

How to ADD FICTION to your mix

By Robert Bittner

“I wanted to be a novelist long before I wanted to be a journalist,” recalls Camille Noe Pagán, who as a journalist has written for *Forbes.com*; *O, The Oprah Magazine*; *Parade*; *Self*; and many other national publications and websites. Despite that early urge, nonfiction has been the foundation for her writing career. “I’m essentially a pen for hire,” she says.

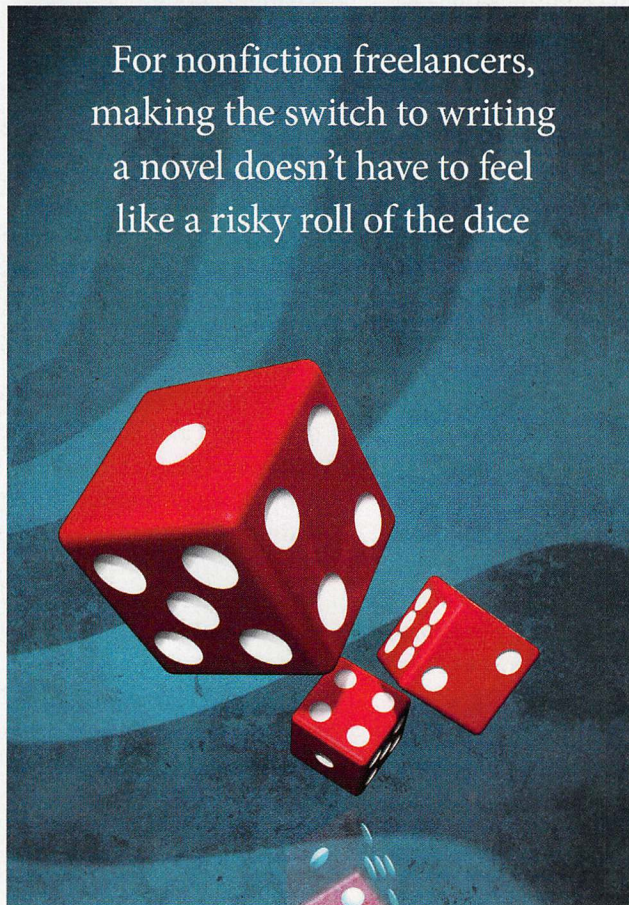
That’s often a good thing. Writing articles and books is a great way to build a profitable full-time freelance career. Yet for many successful nonfiction freelancers like Pagán, the dream of being a novelist never quite disappears.

Sometimes we feel the need to stretch different muscles or tackle new challenges. Maybe we tire of all the business that comes with being a freelancer. Maybe we just want to feel free again, unconstrained by word counts and market needs. Fiction can be the fix we need, giving us the opportunity to do some truly creative writing. While journalism will continue to pay the bills—at least for the foreseeable future—fiction can feed our creative souls.

Pagán agrees, and she recently decided to return to her first love. “Fiction is my passion,” she says. And it has paid off: Her first novel, *The Art of Forgetting*, was published in 2011.

But it’s not an easy passion to pursue,

For nonfiction freelancers, making the switch to writing a novel doesn’t have to feel like a risky roll of the dice



Thinkstock

especially for those of us accustomed to getting assignments and, likely, paychecks, based on queries alone. Fiction writers, unless they’re household names, must devote months, if not years, to writing a finished piece before agents and editors will even look at it. “There’s no guarantee that a manuscript I’ve spent months and months writing will sell to a publisher,” Pagán notes. “And even if it does sell, there’s no guarantee people will buy it. It’s a gamble, both financially and psychologically.”

It is a gamble. But there are ways to put the odds in your favor, whether you’re a full-time freelancer or a part-timer with the added responsibility of a day job. Even better, the tips that follow can enrich your writing life even if the resulting fiction never leaves the comfort of your computer.

Make room for fiction.

Time management is one of the least sexy, least compelling concepts I can imagine. But after talking with a number of nonfiction-writers-turned-novelists, I’m also convinced it’s the key ingredient for making writing dreams come true. It’s tough enough to schedule time for emailing editors, writing queries, telephoning sources, and checking the Web. But if you’re trying to do all of that while also setting aside time for the kind of creative brainstorming

required for a novel, you have to make room in your schedule and in your life.

Monica Bhide, author of the nonfiction book *In Conversation With Exceptional Women*, had spent two years working on the first draft of a novel, “writing a little here and there. I had so many pieces everywhere,” she says. “Finally, it came to the point where I knew I had to sit down and write the first draft out for real. So last year I spent three months working on the novel and not pitching any nonfiction. I just had to

finish it. Now I have a second draft, and it's a long way from where it was."

