

TD: Hello! Welcome to the Writer's Tool Kit! I am Tananarive Due. Steven Barnes will also give his separate writer's tool kit. We've been writing for a very long time, writing for a living for a very long time and we have slightly separate approaches on philosophies, so there will be some repetition, but some of it is our unique voice. What's really important to remember as writers, people who want to write, is that writing is very much a head game, meaning much of your time is going to be spent fighting a fear rather than actually writing. In fact, the battle against fear is the biggest reason so many writers never become writers. My philosophy is this – if you're writing, you're a writer. I distinguish between published and unpublished writers, but when people say 'oh, I want to be a writer' and then you talk to them and you find out they've written pages and pages and pages of manuscripts that are unpublished, it's like 'No, no, you don't want to be a writer, my dear, you are a writer. Congratulations!' There are many people out there calling themselves writers who in fact are not writing and who should not be calling themselves writers. So, first of all, congratulations! You are writers if you are writing. Journaling, blogging, journalism, fiction, non-fiction, screen writing, poetry – you are writers. But like many writers, you are in danger of falling off of the path.

There are 4 stages, much like a disease, where writers fall away from their dreams, they are complicit in the destruction of their own dreams. The first is, obviously, they don't write. The most common excuse for this is 'I don't have time'. Writer's block is another one. 'I don't have time' and writer's block and there's so many other excuses. Well, I say to you, when I was a reporter for The Miami Herald, I had a co-worker named Ana Veciana-Suarez who was an aspiring novelist, but like of us, was tied to her day job, doing a lot of journalism work when unexpectedly, tragically, her husband at the age of 35, died. And left her with, I believe, with 4 or 5 children, they had a newborn, so they had a young baby and several children of varying ages. And in her grief she discovered the time to write, because she had to. Her life had been turned upside-down. So, when theoretically she would have had the least time to write, she got more creative about finding spaces to write. She incorporated family babysitters to watch the kids, she got up at 5 o'clock in the morning and she wrote and published her first novel. So I don't have patience for the excuse 'I don't have time to write'. Of course we have time to write. When I wrote my first novel, I was sort of wrapped with 'I don't have time to write', except I guess at that time I'm rollerblading after work every day and maybe that time I'm going to the movies or that time I'm watching cable... When I got serious about writing my first novel and, again, it was after hurricane Andrew in 1992, so my life had been turned upside-down. And that was when I decided mentally it's time to stop dancing around my first novel and actually write it. I let go of the rollerblading, I let go of the movies, my cable bill went unpaid for months, because I was just so focused on get up early – for me, that was 8, I didn't have kids then, 8 is early – from 8 to 10, scramble to work, I was supposed to be there by 10, I got there around 10:30, right until I fall asleep and I did that for 9 months until I finished the manuscript. I had a deadline. Deadlines are incredibly helpful. Even if it's an artificial deadline, even if it's a loved one, a spouse, a co-worker who says 'Hey, you're going to have to have that ready by September 1st.' Deadlines are incredibly useful. So we do have the time to write, we just tell ourselves we don't.

Writer's block almost is worthy of its own discussion, but I will say this about writer's block – when I feel like I have writer's block, there's two things going on. I have an emotional blockage against the material itself that makes it very difficult literally to put my fingers on the keyboard. Or, more commonly, I have a research hole, a gap, like in a historical novel, you can't see the room, you don't know what clothes they're wearing, you haven't done the homework. Research is our own trap, so beware, because researching is not writing. It might feel like it's

getting ready to write, it's preparation, it's useful and necessary, but it is not writing. If you spend 5 years researching your book, but you're not writing it, you are not writing it, you are researching it. So that is the first thing that gets off of the path, we don't write.

Secondly, we don't finish what we write. Does this sound familiar to anyone? Piles and piles and piles or, I should say now, files and files and files of unfinished manuscripts. And you get frustrated with the revision process. Revision is hard. That's what they say writing is rewriting. Revision is hard. Revision is not as much fun as first flush of romance with the new piece and you're just like 'woohoo, I like skating too', but then, the hard work of the relationship with your piece begins. Not so much fun, is it? But so much fun to look at those first 5 pages and try to figure out why they're not grabbing you. So that is probably where more writers fall, is that they don't finish what they write. That's a big one. Completion is very important for a writer. Completely right.

