

# TAKING THE SHORT TACK WITH SHORT FICTION

Traditional markets aren't the only paths to success for short stories.

Here are six reasons why self-publishing could be the way to go.

BY MATTY DALRYMPLE



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As a reader, some days I find myself with a free half hour and want a quick escape into a fictional world but don't want to find myself mid-story when my time is up. Some evenings, I contemplate my to-be-read pile and know that I don't have the energy to dive into a novel. Sometimes my hunger is not for the full banquet of a novel-length work, but a little snack of entertainment. At those times, what I want is a piece of short fiction.

Many consider the period after World War II to have been the last heyday of short fiction in the United States, with powerhouse publications like *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The New Yorker*, and *Scribner's* handling both the editorial and the printing and distribution efforts required to get these works into readers' hands. My father had short fiction published in *Collier's* and *Cosmopolitan* in the '50s, and I treasure my copies of those beautifully produced issues.

As a writer myself, I would be proud to follow in his footsteps as a traditionally published short fiction author, and I would certainly love the cachet of being able to cite such publications in my résumé. However, I have chosen not to pursue the traditional short fiction market for three reasons. First, it offers only so many slots and better-known authors will claim most of those. Second, although my father might have been willing to wait months for responses to his submittals, I'm not as patient. Third, even if a publication offered me pro rates for one of my stories, the effort-to-earnings ratio, factoring in the time it takes to identify those publications and prepare one's submissions, is not appealing to me.

Beyond these specific reservations, the traditional short fiction market feels too ponderous for my creative and business goals. As I often do, I find an apt metaphor in the nautical world. The traditional market is a cargo ship: a boon for those who can access its goods but slow to answer the helm and liable to cause havoc for any skipper caught unawares in the ever-changing winds of the marketplace.

Does this mean that the benefits of short fiction are closed to me, and to those who share my outlook? Not at all. There are plenty of opportunities for us to reach short fiction readers. Online retail, distribution, and social

media platforms mean that individuals can distribute and promote short fiction easily and affordably. Those options feel less like a cargo ship and more like a nimble sailboat, vessels that can navigate constricted spaces and make progress against a headwind using a maneuver called the short tack.

## NAVIGATING NARROW PATHWAYS

In sailing, to take a short tack means to maneuver using rapid and frequent changes of direction. Sailors might choose the short tack when sailing in a narrow waterway where a long tack would run them aground. For writers, the equivalent might be limited time or creative capacity. Short fiction came to my aid in such a circumstance.

After I completed my second Ann Kinnear Suspense Novel, *The Sense of Reckoning*, I had a story idea I wanted to pursue that didn't fit into Ann's world. I assured my fans that I would be back to Ann as soon as I got this story launched.

However, that story turned into a trilogy: the Lizzy Ballard Thrillers. As I worked on the second and third Lizzy books, I wanted to give the Ann fans something to tide them over until I returned to her story. Trying to write a third novel in Ann's world while I was deep in Lizzy's would stretch my creative perspectives too far. I wanted to stay narrowly focused on Lizzy, but I felt comfortable stepping out of that world for a few "short tacks." I used those times to pen several Ann Kinnear Suspense Shorts, retaining one as a reader magnet, publishing the remainder as standalone e-books, and contributing one to an anthology benefiting a local library.

## OPTIMIZING THE SPEED OF YOUR CRAFT

Sailors know that several short tacks can provide more speed than one long tack over the same distance. Similarly, an author can likely produce more content with short fiction than with long fiction, especially since short fiction rarely involves the plotting complexities of a novel-length work.

Frequent release of short stories keeps you front-of-mind with your fans. But don't let the relative speed of creating them lead you to think of these works as "just" short stories. Apply the same care in crafting a short

story as you would in crafting a novel and bring the same attention to its launch. Any work, regardless of length, deserves a bit of fanfare. Notify your newsletter subscribers, promote it on social media platforms, and hold a live or virtual reading. (This last may seem counterproductive in terms of sales, but far from dissuading readers from purchasing the e-book version, my readings always spur the purchase of my stories, even months or years after their initial launch.)

## TAKING HOME THE SILVER

The goal of the racing sailor is to “take home the silver”—i.e., to win the trophy—and we short fiction authors value silver for our efforts as well.

The income stream generated by my Ann Kinnear Suspense Shorts is small, but not only does it start as soon as I publish the story, but I can imagine that 20 short stories of 4,000 words, each available for \$0.99, might well earn an author more than one 80,000-word novel. If you’re writing both novels and shorts, sales of one will spur sales of the other. Just be sure to clearly differentiate the two on the retail platforms: through the pricing (I price my shorts at \$0.99, versus \$2.99 or \$4.99 for my e-book novels), the series name (e.g., The Ann Kinnear Suspense Shorts), and an explicit call-out in the description.

The couple of hundred dollars I’ve earned from sales of my short stories doesn’t yet reach traditional market pro rates of \$0.08 per word. However, once I have a polished work in hand, the only tasks standing between me and earnings are formatting the e-book, getting a cover, writing a description, and uploading it to the retail platforms.

Furthermore, I make those sales with very little promotional effort. Most of my promotions for the short stories are quick hits on social media related to the seasonal theme of the story: a post-Christmas promotion for *Close These Eyes*, which is set on a frigid January night on Mount Desert Island, Maine, or a February promotion for my Valentine’s Day-themed *All Deaths Endure*. And the standalone e-books are not the only money-making opportunity. Once I have 12 stories, I plan to create yet another piece of content: a collection to be titled *A Year of Kinnear* with one story set in each month.

