

EXPANDING THE CREATIVE CYCLE

Ideas for writers

Craig Spence



WORKSHOP OUTLINE

Introduction

What kind of writer am I?

**The Expanded Creative Cycle
for Writers**

Why do we write?

Why do people read?

Literature's niche

**Examples of Change
in action**

**Getting it Down
(Post Yak Activity)**

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The Boy From Under

READ IT ON
YOUR MOBILE
YOUR TABLET
YOUR COMPUTER
OR YOUR eREADER

Craig Spence Writer

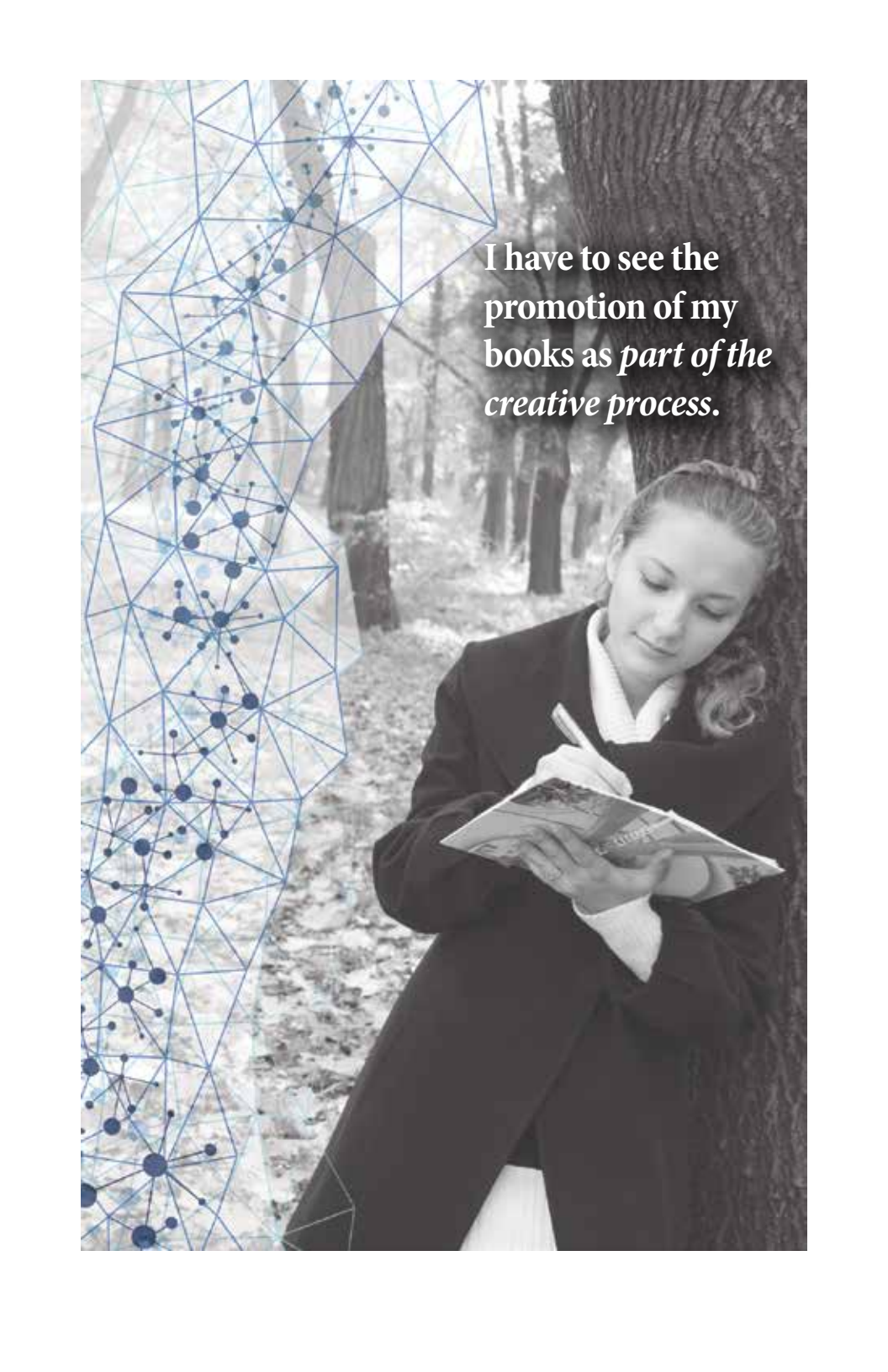
There's more
to successful
writing than
just writing!