Now, sometimes we do finish, but we don't submit. We finally finish the short story or even a novel perhaps and it's just sitting in the drawer. When I wrote that first novel, *The Between*, after all that 9 months of not hanging out with my friends and not watching TV, I submitted one place and it didn't get accepted and I just let it sit for another year, I started writing *My Soul to Keep*, just as 'okay...I guess I wasn't ready'. So, submit. Submit and not be afraid to submit. This is where the rubber hits the road, ladies and gentlemen. This is where an editor has an interaction with you. Often, it's a negative interaction perhaps. That's what we're all afraid of, we're afraid the editor will say no, but you must submit or you are not being a true writer.

Or you submit, but you don't keep submitting, as I made that mistake with *The Between*. I submitted once and then I let it go for a long time. I once saw a presentation by the author Karen Joy Fowler and she made the point that she had been a member of a writers group for many years and there were great writers in her group. She said she wasn't the most talented in the group, she wasn't even the hardest working in the group, she admitted. Then she brought out a huge folder full of papers and dropped it with a thud on the desk and she said 'I was the one who could take the rejection'. So rejection has been a part of the writer's life since the begging of writers. And there's no avoiding it. I wish I could avoid it, I wish I could say 'oh, you will have a smooth journey and no one will ever reject anything that you write'. But that's not the case. My novel *The Living Blood* was rejected by the publisher HarperCollins, which had published my first two novels. Various reasons given, many of them probably market place and committee meeting related, but whatever it was, I didn't think it was what they wanted, it wasn't up to snuff. Now, that book later went on to win an American book award, so the correlation between rejection and eventual success is not what it might seem. You can't take the rejection personally. Have you chosen the market carefully? Have you looked at the other work that that editor is publishing? Are you using an agent if it's a novel length manuscript? It's very difficult to publish without an agent and getting an agent is its own journey, that's a whole separate conversation. It's difficult. If it weren't difficult, everybody would be publishing. It's very, very difficult. So stick it out, don't be afraid of the rejection. In fact, when I was in high school, I had a senior English teacher. She was awesome. And when I told her I wanted to be a writer – she herself was a writer or wanted to be a writer – and she said 'In order to be a writer, you have to wallpaper your wall with rejection slips.' And while that was sort of a disappointing image, I thought 'okay, I'd have that, that's something I can wrap my mind around'. So when I first started submitting my short stories and my little rejection slips came in and I was rejected by the

best, Story magazine, Playboy magazine, I was aiming at every market I could, every time I got one, I put it up on the back of my door until I had a row on the top and then I started the next row and I felt a growing sense of pride in my rejection slip collection. I mean, I was a long way from a wallpaper on my wall, but I was on the path and I could see that I was on the path. So try to reframe your rejections into something meaningful and keep on the path so you don't fall off.

