tracker)

<http://www.ebookcrossroads.com/agents.html>

<http://www.scriptologist.com/Directory/Agent/Literary/literary.html>

<http://pred-ed.com/pubagent.htm>

<http://www.sfwaworld.org/for-authors/writer-beware/agents/>

Writers Guild signatory agents and agencies

<http://www.wga.org/agency/agencylist.aspx>