Sarah Jio, a magazine writer and now a three-time novelist, including the upcoming *Blackberry Winter*, was unable to set aside such a discrete chunk of time for fiction. Solution? "I stayed up late into the night writing, didn't watch much TV, and always wrote on weekends," she says. "I worked really hard to juggle both fiction and nonfiction."

Juggling can be a challenge, particularly if we're constantly switching between the deadlines, interviews and research that go along with journalism and the plotting, character development and brainstorming that typify fiction. To stay on track (and keep your brain from spinning in circles), it can help to build boundaries between these two worlds—say, working on fiction in the morning and nonfiction in the afternoon.

That was the approach taken by Allison Winn Scotch, a former full-time nonfiction freelancer who is now a *New York Times* bestselling author of four novels, including *The Song Remains the Same*. During her transition into fiction, she made it her goal to be "very, very organized" regarding her workday.

"After taking my kids to school, I'll come home, work out, and give myself, say, 30 minutes to screw around, surf the Web, eat breakfast, etc. But at 10 a.m., I absolutely force myself to start my work. I'm not quite as specific as 'Brainstorming from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m.' But I block out chunks of time for each project. So from 10 a.m. until noon, I may work on fiction. Then, after lunch, I'll work on celebrity interviews or whatnot."

Make the most of your time. To help manage her limited time, Scotch likes to keep "a very detailed to-do list and cross things off as I go. Without the list, I would lose track of a lot of what has to get done." Jio is similarly task-oriented, using a daily planner she checks often.

But Jio took another step that helped her to wring the most from her writing time: She cut back on lower-paying magazine work. "I was fortunate to be at a place in my magazine career where I had many good assignments coming my

way," she admits, "so I was able to pick and choose."

Turning down assignments may seem counterintuitive to building a career. But by taking on fewer yet better-paying jobs, she had fewer deadlines to manage, fewer topics to research, and fewer interviews to set up. Yet her income stayed fairly stable. The reduced nonfiction workload freed up time for her novel.

Many first-time novelists also draw on their nonfiction work for their novels to make the most efficient use of their research time. Bhide, a cookbook author, is putting food front and center in her novel-in-progress. Hilary Davidson, a travel writer with more than 18 books and many articles to her credit, was able to draw on her own experiences when she made the main character of her crime mysteries *The Damage Done* and *The Next One to Fall* a travel writer.

The carryover works both ways. "In the course of doing research for a novel, you naturally come across information you can use for a story pitch," says Marie Bartlett, a 20-year nonfiction freelancer now writing a historical novel. "I made a trip to Tombstone, Ariz., to get a sense of the place for my novel. But the secondary purpose was to look for stories about Tombstone. I'm pitching those stories to magazines now."

Press 'pause' if you need to. Chances are, most writers would enjoy the chance to simply sit and write, unhindered by the concerns that come with having to earn a living. Since that's unlikely for most of us, over the course of writing a novel we'll probably find ourselves at one some point or another needing to focus more of our attention on paying work. Maybe it's a juicy assignment we can't refuse. Maybe it's an unexpected need for extra income.

Whatever the situation, we may have to make the choice to do the otherwise unthinkable: set our novel—our passion project—aside for a time. That does not mean we're giving up on it. It does not mean that we won't finish it. It simply

means we're making the reasonable business decision to move a speculative project to the back burner.

That was the case with my own first-novel-in-progress, *Lost Time*. After 25 years of writing and selling hundreds of articles and five nonfiction books, I realized I'd lost some of my passion for nonfiction. It was time to shake things up. So, like so many others, I returned to my first writing love, and I started a novel. I gave myself a year to write it.

I was halfway through my first draft—and already six months behind schedule—when a committee from my alma mater contacted me. My very young college was preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary, and they wanted to produce a commemorative, coffee-table

IT CAN HELP to build boundaries between these two worlds—say, working on fiction in the morning and nonfiction in the afternoon.

book chronicling the school's history and key figures. They wanted me to write it.

I couldn't say no. The school has had a lasting impact on my life. I met my wife there. Since graduating nearly 30 years ago, I've rarely missed a homecoming. I serve on the alumni board and support the school financially. This was a project I believed in wholeheartedly.

But saying yes meant putting my novel on hold. That could have been potentially fatal to my first draft (already behind schedule). But it wasn't. I think there were three reasons:

- I wasn't stopping because I was stuck or because I'd lost interest in my fiction story or faith in my ability to tell it. An opportunity came along to earn a nice paycheck doing a project I'd really enjoy.
- I was already halfway through the first draft of my novel. That meant half the story was written and much of the rest was plotted out. When I was ready to return, I could pick up where I left off.
- The new project had a short and definite deadline. My text had to be written during the next four months. That was a minimal delay I could accept.