Now, once we've established that you must write and you must submit and you must keep submitting, the question of how to write comes to bear. It's difficult to sort of prune through all of the ideas that you have running in your mind and figure out the form. A lot of us want to write novels and Steve will probably talk about this too, because we are in agreement on this. Novels, for the beginning writer are kryptonite. Because you can get lost in the woods of a novel in progress for years and years. I have a very good friend, one of my mentors, one of my editors as a young person, who polished one of my short stories to professional level of quality where I can go and send it out. He was published when I met him. Was writing a novel for years and just lost his faith, not just in the novel, but lost his faith in writing fiction. And this is a very, very real danger, writers. Because we sometimes think that our writing life is about this one project. And sometimes you're a writer who only want to write one story. There's this one thing you want to get out, a memoir perhaps, your autobiography, a story about someone you admire and that's it. And that frustration with that progress will determine whether or not you wrote anything else. I understand that a little better because that's just that you wanted to write the one thing, but a lot of us want to just write, we want to tell stories, we want to share different kinds of stories. So how unfair is that? That because one novel project didn't work for us that we're going to give up all the other stories that we could've told? Not everything we work on is meant to be published, by the way. Some of our manuscripts, in fact, the majority of the manuscripts of a beginning writer are learning tools. That's how I have to look at screenplays. How many screenplays do you think got produced out of all the screenplays that I've written? Most screenwriters are writing as a learning tool or just for the practice of it or because you have to write a certain number of them before you finally sell one. So I look at it that way, this may not be the one. Maybe you go on a few dates, but this may not be the one you marry. I was writing a novel in college called *Separate and Related*, which actually I still think it's a good title. And it was a failed novel because it was overambitious, it was about characters who were nothing like me, who had had experiences nothing like the ones I had and in retrospect, what was I even thinking? But it was in the course of writing that novel I saw those first bursts of professional level writing. And it was enough of a guide post that when I could take the skills I had learned working on that book, 100-200 pages in, jumped to the next project. So I still knew how to balance my dialogue with my character's interior monologue, I still knew how to open a story, I just didn't know how to finish that one. So when I say 'finish what you write', don't mistake me to mean that if a project isn't working and sometimes they are not working for several reasons, sometimes they're not meant to work, sometimes they were ill-conceived and no one in your circle could tell you that because they weren't studied enough themselves. Sometimes you have to walk away. And it's okay. Maybe come back 5 years later, don't let that prevent you from working on other things just because I said in this lecture 'finish what you write'. You have to sort of have a balance there, you have to know the difference between finishing something that is going to help you grow or trying to finish something that is going to continue to drag you down and further away from your dreams. I often tell my clients and my students, if you have a novel idea, that's great, don't say that I told you to never work on your novel, but while you're

working on this novel, take out a piece of it as a short story. Maybe the prologue. Maybe something that happened before the novel begins. As an exercise for you to get to know these characters better or to paint this world better. Write 15 or 20 pages and start submitting it. One of the best writers, unpublished writers that I have ever met, was a client of mine who was working on a novel for years and I was like ‘This is beautiful prose! Why doesn’t the world know your name yet?’ And I gave her this advice, she pulled out a piece of it and she was published immediately. Now, immediate publication doesn’t mean your life will change and you can quit your day job, I don’t even suggest it, we’ll talk about that later. But it gave her so much confidence, she was interviewed by a local magazine, she was in an anthology that was edited by a very widely respected writer and she got her name out there, she was able to bring that editor on as her PhD advisor. The connections, the confidence, the satisfaction of publication are so much faster when you’re writing short fiction than a novel. And besides that, not even from a market place consideration, especially if you’re a learning writer – and by ‘learning’, what does that mean? I guess that means that you’re a writer who struggles with completion, whose writing is not up to professional writing yet. And how do you know that? Friends, writing groups, courses. I mean, it’s hard to know, we’re not objective about our own work. If you’re not publishing, you might consider yourself a learning writer, if you’re trying diligently and you’re still not getting out there... The short story form is a much better playground and will give you much more exposure, even for an established writer. I’ve been publishing novels since 1995. Periodically I have also published short fiction when editors ask me to. I have found, especially recently, since I’ve been teaching, I’ve been focusing more on the short fiction, less on longer projects. There are readers out there who are just discovering my work because I was in Lightspeed Magazine or because I was in this anthology or that anthology, they didn’t even know I was a novelist. So there’s a benefit to the short fiction even if you’re an established writer, much less if you are a writer who’s trying to get the attention. Who know? You might get on a Hugo ballot, you might win a prize, you might be selected for Best American Short Stories, you don’t know and you’ll never know if you’re not submitting. And there are some great online programs to help you do that. I mean, this is a paid one called duotrope.com, I don’t know if you heard of it, it’s a submission service, it helps you track your submissions, it helps you look at market places. I used to use Writers Market when I was younger, but now, online there’s just a lot more resources. So in terms of finding the places to publish, they’re out there. Don’t feel like because you don’t read short stories yourself, that there aren’t places publishing short stories. And if you say ‘well, I don’t like short stories and I don’t think in short stories’, possibly that’s because you’re not reading enough of them. The more short fiction you read, I think you would be surprised at how much more inspired you would be to write your own or to see the short story within your novel or to see the essay within your non-fiction book. When I was working on a memoir with my mother, *Freedom in the Family*, a mother-daughter memoir of the fight for civil rights, one of the ways I’m quite sure we were able to secure a publisher was because we published an essay from the book content and got noticed that way. We got it out there years before the actual book itself was published and probably a year and a half before we sold it. So there are all kinds of reasons to concentrate on shorter pieces. I don’t want to see you guys lost in the woods. It scares me when that happens to writers, because it can happen to any of us and it’s such a fragile thing to want to write, to subject yourself to the work, there’s so many things that can really let the air out of that tire.

