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Finding My Starting Point

My debut novel, *The Peach Seed*, was released by Henry Holt on August 1, 2023. To prepare for this moment, I geared up to use my creator skills to promote the novel in whatever ways I could. I just needed to know where to start. My journey from idea conception to publication had taken over a decade, and along the road I'd felt every emotion from ecstasy to despair. This quote from James Baldwin became my mantra: "Talent is insignificant. I know a lot of talented ruins. Beyond talent lie all the usual words: discipline, love, luck, but most of all, endurance."

After years of a repeating pattern of writing/editing/querying/rejection, this endurance finally paid off when my novel was accepted for publication. When my editor, Retha Powers, suggested in the fall of 2022 that I apply for Get the Word Out, Poets & Writers' new publicity incubator, the timing was perfect. I immediately applied and was thrilled when I was accepted, joining a cohort of nine other debut authors. This was nine months before my book launched. I had time and much to learn. Fortunately, Holt's marketing and PR departments would also assist in promoting my novel. As I learned from my Get the Word Out cohort, many publishers are not able to provide marketing support, leaving authors in the trenches to become their own promo team. My Holt teams showed great respect for me as an artist and were willing to collaborate, but—since I also had ideas that did not fit their assigned tasks—I was not exempt from working on the front lines. Luckily, I now had an exciting place to start.

We writers face finding a starting point every time we set out to tell a new story. For my own promotional journey, this story began with the intrinsic value of the Get the Word Out application process, which required that I pause, take stock, and once again decide how to talk about my work and figure out what was missing from my promotional toolbox.

First turning point: being accepted by Poets & Writers, so revered in America's book culture that this alone had a far-reaching impact. The validation created a ripple effect, further bolstering my relationship with the work and the respect I had for myself as a newly minted author.

This story introduced ten protagonists—myself and my fellow cohort members—who quickly became friends. To this day we continue to hold one another up across miles, even though most of us have yet to meet in person. Under the leadership of Thierry Kehou, Poets & Writers' director of programs and partnerships, we met over many Zoom sessions. Workshop No. 1 was our inciting incident, a turning point so pivotal that nothing could ever be the same for us protagonists. Credit goes to our guide, publicist extraordinaire Lauren Cerand. It was an event to witness her riff on our ideas and questions, tailoring answers in ways we could not yet fathom as fledgling authors, just learning to walk.

The middle of this story was packed with advice, tips, and resources from a dynamic array of publishing pros such as Emily Firetog of Literary Hub and Jina Moore of *Guernica* and celebrated authors Wayétu Moore and Tayari Jones. Here is my top tip from their collective wisdom regarding public appearances: *It is important to decide the things you do not want to talk about. Make a list of ten things you want people to know and segue back to your list, no matter what you are asked.* The story's climax was a virtual public reading in which our cohort presented our polished elevator pitches and read sections of our work.

The vast knowledge gathered from our workshops became fuel that I still use as I continue tweaking my strategic marketing plan developed in our sessions, keeping momentum going for *The Peach Seed* as it heads into its sixth month.

The incubator's exponential impact extends so far into the future that, while my goals are well within reach, end of this story remains out of sight.

Anita Gail Jones was selected for the inaugural fiction cohort of Get the Word Out, the Poets & Writers publicity incubator for debut authors. She is a visual artist and writer born and raised in Albany, Georgia. Her debut novel, *The Peach Seed*, was published by Henry Holt in August 2023. Learn more at anitagailjones.com.

Get the Word Out was developed with funding from Leonard and Louise Riggio, with additional support from Macmillan Publishers. To learn more, visit [at.pw.org/GTWO](https://www.pw.org/GTWO) (https://www.pw.org/content/get_the_word_out).

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