Setpiece
Theatre



LOOK INTO THE CHEMAINUS MURAL GAZER WORKSHOP

[Click here for a whole new take on the famous wall-art of Muraltown, B.C.](#)

A black and white photograph of a woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a dark coat over a white shirt, sitting on the ground in a forest and writing in a notebook. She is leaning against a large tree trunk. The background shows a path lined with trees. A blue, semi-transparent geometric overlay consisting of interconnected lines and dots is positioned on the left side of the image, partially obscuring the forest background.

I have to see the
promotion of my
books as *part of the
creative process.*

Introduction

For many of us writing is a vocation – something we ‘can’t not-do’. But because we are so immersed in the process of getting words onto pages, we sometimes do not pay enough attention to what happens before we actually start writing and, then again, after our stories are ‘finished’.

I plead guilty, but with mitigating circumstances. Writers need to be selfish and self-absorbed. We have important, inspiring things to say and need to demand time and space to cast those thoughts and feelings into words. It’s easy to get so wrapped up in those intense, creative processes that we forget to take ourselves and our ideas out of the closet at key points in the writing cycle.

That’s especially true when it comes to taking breaks to promote our books. There’s more to that vital task than simply finding a publisher after typing ‘The End’ at the bottom of a manuscript. Many writers have been surprised at how little conventional publishers can actually do to promote and sell listed books. Publishers will help revise and edit a work, to make sure it’s as close to perfect as it can be; they will attend to the fine arts of design and printing; they will get your title distributed, and manage sales and royalties. But, with the exception of their ‘name writers’, most publishers do not have large enough budgets to actively promote every author in their catalogue. It’s left up to the writer to get out there and promote his own work.

Many writers – myself included – ignore the obvious, though. We labour on, hoping readers will gravitate to locations where our books are sold and pick us, even if our titles are placed spine-out amidst a thousand others on the shelves. In an age deluged with heavily marketed imagery and words, that delusion will almost certainly kill the hopes of anyone who thinks the point of creative, literary endeavour is a story coming alive in the mind of a reader.

Unless I see my writing as a means of self-exploration – a perfectly valid and encompassed motive – it seems clear that I have to consider readership strategies at the start of my cycle, and include the promotion and sale of my books as *part of the creative process*. That last bit is key. What I am proposing here is not ‘marketing’ – a word that gets bandied about as if it can be stripped of its pervasive and perverting manipulations. I’m looking to adapt and present stories in ways that will stimulate readership without undermining the clarity and integrity of my literary intent.

It’s a fine line. How far should I go, writing to an audience? At what point am I compromising my work to generate readership through alternative media? What do I mean when I say promotion of a book should be part of the creative cycle? That’s what this booklet and workshop was to be about – it’s actually gone quite a bit farther!

Please join me if you want to consider expanding and redefining your writer’s cycle too; and tell me if you think I’m going too far down a doubtful road. First, though, an overview of some of the terms I use, describing my creative cycle.

MY WRITER'S PATH

What kind of writer am I?

There are two takes on this question: How do I write? And what do I write? Separating the answers into neat compartments is impossible, but for the purposes of this booklet I can provide pertinent generalizations.

I write in a linear mode and adhere to a fairly consistent routine. My actual writing starts early in the morning – I'm usually at my computer by 6 a.m. when I'm up to speed, and will write until noon if I can. Ideally, I like to use the afternoons for research, promotional planning and taking care of business. Rewrites and revisions fall into the creative portion of my day.

My writing straddles several genres. I have two published works that fit into the fantasy-adventure for young readers category. More recently I have been writing adult fiction that includes mystery, historical drama and will include speculative fiction from a dystopian-futuristic perspective.

Without going into it too deeply, all my work is rooted in an existentialist philosophy that sees human beings as representations of a life-force that can only manifest in natural forms – that is, I can only conceive of spirit as an eternal, cyclical urge expressing itself in matter, which it transforms into nascent, emerging consciousness. We are a facet of the universe awakening. From my POV meaning and purpose only come into the world with a consciousness capable of manifesting and perceiving sense, and feeling compassion.

Why am I telling you all this? Because my beliefs deeply influence what I write, which in turn determines who I am becoming as an author, and why I want to connect with readers. In short, writing is a life-altering activity.