Now, also, in terms of what to write. Once you're just starting out, follow your passion. Don't even think about the market, that's my advice. Because I'm telling you as an established writer, when I think about the market, it kills my creativity, it really does. And I had a conversation with an agent recently, he said 'in terms of that whole thing, I see what's selling and all that...', it's not the approach for someone at my level in my career. Find your voice. Find your unique voice, because your voice, your story is what's most likely to be successful, not emulating and imitating. Let's say you're publishing. Let's say you've published some short stories, maybe you've even been shopping a novel, you're getting a lot of great feedback 'wow, this is really well written, I like the pacing, but we just don't publish this, it doesn't work for us'. Then you want to start to look at this Vin diagram in terms of what you want to write.

This circle represents all the creativity that is within you, this is what you want to write. Way over here is that novel you've always wanted to write in Klingon cling on, just complete Klingon where you would have to use the Klingon to English dictionary to even understand what's going on. That is not probably the one that's going to sell for you. Okay? The more obscure and I mean really obscure it is, the harder it will be to sell. Now I'm thinking 'Well, what is selling?' What's out there in the market place? I can look at the book shelves, I can look at the bestseller lists, I can ask my friends what they're reading – I get some idea of what's selling. This is what's selling, right here. And now, here is like some trashy novel you would never even think about writing, you might as well just give it all back before you even put your name on something over here. Okay? But what's this? Here's an overlap between what's selling and what you want to write. This shaded space, once you, as I said, have done the work to find your voice – you're not aiming to write this, this is your natural voice – once you've done work to find your voice, this is where you can concentrate if you want to find market place success or increase your chances of market place success. What do I mean by market place success? You find a publisher who will publish your book. That is huge success. That may be a \$5,000 advance, that may be a \$2,000 advance. It may be a \$50,000 advance – not usually, don't count on that every time. That's market place success. And once you've cracked that, once you've found a way to sort of reach the publisher, get pass the committee meeting, you might be on your way as a writer.

Now, when to write is a big question. And time management is the biggest question that comes up for me with my writing clients, it's the main reason I have writing clients, because they just want someone standing over them to give them a deadline of authority, so-called authority. A deadline worked for me. I think one of the biggest problems we have as writers is we're looking for the 4 hour block. Where can I get that 4 hour block in the day to just disappear into my fiction? Well, guess what? Unless you're writing full-time, it's hard to find that 4 hour block. In fact, that 4 hour block may be not existent, you may have one hour if you get up early in the morning before you go to work and you may have 90 minutes after your kids go to bed in the evenings. Or, God forbid, you have 30 minutes on your lunch break and that's an exit where you can just sort of sit at your desk. I used to write fiction at work and switch my screen over when my editor came. I'm not advising you do that, but writers do it. This is a tough war here, writers have to do what they have to do, there will be casualties. Write in the margins. Write in the margins and even if you're not going as deeply into flow as you would like, sometimes just rereading what you wrote last night will keep the pot simmering long enough to get you through the evening. So if I have 30 minutes at lunch, I'm not going to wrote much, but even if I just wrote maybe a sentence or revise a sentence that I wrote last night, I will have enough energy

