



**PERSEVERANCE**  
**IS THE BIGGEST TALENT YOU CAN DEVELOP**

**Norma Hopcraft**

# After losing my way in life, just a bit,

I re-launched a writing career—a childhood dream—and began to send work to literary magazines. I was bursting with hope for affirmation of my great skill and broad experience. Editors would be glad I sent them work. I would be a literary star.

I sent out stories and essays confidently at first.

Months later I would get a reply in the mail—from The Paris Review, for example (I aim high)—and stand motionless, desperate for acceptance, floating amongst the stars with hope. I'd slowly slip my finger under a loose corner of the envelope flap and tear, take the slip of paper out and hold it up to my near-sighted eyes.

The pain of rejection dragged me from the stars into the red-hot magma at the core of the earth.

It got to the point that, whenever I'd get a letter from a lit magazine, I'd cringe at the pain I knew I was about to feel. I would try to cut off hope—it seemed easier than to be disappointed again. Then I'd hope against hope, anyway, wishing for that surge of affirmation from being accepted for publication. But I knew at this point that it wasn't likely. I'd whip through those three stages several times. Then I would say, "Open it. It might just be what you want to hear." I was right twice. But, literally hundreds of times, I got a rejection, and each one floored me for days, if not weeks.

But I chose each time to keep working at my craft.





I may be more talented at dogged perseverance than I am at creative writing.

It doesn't matter. I have to write. If I don't, Franz Kafka's quote that "A non-writing writer is a monster courting insanity" lingers, threatening to come true. After a day or two of not sitting with pen and paper, I begin to obsess over stupid things—like slow-moving tourists on the streets of New York. I pick fights in my head with innocent people, and worry much too creatively about the future.

As they say in the Twelve Step program, I have a magic magnifying mind. Either I focus on putting my fictional characters into greater conflict or I seethe with rising inner conflict and nearly drive myself mad. I'd rather do it to my characters.

So I've bird-dogged my goal: to keep out of the asylum and instead to interact with the world as it seems my Higher Power wants me to do.

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I believe, with writer Frederick Buechner, that a Higher Power wants us to find the intersection between the world's great needs and our greatest strengths. So I write stories that I hope cause distracted Americans to ask deeper questions about who they are, about the meaning of life, about whether they're living as fully as they could be. I attempt to offer a rich, nutritive substance—food for thought, a catalyst for reflection.

I knew I was succeeding when my writers group would talk about my most recent chapter for 45 minutes or more. I would sit with them in my friend Pat's kitchen, at her giant oak table. Lisa was a poet posing as an advertising copywriter by day. Peggy wrote stories from her life for her family. Pat was a former librarian nearly incapacitated by multiple sclerosis. She could barely hold a pencil, but she wrote elegant poems. And I brought fiction to the group.

As the writers discussed my work, I would chuckle inside with happiness that they were chewing over my thoughts-on-paper. That was all the encouragement I had, for years. The chuckles would be mixed with heartache over the criticisms they'd given me just moments earlier—I would pass out my pages to them feeling certain that they would love every word. They never did, though. Stars and magma.

But I wrote each criticism down and later considered it. I consulted my instincts on each critique and weeded through all of them diligently. I slowly became a better writer, by persevering through the pain.

I'm an entertainer at heart, so I love to whisk people away from their worries and immerse them in my characters' predicaments. I also like to teach, just a little, about what I've learned in my rich and challenging life. I want to help people transport, escape, experience something new, connect, delight, engage.

I want to provide a great read that people look forward to after a hard day.

Writing is a great risk: I've invested hundreds of thousands of hours into my 30-year apprenticeship in better storytelling. I kept writing through divorce, job and family troubles, all the usual afflictions. And now I have a book published. It has my name on it. It's getting five-star reviews. Thrilling! I look at the book's beautiful cover and think of the true grit it required. This is a very fine emotional reward. I may never see much financial reward, but even if I don't, it was worth it.

It's worthwhile to persevere at whatever you do, even if "success" takes decades. I guarantee you'll see pay-offs: increased skill in your chosen field of endeavor, or the simple satisfaction that comes with seeing something through. As writers, "We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master," according to Ernest Hemingway. But there's always much more room to grow!

One of the payoffs to writing is that it makes me feel more alive. I'm always looking for ideas and inspiration. And I find it in people's behavior, attitude, and way of speaking. I especially delight in capturing people's quirks, like that of a friend who said for months that she'd love to go ballroom dancing with me, and when I invited her said she didn't like to move her body that way. If I weren't constantly looking for this sort of peculiarity, I might have forgotten it. But because I use it in my writing—with relish!—it sticks with me and adds an extra layer of delight to my life.

As a result of writing, I experience life more deeply. I've also learned to believe in myself more (especially when nobody else did) and to believe in a Higher Power who has helped in unexpected ways. This has been rewarding too. Writing has taken me on adventures. I circumnavigated the U.S. on a bus, visiting 20 cities, staying in hostels, interviewing people in all walks of life, marveling at how interesting the "average" person is. I asked Americans and people from all over the world how they defined the American Dream, and what they were aspiring to. Each person answered with something unique.

That Higher Power also set up circumstances that led me to Paris on a one-year creative writing sabbatical, then to the people who gave me the opportunity to live in Barcelona. (You can see how all this happened on my blog.)

It was a magma experience first. I lost my mother, my fiancé, and my home within six months of each other—all in the midst of a job search that provided even more rejections than writing did.