And there's more. For 30 years I worked as a journalist and communications manager, occupations that have given me an unusual set of skills. I am experienced at writing media releases, taking reasonably good photos, creating web sites, page design and layout (including books), video production suitable for online use, and social media development. Again, this brief CV is included because my background has a direct bearing on the methods I might choose to reach readers.

One last note and I'll be ready to move on, describing my emerging creative cycle. At the heart of my personal philosophy is the notion that we're here to make a contribution. As a husband and father, or member of a community and larger society, I am happiest when I give of myself. The prospect of death has no silver lining, but I'll be able to leave this world with some degree of dignity if I can say I gave as much of myself as I could while I was able. My stories are the biggest 'give' I can make to my larger community; the reason I want to make money selling them is so that I can position myself to contribute more.

The Expanded Creative Cycle for Writers

On the following spread you will find a graphic representation of my creative cycle, which I thought of titling somewhat whimsically the *Ionic Chart of Creativity*, 'Ionic' referring to the mileposts on the chart, which all end in 'ion', the suffix that transforms verbs into nouns, actions into representations. It struck me as well that an ion is an atom that has either lost an electron or gained one, which makes the resulting form repel or attract nearby atoms - it's an energetic, transformative state, which seemed an appropriate writing metaphor.

The Chart – Ionic or not – delineates three phases during the evolution of a story from inception through to celebration and distribution, each of the phases (again, somewhat whimsically) described by the salient state of mind this writer feels he has to achieve to succeed: from *Introvert* at the inspiration stage; to *Convert* as he musters the will to write, and write and rewrite; to *Extrovert*, as he gets out on the circuit and sings the praises of his story.

The *Expanded Creative Cycle for Writers* is described as a circle in the chart. But there is an aspect you must add to this representation. Imagine, if you will, looking at a spiral from above; what you will see is a circle. From that perspective the third dimension, height, is flattened, even though it's the most important facet of the cycle. So when I talk about my writer's cycle, really I am talking about an ascending spiral.

If I wanted to push the analogy, I could say I'm trying to describe a double-helix end-on: one strand being my creative cycle; the other, its relationship to the world around me and my responses to my environment. In that context, writing that challenges the author in profound ways, and which changes the mental landscape of readers, has met at least two of the criteria that may eventually earn it a spot in the genus Literature with a capital 'L'.

Included in my writer's cycle until now have been all aspects of imagining, researching, writing, rewriting, sharing, editing and publishing a story. It's a cycle because once one book is finished, the process begins anew with the next, and the next after that; a spiral because each beginning is hopefully at a higher plane.

In my introduction to this booklet I noted that my redrawn circumference had encompassed more than I'd set out to achieve. As well as discovering new and exciting aspects to the post-publication phase, which I think will be helpful as I continue my writing journey, I extended and added nuances to the inspiration and research phase.

For devotees writing is a lifestyle, a state of mind, a way of being, not an occupation. So when I set out to expand my cycle to embrace readership I'm talking about a fundamental change, not only in my approach to writing, but in my belief about what it means *to be a writer*. Without waxing too dramatic, I can say the type of changes I am talking about will call for commitment and a certain amount of courage, qualities I can only summon if I truly believe in the 'rightness' of the initiative. I say that not in the hopes of a medal, but as a preparatory note to colleagues who might be persuaded to examine their own ways of writerly being.

EXPLORATION

LOOK OUTWARD FOR RICH CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE IDEA AND YOUR WORLD.

INVESTIGATION

EXAMINE YOUR IDEA, TESTING ITS INTEGRITY AND VIABILITY AGAINST YOUR EXPERIENCE.

INSPIRATION

THE IDEA FOR A STORY MATERIALIZES 'OUT OF THE BLUE' AND YOU ARE EXCITED BY IT.

ASPIRATION

THE END OF ONE BOOK IS THE BEGINNING OF THE NEXT. LEARN FROM EVERY KEYSTROKE.

PROPAGATION

PROMO AS MANY KEY PEOPLE, IN AS MANY FRESH WAYS, AS OFTEN AS YOU CAN.

CONSOLIDATION

SHAPE AN OUTLINE WITH SKETCHES OF CHARACTER, SETTING AND PLOT.