from that and feel enough longing from that so that at 9:30 when I'm already getting sleepy, I'm still simmering, though, so I can pull that energy into the evening and maybe keep my eyes open past 10:30 and write 3 or 4 new paragraphs. Sometimes that's what you have to do. It's not pages, it's paragraphs, it's sentences. Write what you can. It's great to have a quota. When I'm writing a novel, I have a 3 to 5 page daily quota if time permits. That doesn't sound like a lot, 4 or 5 pages, but you know, it is a lot. So if it's a very dense novel, 3 pages is a great achievement. If it's less dense, more sort of action, then 5 pages, I can kind of zip along through those scenes. Have quotas, have an outline. Even in a short story maybe. If you're learning short stories, you're not sure how to write a short story, sketch out – in a novel outline, some people have a scene by scene summary, I'm not even saying that. Look at what they're do in screenwriting, it's called the beat sheet. This beat is what happens. Fred wakes up, Fred notices an intruder in his home, Fred calls the police – these are the beats of the story, this is what happens. So let's say you want to write a short story, write 6 beats. If you're writing a novel, you might have a page of beats and then you start to expand them into paragraphs and that turns into what in screenwriting would be a treatment and then, in writing novels and fiction would be an outline. This is how it looks. Some of you are thinking 'I hate outlines'. Most of you may be thinking 'I hate outlines'. I hate outlines, too. The fun of being a writer is we're free. But guess what happens when you're free? You don't get the book finished, you don't get the project finished, you can't collect your thoughts, you can't tell if there's any dare there. When you have an outline, you have something either you can look at or you can show your friends, your readers. Preferably readers, not friends, although some friends will prove to be good readers. Learn to distinguish between people who love reading everything you write and people who are actually good at judging everything you write. But you have something you can show them and they can say 'You know, this middle part doesn't really grab me. It feels like your character isn't really doing anything except reminiscing about stuff.' Wow, you haven't realized that! Well, guess what? All you've written is a 3 to 5 page outline at this point – not a big deal. You can switch it around, find ways to jazz it up. If you'd been charging ahead with your writing, you'd be 300 pages into a novel, it's a little more problematic now to go back and kill all your babies and say 'Oh, yeah, this whole second part sucks. What am I gonna do?' It's much less heartbreaking to have to go back and revise an outline than it is to go back and revise pages and pages and pages, because you couldn't let yourself see it wasn't working. I am a big, big, big believer in outlines. That's been reinforced in screenwriting where you really just can't even proceed without an outline, because so many people have to agree that this is what the story is. I've collaborated, I had to use outlines for the same reasons, we all have to agree. And I also learned writing fiction and more commonly, in non-fiction, you can sell a project based on an outline and a couple of chapters. That's huge. Now, it takes a more established writer for that sometimes, it's more common in non-fiction than it is in fiction. But if it's non-fiction, you're off to the races. If you're writing about something that's interesting, it's a topic that they're interested in, they can see this outline, you've thought it out, you have your research lined out, your first chapter is awesome – cha-ching! – you might have a check right then and there that gives you time to write the book. We sold my memoir with my mother, Patricia Stephens Due, based on the outline, the article and 3 chapters. That was it. So outlining is not just a pain in the butt assignment from grade school or junior high school, it's something that can really kick you on track as a writer and it's one of your most important tools, I believe, is having that outline. And if you can't make yourself write the outline, imagine how difficult it will be to make yourself write the book.

Now, let's see what's next. You have your book, you've done your work, you've done your outlining, it's great, everyone in your circle agrees it's great, it's as good as it's going to get. Don't hold on to it forever, it will never be perfect. At a certain degree, you might need an editor's input, because they love 80% of it, but 20% of it we'd rather you do it this way. Think of it as a template of what your final project would be and start submitting it.

Now, short fiction, you can submit that on your own using whatever, read magazines, see who's publishing what's similar to what you write, send it there, use something like duotrope.com et cetera. But the other question is that of an agent. And, yes, we are still living in a world where very often you need an agent. I like to tell the story that I was working for the Miami Herald once writing a story about another writer and I talked to the writer's agent in the course of writing my story and it turned out we went to school together, she lived in my dorm 'Renée Zuckerbrot! What's up? Oh, my gosh! That's so funny, you're an agent' – no, she was an editor, she was an editor at the house. And I said 'You're an editor and I'm writing a novel. This is a great match.' And she said 'Really? When you get an agent, have him send it to me.' Okay...so yeah, friend from college still needs the agent. And it can be very frustrating to find an agent. Sometimes you can get around it, there are a lot of startups, straight to eBook companies where you can submit yourself. Research these market places, there's some very interesting markets emerging. But in terms of traditional publishing, how do you find an agent? Research the same way you researched your book online. One of my favorite cheats is to look at the acknowledgments page, see who represents this great author you love whose work is so similar to yours and submit to that agent, see they're interested in picking you up. Yes, it can be as difficult sometime to find an agent as it is to find a publisher. It is frustrating. Again, I wish I could smooth that up for everybody, make that easier. It is what it is.