But every time I took a bridge across the Seine, which was daily, I rejoiced that my Higher Power had freed me from a fiancé (what a disaster that would have been, especially compared to THIS!), that he'd dynamited me out of that house, that he'd led me to a book that challenged me to live and write in Paris.

When this idea presented itself, I reflected on all the years I'd persevered and knew that, while I may not see many acceptance letters from literary editors, that I must be a writer anyway because I hadn't given up.

Well, it all worked out beautifully, beyond my wildest dreams. When I crossed the Seine, I was floating among the stars.

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While in Paris on my creative writing sabbatical, I had the freedom to write my book, *The Paris Writers Circle*. Then I moved to Barcelona and revised it in a 14th century hospital-turned-library with a soaring ceiling. But I had to return to New York City, and now I live and write in Brooklyn, and work in Manhattan.

I don't feel quite as star-crossed here as I did in Paris, and I've struggled for two and a half years with a feeling of letdown. But I'm working on my next novel, set in Brooklyn. For some mysterious reason, it had occurred to me that I wanted to write about a character steeped in Coptic Christianity. Then I saw corkscrew curls on a girl in the Apple store in Grand Central Station and thought, I'd like to write about a character with corkscrew curls. Returning home to Brooklyn one night a few weeks later, I sat on the subway next to someone with corkscrew curls. She turned out to be a Coptic Christian! I asked her what she did for a living and she said she was a set designer, had won awards for films she'd worked on in Egypt, was now in working in the New York City theater world, and would love to be interviewed about set design. I had my new vein of gold to mine! Gold instead of magma! A Higher Power at work again!

By means of serendipity of networking, I've interviewed a bunch of set designers now. I've also found a writers group in Brooklyn! That changes my feeling about living in Brooklyn, from one of magma to one more like adventure.

Even so, New York City doesn't have quite as much sensational adventure to it as Paris did, because I started to explore NYC on my own when I was 14 and I've worked here daily for 30 years. There's still much I haven't done – ride the Staten Island ferry, for one. But New York City still doesn't feel like the high adventure of Paris and Barcelona.

Even the quotidian, however, feels more like an adventure when I'm practicing my art. I just don't know what ideas and opportunities will arise. Corkscrew curls. Coptic church services in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Seeing the shows that set designers I've interviewed had worked on. Free!

I'm trying now to get involved in amateur theater in New York City as a stagehand. I need to be part of some shows to be able to write about backstage life. My eyes will be wide open for peculiarities and delightful inconsistencies. While I strive to be somebody, as writer Henry James said, upon whom nothing is lost, I become more alive.

It's been worth it to persevere strictly for the sake of perseverance. To stay on track, I moved my plaque, with Winston Churchill's words, from the U.S. to Paris to Barcelona to Brooklyn: "Never, never, never give up." I'm glad I took that advice. I have become a better artist over time.

Now, I have several novels written, and I have a new skill to master: publishing. Since I'm bearing the financial risk of bringing my books into the world, I'm a publisher. In doing so, I'm fulfilling a longtime dream of being like Nan Talese. A successful veteran editor of the New York publishing industry, Doubleday eventually rewarded her with her own publishing imprint, Nan A. Talese. Years ago, the idea of being rewarded with my name on an imprint really drove me wild. Of course, I couldn't get Nan Talese to publish me, which may have worked for the best because I now have my own imprint, so to speak. Jaguar Publishing is named for Norma Jaguar, the nickname a boy named Pete gave me in sixth grade when I first learned I had an affinity for writing.

I have had to become a marketer, too. My goal is to earn enough money with my books so I can create freedom to write full-time. I'm just starting the marketing adventure. After 30 years of work, I'd like to be an overnight success. That hasn't happened. It's time for dogged perseverance again.

So, I doggedly pursue my writing apprenticeship, and now I have a publishing and marketing apprenticeship to learn. It's good. So many people have to exercise dogged perseverance just to find their next meal. I'm a worker among workers, finding adventure and inspiration for stories in the quotidian, and glad to have an opportunity to do so.



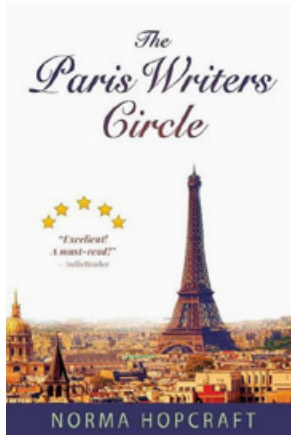
When I feel profound discouragement—and I still do, strangely for two months right after The Paris Writers Circle came out in February—I think of Britain in World War II, facing Nazi Germany alone for so long before the U.S. got involved. Death rained out of the sky onto London and other cities day and night. People must have at least considered surrender to stop the incessant bombs. But Churchill said, “Never, never, never give up.” The people listened. The British prevailed. And live free.

**Through my art, and my perseverance to continue writing, I also prevail. And live free. 🇺🇸**





# Info



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### About the author

Norma Jaeger Hopcraft has been writing stories for 30 years. She was a newspaper and corporate journalist, then a magna cum laude graduate of New York University's creative writing and literature program. She recently took a creative writing sabbatical year in Paris and Barcelona. She's been published in the South Dakota Review and won first prize in a mystery short story contest from Deadly Ink. She lives in Brooklyn and blogs at [In Search of the American Dream](#). You can contact her by leaving a message there. She would love to connect with you!

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