INTROVERT >

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< EXTROVERT

CELEBRATION

CHEER THE LANDING MORE THAN THE LAUNCH, WHEN YOU SHOOT FOR THE MOON

IMAGINATION

BEGIN WRITING, BUT BE SURE TO SUSTAIN INSPIRATION, NOT SLIP INTO 'WORK MODE'.

CONVERSATION

COMMITTED TO THE IDEA, IT'S TIME TO TEST AND ADJUST BASED ON OTHER'S REACTIONS.

EXPERIMENTATION

FOLLOW 'WHAT IFS'. PUSH CHARACTERS AND PLOT BEYOND WHAT'S EXPECTED.

DISSEMINATION

SHARE YOUR FIRST DRAFT WITH READERS WHO WILL CRITIQUE CONSTRUCTIVELY.

REVISION

IGNORE THAT PUSHY 'WHEN WILL YOU BE DONE' VOICE. MAKE IT PERFECT... AGAIN...

DISTRIBUTION

A BOOK UNREAD IS A WEIGHT OF PULPED WOOD AND INK TAKING UP ROOM ON A SHELF.

PUBLICATION

BE ABSOLUTELY SURE YOUR STORY IS READY, AND YOU'RE READY TO STAND UP FOR IT!

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CONVERT >

MAPPING THE LITERARY TERRAIN

Why do we write?

Every writer has his own matrix of reasons for labouring away on a manuscript, sometimes for years. The starting point for me almost always comes in the form of inspiration. People ask 'How did you think up that story?' The answer is usually: 'It simply came to me, almost whole, my job was to discover its deeper nuances and meanings, and express them in words.' I think of that moment of inspiration as the writer's high; it's why this writer keeps on writing, no matter how hard the journey and discouraging the sales.

But, if I am going to understand my motives in a broader context – and it's important I do – then I have list a few other things I want to experience and achieve. As a writer I want to:

Entertain - Evoking laughter, sadness, fear and curiosity gets readers turning the pages of our stories, be they fiction or creative non-fiction.

Inform - People love learning new things. What books can bring to that passion is an organized body of researched information that leads to a higher perspective.

Project - Many of us have compelling thoughts and strong feelings, but are at a loss when it comes to expressing them. A skilled writer is able to formulate those passions into sustained phrases in realistic settings, and project them with enduring impact.

Learn - I have never written a story that hasn't changed me in some way. Knowing that, I set out writing with the expectation that I am going to learn as I research and think my way through a story, understanding its characters, settings and actions. Learning is different from being informed; the one is analogous to the mindset of a curious traveler; the other a focused state of mind with definite, almost scientific objectives.

Explore - Linear travel gets us from A to B most quickly. But as a writer I apply a process I call 'wedging' to enrich my text. When I hit upon a key word in a sentence, I break it apart and look for more meaning, nuance or symbolism that can be unpacked and elaborated on at that point in the intensifying narrative.

Record - When something is written it acquires a prominence and permanence that cannot be easily controlled or denied. Books, even fiction, have changed the course of history; the very word 'history' signifies the importance of written and oral interpretations of the world we live in.

Understand - If I am going to write stories that resonate, I have to understand the motives of saints and scoundrels; heroes and cowards; dullards and geniuses; villains and victims; lovers and leavers. It's not up to me to judge characters; my role is to understand even the most heinous personalities that enter my stories.

Create - For me creativity is the point of convergence where a writer's incentives and efforts come together in a compelling or captivating narrative. To create a unique and insightfully human story is the whole point of my creative writing cycle.

Why do people read?

Fortunately (and if we're skillful) there's a happy convergence between the vocation of writers and the proclivities of readers. People want to be entertained, informed, engaged, educated, amazed, recognized, honoured and heard. For millenia, right up to the end of the 19th Century, writers could be assured of a sizable share of that 'market.' In the last hundred years the picture has changed beyond recognition. Books have to compete with TV, radio, the Internet, video games, professional sports, travel... an unending roll call of media and activities competing for time and mind-space.

So why would anyone pick up a book when they can click a remote instead and veg out on the living-room sofa in front of the big screen with a bowl of popcorn to munch on?

The enduring strengths of literature include:

Selection - No form of art, entertainment or information offers the selection and diversity of voices readers can access at their local library, book store or digital book network. Narrative text in one form or another is still the most versatile, searchable form of accessing stories and information.

Convenience - Books can go anywhere and be picked up any time. You don't need to plug them in, they don't disturb the person sitting next to you, they don't require a big screen.