At a certain point you may reach the decision that you want to publish it yourself. Now, here is what I say: proceed with some caution. The good news is this: the market has changed such that it is never been easier, never been easier to publish your own work. Never been cheaper to publish your own work. You can throw it up on Amazon. Amazon is the biggest eBook publisher in the world. Hey, it sounds great! Right? Here's the problem. Vetting is what creates good writers. And as much as you may hate those rejection slips you've been receiving, every once in a while someone is going to send you a handwritten note and on that handwritten note, they're going to school you on what is wrong with this manuscript. And if you throw your manuscripts out as eBooks before you've been through school, you risk not just an unsuccessful project and just sort of the depression of having a book out and everybody hated it, which you know, we all go through that, but it's actually not good, it's an embarrassment now. Two years later you look at it and you go 'Oh, my gosh, what was I thinking?!' And remember this, when you self-publish, you also have to self-edit, you have to find your illustrator, you have to become a business person. And I don't know about you guys, but I am writer. I'm trying to be a business person, that's one of my goals in life, but it doesn't come naturally to me. So it's a different form of energy and while it seems like a quick fix, sometimes it can actually become a problem. So I would not rush into self-publishing. But the good news is, if you feel like you're ready and, let me tell you, I have had conversations with writers who were very good, who won prizes, who talked to every editor I've mentioned, talked to every agent I've mentioned, maybe it was time for her to self-publish. I would've done that, I had a short story collection that my big commercial house wasn't interested in. I was this close to throwing it up on Amazon myself, but I found a publisher for a very small advance that was willing to do it for me. And I'm willing to

take that small advance and share 50% of my eBook profits or whatever of the other book profits, because they are doing the work of telling people it's coming out, they're doing the work of submitting me for prizes, they know the market place in some ways that I don't. It's important to have someone in your team who can do the work, because it takes a village to create an author. And, yes, even in a traditional house you end up doing a lot of publicity. Yes, you have to have the Facebook and the Twitter and the social media and say 'Hey, aren't I great?' But only within limits. And I tell new writers this all the time. When I go to conferences and I see writers with those tables set up and those postcards they paid for out of their own pocket and they're usually there out of their own pocket, I feel tired just looking at them. I mean, I was that writer when I was young. I was luck, my publisher was making my postcards and my book marks and all that, they were paying for my plane tickets. But you can go broke trying to promote yourself as a writer. I knew a writer who was on the New York Times bestseller list and I wanted to walk in his footsteps. So I said 'What do you do? How does this work?' He said he spends 50% of his time on the road. I was like 'Wow! I have a family, I can't spend 50% of my time.' And that was with other people paying for it. Nevermind if you're paying for it yourself. And sad to say, that same writer passed away at a very young age, in his 50s, as a very young man. So beware, you literally can push yourself to death trying to promote your art. That is not a joke either. So be calm about it. There are options if you need to get out there and you feel like you don't have time to wait, but if you can go through the process, study the markets, study other writers, go to writers conferences; writers and agents, that's why they're there, to talk to you. They may not answer a letter if they're not at the conference, but if you go to the conference and you go face-to-face, that is the point of their presence there. They want to meet hungry writers, they want new material, you have to go them, to their watering holes and humanize the process. Just like in Hollywood, they say it's who you know. Well, it's very true. But the good news is it's possible to get to know people, because there are conferences every day where editors, agents and writers are in conversation, exchanging business cards. And you can do that too.

So those, I think, are some of the most important tools in the writer's tool kit and I hope they will be helpful to you. Thank you!

TD: Do any of you have any questions for me? You have a card? I'll read the card.

'How can beats be used to define chapters?'