These were the reasons that helped me decide it was OK to make room for an unexpected assignment. Your reasons may differ. But only you can decide whether the new opportunity is worth the immediate benefits and the potential risk to your novel-in-progress.

For me, it was. Still, I can't tell you how eager I was to return to my novel. And I was especially excited to discover just what creative energies my nonfiction project would now pour into my fiction. Because I've learned that writers who go back and forth between nonfiction and fiction actually encourage a kind of mental cross-fertilization that stimulates creative imagination and their ability to solve problems.

Reap the benefits. “Sticking to one area—for example, writing strictly fiction or nonfiction—is like drilling a single well to find oil or a single hole to

find a hidden treasure,” explains Gerard Puccio, professor at the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State University. “If you want to increase the probability of a breakthrough—a novel and useful idea—it's important to think in lateral ways, to pursue different paths. The more raw material we put into our creative process, the more it stimulates new creative connections, insights and products.”

As we move back and forth between journalism and fiction, we are actually training ourselves to get better at both. “Research shows, over and over, that creative thinking skills can be developed,” Puccio adds. “So, when you learn and practice strategies such as cross-fertilization, the more you will be able to apply this skill on a regular basis.”

On the fiction side, that could lead to more inventive solutions to plot problems or the ability to develop more

intriguing characters. It could even mean being so creatively stimulated that we can say goodbye to that old standby writer's block, and get better acquainted with an elusive state known as flow.

Flow is the experience of being so immersed in an activity that we lose all sense of time. You start a new chapter, planning to jot down some rough ideas, and the next thing you know two hours have flown by. Of course, flow isn't exclusive to writers, but fiction writers have an advantage when it comes to achieving a flow state: We can often simply sit and type, writing straight from our imaginations, with nothing but a keyboard between us and our ideas.

Nonfiction writers have more challenges. There are notes to consult, facts to check. And there are all of those market requirements: Do they like sidebars? Bullets? What's the word count? Part of being a successful nonfiction writer involves thinking like your editor.

“The challenge for nonfiction writers who tackle fiction is being able to let go and give yourself permission to put your audience aside,” says Susan K. Perry, a social psychologist, author of *Writing in Flow*, and a nonfiction freelancer working on her first novel. “Yes, you'd like to sell this and have it published. But you have to put your inner critic aside in order to let the words and ideas come.”

Get started. If transitioning into fiction is your goal, you can make it happen. “You will find the time, even if it takes years to write that first draft,” Pagan says. “And you'll try again if your first or second or third manuscript doesn't receive representation or sell to a publisher. At the same time, fiction is hard and there are no guarantees, so it's silly to chuck your day job”—or abruptly stop taking on nonfiction assignments—“to write a book. Do it in your spare time or on a part-time basis.

“It's been said countless times before: If you write a page a day, you'll have an entire manuscript written in a year.”

Robert Bittner

Robert Bittner is a veteran freelancer currently revising his first novel, *Last Time*.

Tools for the transition

IN MANAGING A writing life split between nonfiction and fiction, some writers rely on little more than a daily to-do list and standard word-processing software. But if you're seeking a change of pace and fresh inspiration, consider these software options:

Scrivener (Windows, \$40; Mac OSX, \$45; free trial; literatureandlatte.com) is a word processor and project-management tool designed specifically for novelists (although anyone working on a large, detailed writing project can use it). It allows you to outline and structure your ideas, make notes, manage multiple pieces of research—even lay out your structure on virtual 3-by-5 cards you can reorder however you like.

Evernote (free download for Windows, Mac and most portable devices; evernote.com) is software designed to “help you remember things,” combining typed notes, audio, Web clippings, etc., in a series of virtual folders and binders. Not as writer-friendly as Scrivener, but powerful in its own way. Particularly useful is its ability to sync automatically across devices: Take notes on your iPad in the field and they will automatically sync to Evernote on your desktop and laptop. Revise a chapter outline on your desktop and it's automatically updated on every other Evernote-equipped device.

Self-Control (free download, Mac OSX only; visitsteve.com/made/selfcontrol) allows users to block access to email and Web sites for a predetermined period of time so that you can focus on your writing without distractions. As the website notes, “You could block access to your e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter for 90 minutes, but still have access to the rest of the Web.” The downside is that once you start the timer you cannot stop it—not even by restarting your computer.

Freedom (Windows/Mac, \$10; free trial; macfreedom.com) is similar to Self-Control but takes an all-or-nothing approach to blocking distractions. Once you set the timer, Freedom simply cuts off all Internet access until the timer runs down. Unlike Self-Control, restarting your computer will cancel the program.

—R.B.