For all these pieces of content, I’ll continue to receive royalties for years to come, earnings that I feel confident will ultimately exceed what I could have earned in the

traditional market. All this from content that originally had reader relations, not income creation, as its primary goal.

## FORMING YOUR FLEET

You can also use short fiction to build and strengthen your connections within the author community, or to “form your fleet.” Short story anthologies offer opportunities to connect with other writers in your genre, to reach their fans and followers, and to introduce your own fans to those writers’ works.

Being asked to join a traditionally published anthology is a tremendous honor, but I have found these opportunities difficult to find without contacts within the ranks of anthology curators. However, enterprising writers don’t have to wait to be invited to participate in someone else’s anthology—we can curate our own.

Writers’ groups or critique groups offer a pool of potential contributors. It goes without saying that the writers you approach for your anthology should have demonstrated skill in their craft, but there are other factors to assess as well. For example, will they be willing to accept editorial input and to share the limelight with their co-contributors?

As you consider possible contributors, document your plan for the anthology and share it with them to ensure alignment on expectations.

What are the financial goals of the anthology? If the goal is to make money, then you’ll need to balance the upside of having many contributors, and the additional fans and followers they’ll bring, against the downside of having to divide the royalties among all those authors. Will all contributors receive the same percentage? Will you take a higher percentage as compensation for your curatorial work?

What is the theme for your anthology? If you belong to a writer’s group that focuses on a certain genre, consider building the anthology around that genre. If the timing of the anthology’s release is important, consider a theme based on the date: love stories for a February release or stories of vacations gone awry for a summer release.

How long will the anthology be available? A long period will result in a small but steady payout that will accumulate over time. Limited availability will generate buzz.

What are your plans to promote the anthology, and how active a role do you expect the contributors to play? What material—images for social media posts, text for

email newsletter announcements—will you provide, and what material do you expect contributors to create?

How will you handle distribution of royalties? Barring inclusion of a marquee name, the proceeds are likely to be modest, and you must ensure your time investment in support of the anthology is commensurate with its earning potential. Fortunately, platforms like Draft2Digital and PubShare can automate the distribution of royalties, even enabling you to allocate different percentages to different contributors—for example, to entice a better-known author to participate by offering a higher percentage.

Perhaps most importantly, do the potential contributors have the required rights to their stories, and will they retain those rights for the period of time you expect the anthology to be available? I learned the hard way the cost of not setting this expectation in advance.

Years ago, I published an anthology of crime fiction featuring stories from five authors. The per sale proceeds would be small, but I expected the anthology would repay our efforts—and especially my efforts as the curator—over the many years we would be reaping sales.

The anthology had been available for only a few months when one of the authors let me know that her publisher was repackaging her books in a way that required her to withdraw her story. I could have republished the anthology, minus her story, with a new title and cover, but considering the work needed and the costs for a new cover design, I decided against it. I could have avoided that disappointing outcome by being clearer in advance with my potential contributors about my expectations regarding the availability of the stories.

Are you looking for ways to form your fleet not only with readers and fellow authors but with the wider community as well? Generate goodwill by donating the proceeds from your anthology to a charitable organization or local library.

## CREATING A SCALE MODEL

Shipwrights create scale models of vessels so that they can work out details of the boat's expected behavior and characteristics before embarking on construction. Similarly, you can use short fiction to test the waters of a new creative direction.

Perhaps you've been writing cozies but are hearing the siren call of thrillers. Craft a short story in this new genre and share it with your current readers to get a sense of whether they'll be interested in following you in

this new direction. Reach out to readers familiar with the new genre, perhaps through a beta reader program, and solicit their input to discover whether you've made the transition successfully. If you find you need to make a course correction based on this input, you'll be glad you learned that lesson with a piece of short fiction rather than with a longer work.

Trying out a new direction with a piece of short fiction will also ensure that it will hold your own interest. If you're tens of thousands of words into a novel in your new genre and you're finding it more enervating than energizing, you may force yourself to plow ahead—not wanting to “waste” all those words—when a better option would be to cut your losses and return to work that inspires you. Experimenting with a piece of short fiction allows you to dip your toe into those waters, and to regroup if they prove inhospitable.

## GETTING YOUR CREATIVE ENGINE STARTED

Perhaps the very familiarity of your current work has left you adrift in the creative doldrums. Short fiction can provide a remedy.

Step back from a work whose engine has died and take a short tack with a piece of short fiction. Because the time investment for a short story is low, you can approach it with less angst. Because the stakes are lower, you can bring a sense of adventure and lightheartedness that may be what is missing from your work in progress. Wrestling with your novel-length work might feel like trying to maneuver a freighter across a storm-tossed lake, while embarking on a piece of short fiction is more like a jaunt across the pond in a sailing dinghy—a refreshing break that revives your creative energy.

Whether your goal is to navigate the constraints of time and creative energy, speed your ability to provide fresh content to your readers, build a community among readers and fellow writers, or regain your creative momentum, taking the short tack of short fiction can put fresh wind in your sails. **WD**

**Matty Dalrymple** is the author of the Lizzy Ballard Thrillers and the Ann Kinnear Suspense Novels and Suspense Shorts. Matty explores the writing craft and the publishing voyage via *The Indy Author Podcast* and her books *The Indy Author's Guide to Podcasting for Authors* and *Taking the Short Tack: Creating Income and Connecting With Readers Using Short Fiction*.