TD: I would say, yeah, that's a good question. Definitely a beat probably is not a chapter, one by itself. But once you've clustered – and I can't give you a number, because it would really depend on how much you're covering in each beat. Some writers will write very, very broad beats and some will be much more specific. Maybe 3 to 4 beats might be a chapter. And you can kind of tell, like let's say you're switching point of view characters – for me, that's a big marker as to needing a new chapter when I'm switching. Sometimes it's a new section. I am not a fan of mingling point of view in the same section. I've seen writers do it deathly. Zora Neale Hurston veers between her protagonist, some buzzards, I mean, she made it work, but for most of us mere mortals, you're going to want to section off by point of view character and that's a good place to have an ending for a chapter. But also just invent wise, you know... Has there been a passage of

time? Really, you want to end a chapter on a little bit of cliffhanger. So if you had a big event, that's good place, let's stop here and that way your reader who's up at 10 at night and thinks they're going to stop reading after chapter 2, can't help reading on to chapter 3. But that is just sort of intuiting. Once you get a sense of what the whole story is, you can kind of intuit where your natural chapters should begin and end. I hope that's helpful. I mean, that's something that's very, very different for every project. It's really hard to generalize about it. Any other questions?

'When you were talking about rejection slips, the only thing that came into my mind – J. K. Rowling.'

TD: Yeah, right? How many times... And I probably wouldn't've submitted that any places. I mean, really. Yeah, those kinds of stories are so common. And it's unfortunate, but sometimes it's our fault. I was looking through some old rejection slips and found one from Betsy Mitchell – and I met Betsy Mitchell years later – but this was like when I was in college, I have never met Betsy Mitchell and I sent her a story and she said 'I love your story, it's interesting, but we're looking for something with some sort of supernatural development.' And then I thought 'Well, why did I ever sent her the story if it wasn't what she published? She's a science fiction publisher. Why was I sending her a story that didn't have a science fiction or fantasy element?' So you really have to be smart about where you submit. Some people like to sort of blank it every market. That is not a wise use of time and it creates a burden for editors. You have to really research and see what people want. Another question.

'You seem to say that a section based on recollection was not so good. What if there is a section in recollection? What about recollection mixed with present point of view?'

TD: We talked a little bit about flashbacks in a previous session. Yes, absolutely, I love flashbacks. I mean, *The Good House* takes place in 3 different time lines, back and forth. Finding the thematic threads that tie them together. So even though the events may not be directly related – and sometimes the events are directly related, like if I pick up a book that's 30-years-old and I'm reading it in the present timeline, that's a great transition for me, to go back to 30 years later when that piece was written and who wrote it and what they were thinking at the time. So recollection and flashback is an important part of writing and to meet character building and point of view, because I like to know where the characters have come from, what has brought them to that place. You just have to find that balance. The balance between what's happening now. Your book should be about what's happening now, in my opinion. Now, there are probably exceptions you can think of from literature and that's what great about great writers, it's they can just sort of walk all over the rules. But if it's not happening now, why am I reading about now? If the bulk of your story is in 1930, then guess what? You're writing a historical novel, just own up to it and start the darn thing in 1930 and do the research, see what people were driving, see what people were wearing, stop trying to dance around what it really is and write what it really is. That's your hint. If you're spending too much time elsewhere and your present story is just sort of a thin covering over the real story, then take that cover off and find what the real story is and write that. Now, if you've done enough work in the present that your readers are invested and you want to have a chapter that is a flashback, absolutely – why not? If it fits thematically in what you've set forth, if the reader won't be completely confused, I mean, they should know why they're reading it, it should make perfect logical sense why it's here at some point, maybe