Pace - Put a book down, pick it up a day later and continue from the same spot, and it's like the intervening time has been seamlessly spliced. You can step out any time to think through the implications of a paragraph just read, then come back to it when you've figured things out, and carry on.

Depth - No other media can double down on a topic the way a book can (I'm including direct-to-web editions in these examples, because web sites used in that way are really books delivered on a different platform). The ability to index information, footnote passages, and cross reference has not been matched in any other mode, and has been improved in the era of active links.

Inner Perspective - No other medium or form can represent the inner thoughts of a subject or character the way a book can. Books are, after all, a narrative voice being evoked in the mind of a reader; imagining the world from another's point of view in that framework isn't a big leap.

Creative Engagement - Although readers credit authors with creating the settings, characters and actions that take place in a book, it's a credit that has to be shared. Reading is a creative activity, every person's take on a book is a completely new imaginative endeavour.

Literature's niche

Knowing why authors write, and why people read, we can perhaps figure out literature's place in the melee of 21st Century culture and entertainment – the place where writers' and readers' passions intersect. I think it's important to identify, or at least guess at, literature's strengths and play to them. Books can't compete with the television or movies when it comes to immersive impressions of scenery and action. They can't come close to video games when it comes to immediacy and interactiveness. As for portability, tablets and mobile phones are eroding that edge. Almost anything can be viewed and interacted with on some type of device in almost any quadrant of the world these days.

So where does literature fit in?


What some might consider a drawback, I consider to be one of the most appealing aspects of literature: Creative Engagement. It takes concentration and imagination to bring text on a page to life. The reader can't simply relax and experience the flow of a novel as if he was in a movie theatre; he has to create his own mind-movie. He has to imagine what the words are saying. In the best books there's a richness and beauty to the language, of course. And the special effects of elements like metaphor and symbolism are not easily reproduced in other forms. But surely one of the joys of reading is that sense of activated creative energy.

It takes skill to be a reader; you don't have to learn how to watch TV. There's room for lateral thinking, reading a book; TV overwhelms the senses and overrides intellect. Avid readers learn how to extract all there is to experience from a good book, and that engaged state-of-mind is what many of us enjoy most when we're engrossed in a book – that awareness that we are *in the story*.

Other attributes that make literature a unique experience, hard to duplicate in other forms or media, are its ability to explore inner perspectives; the depths it can go to on any subject; and the ability of readers to go at their own pace. These aspects are interrelated; combined they secure a patch of ground for literature on the cultural and entertainment map that won't be overwhelmed any time soon.

But it would be a mistake to think of literature as synonymous with books – or, put another way, it is anachronistic to think of books as text printed on paper sandwiched between covers. Computers, eBook readers and mobile phones can be considered 'books' just as much as the ink-on-paper editions lined up in your library. And, despite the enduring fondness most readers have for print editions, my guess is there will be an inexorable gravitation toward digital books as habits change and technology improves.

Having described what I believe is literature's niche, I can now consider how to expand my creative cycle in ways that will appeal to that specific subset of people called readers, and a sub-subset I can ID as readers who are most likely to be interested in what I write. What we've done so far is map out the mental terrain where literature can hold its own; now I have to figure out how to creatively incite people in that domain to get into my stories!



**...that engaged state-
of-mind is what many
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WALKING THE TALK

Examples of change in action

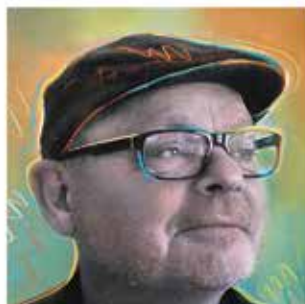
I apologize if you are feeling somewhat exhausted with the theory and philosophy of the creative cycle and like you've been sitting through a breatherian's lunch buffet. Alas, I've only this page left to lay out my menu of creative change in action, so I won't take too much space explaining that these examples are all new undertakings – they *do have the potential* to bring my work to more participants and readers, but I have work to do proving it:

Direct to Web Publishing - My most recent novel *The Boy From Under*, was first published Direct to Web (DTW). The format allows global distribution, accessibility and interaction for readers on virtually any device (mobile phones included), the ability to incorporate online readings for those who choose to listen to the work rather than read, and the ability for people to pay for the book online and have it delivered in ePub, PDF or DTW formats. See BoyFromUnder.ca