not in the first paragraph, but by the end, I should understand why it's here. Then, yes, you can do that. But know that you risk throwing your readers off the horse a little bit if they're not interested in those chapters. And write little small stuff. My flashback chapters of *My Soul to Keep* – and it made sense, it's a 500-year-old immortal, so you're almost begging to know what he's life was like in previous years – but I wrote them in italics. And I had a reader, Oprah, tell me over the phone – this is what happened – I interviewed Oprah Winfrey over the phone as a newspaper reporter. I didn't even say I was a writer, really. I had some self-restraint there, but I've published two books by then and I was dying to tell her, but I didn't and I was cool. I had a friend who gave me the address for Harpo, so I send her a copy, I said 'Hey, I enjoyed our interview, here's my novel, *My Soul to Keep*.' And I kind of forgot about it. Well, two weeks later I got a phone call. 'Tananarive, this is Oprah. I was considering your nook for my book club.' And, you know, I didn't hear anything she said after 'Tananarive, this is Oprah' and then, just when I was recovering from that, I hear 'book club'. Long story short, she had been considering the book for her book club, but because it had the title of another book – there were two books called *My Soul to Keep*, they were published basically within a year of each other – and they had had problems with duplicate title in the past, so that was basically the end of that conversation. My editor was like 'Well, change it!' It's over, it was like one of those ships – it's gone, you can't waive from the beach when the ship's already moved on. But what she said that really struck me in terms of flashbacks was that she was skipping over my flashback chapters because they were in italics and she didn't like italics. Now, that was when I forgot I was talking to Oprah and I was like 'But that's when you really learn what his past was, blah, blah, blah'. She didn't care. So this is my point, don't overdo the distinction between your present and your flashbacks like, say, with italics. I've had some situations where I write the flashbacks in present tense even. It's a different tone. But you have to be careful about experimentation with style, because sometimes you'll put off an editor. Or dreams in present tense and the rest of the story is in past tense et cetera. So there are ways to interweave all of those elements. My only caution, again, is if it's too much about the backstory and not enough about the present, then your story itself is usually flawed in some way. Not always, but usually there's a flaw, there's something missing in the present story that you need to holster to support those flashbacks.

'Don't we, as an audience, recognize flashbacks and dreams in italics? Isn't that kind of standard?'

TD: Well, I'm thinking about it now, I can't think of the last time I read a book that used extended pages upon pages in italics. I know that thoughts – Steven King has thoughts... I would've moved away from that because, honestly, you don't have to put thoughts in italics. Sometimes it's just so obvious that it's a thought, it stands out, especially if you're doing a very close point of view narrator. If the thought was 'What the hell?' – do I have to put that in italics, really? No. I can leave that, that's clearly a thought. Any other questions?

'Can you speak more about writing for young adult audiences and the challenges of adapting genre fiction to a younger audience?'

TD: Well, thank you for this question. Yes, I will. I discovered that many of my protagonists, naturally, were veering toward younger people. I would say starting with *Blood Colony*, it was about teenagers and by *My Soul to Take*, I just sort of removed some of the potty

language and sexuality to veer it even more toward teenagers, because I did hear complaints from parents. So you have to sort of decide for yourself whether you're interested in that crossover audience (number 1) and if it's worth taking out the sex and the potty language, but you'd be surprised actually at how racy some of these young adult novels really are. So it may not take as much work as you'd think to adapt a project to the younger audience. When Steve and I collaborated in *Devil's Wake* and *Domino Falls* – those are young adult zombie series. There's a new category called new adult, by the way, which is like early 20s, which is intriguing to me. Why they need a category? I don't know. But a lot of adults, new adults are reading so-called young adult fiction. And really what distinguishes it is not just, say, primary protagonists are teenagers, but they're driving the story. So it's not enough if it's just like 'okay, a major character is a teenager', but there are other characters who are driving the story more. You can really tell, if your teenager is driving the story, then yeah, there's potential to get into that young adult market place, which is actually really hot right now. And I would say, other than that, yes, read the top young adult fiction, don't try to jump in without having any understanding of like why *The Hunger Games* is so popular et cetera. But then, adhere into your own voice and your own storytelling style. Just wrote it and be mindful that you don't want to be too explicit sexually – although, again, you'd be surprised at what you can get away with – and some of the language that maybe wouldn't be appropriate for 14 or 12-year-old, because, you know, some young adult will skew it to that younger middle advanced reader and you might expand your market place opportunities if you can reach those readers as well. But you're not writing down. I think it's really, really important not to write down because you're writing young adult. In fact, some of the most creative fiction right now is coming out of the young adult market place.

So, is that it? Thank you all and I appreciate your questions!