The Mural Gazer Project - I live in Chemainus, B.C., commonly known as MuralTown. Currently I am writing a series of stories, to be published initially: on the MuralGazer.ca web site; in a media sponsor's newspaper; and as chapbooks. Eventually the individual stories will be published as a collection woven together by an overarching story. The plan includes street readings, workshops for people who want to 'get into' a mural story, and an approach to local businesses and organizations for sponsorship. See MuralGazer.ca

Setpiece Theatre - This workshop takes 'getting into the story' to a new level. Participants will go through the creative cycle from inspiration to publication, and at the end of six weeks walk away with their own illustrated chapbook, themselves included in highlight scenes, captured in 'setpiece' enactments. It is intended for people who want to engage deeply in the creation of a book, in collaboration with a writer. No writing or acting experience is required, and the workshop is intended to be enriching fun. See *Workshops* under the *Services* menu at CraigSpenceWriter.ca

Book Trailers - Trailers and online readings are terrific ways of reaching potential readers. Short videos that capture the essence or flavour of a book, they are in formats that can be posted online via web sites, social media, email or eNewsletters. The beauty of book trailers is they allow you to reach out to audience over and over again, featuring fresh excerpts from your works, even from works in progress. See CraigSpenceWriter.ca/book-trailers

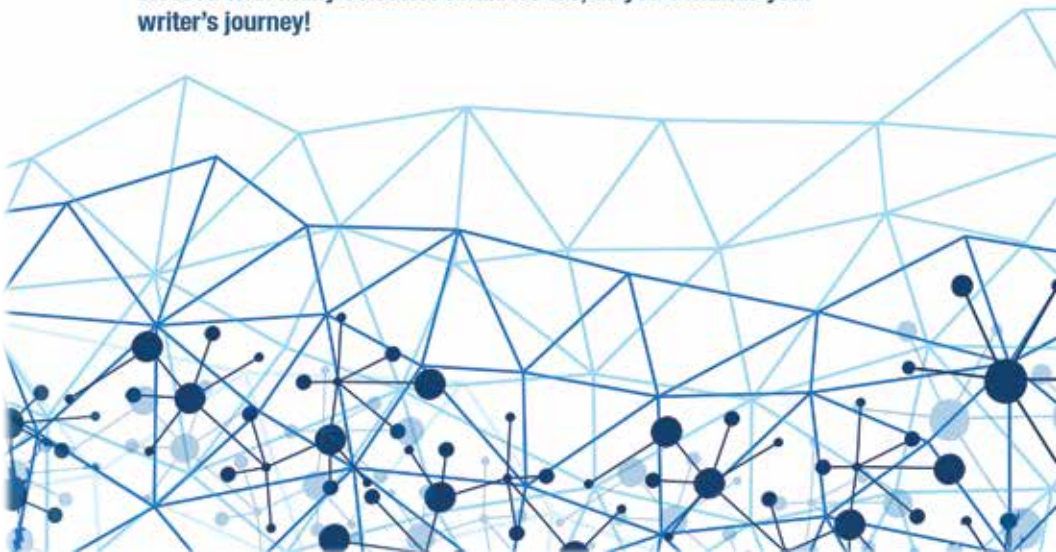


Thank you for joining me in *Expanding the Circle*. I'm writing this in advance, hoping you have enjoyed the workshop and were able to take something away from it that will challenge who you are as an author, and how you go about writing.

I can tell you I have learned a lot, preparing for our couple of hours together. Setting out to inscribe what I have grandly called the *Expanded Creative Cycle for Writers*, I intended to widen the arc at the end. I am introvert by nature, so promotion and sales of my books has always been a challenge.

It became clear to me, though, under the radar-like sweep of self-analysis, that there are other files in my ointment: I have to intensify and embrace research as a part of the writing cycle; and engage in more communication... In short, I have to open the closet door not only after I've written my books, but before and during the exhilarating process of writing.

The chart in this booklet is my own, its aphorisms ready to apply like felt marked graffiti to the lenses of my glasses. May you be blessed with many colourful scribbles too, as you continue your writer's journey!





This booklet has been produced as a companion to a workshop delivered by Craig Spence at the Spring Writes Festival, held in Nanaimo, B.C., on April 30, 2017.

It describes some ideas Craig has about the need to expand the scope of what he considers 'creative' activity, widening the circle to include the promotion of books and community engagement projects.

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