



WHAT'S YOUR SUPERPOWER? EVERY SUCCESSFUL WRITER HAS AT LEAST ONE

BY DANNY HEITMAN, FORUM EDITOR

From time to time, writers who are trying to get their work published professionally ask me for advice. What's the best way to find a market for their essay, story, or book project?

I always begin by asking each writer to consider a key question: What's your superpower? Editors who field submissions at magazines, newspapers, media websites, and book publishers often have a hard time sorting out the best candidates among the many submissions that they receive. What is it about you that will make your work stand out from the rest? That's what I mean when I invite writers to think about their superpower. It's merely a vivid way to describe your competitive advantage in a crowded field.

Obviously, the ability to write well can take a wordsmith a long way in the industry. But it's also helpful for a writer to identify a perspective that few others have. Editors typically want content that offers something different. That's what a superpower can do.

In my early days as a journalist, for example, I was eager to write for national parenting magazines. I'd read

quite a few of them as a young father, and I thought I might be good enough to sell these journals some of my work. I was a decent writer, but what set me apart was my vantage point as a father. Most of the content in parenting magazines at the time was written by mothers, so my experience as a father who could write sensitively about parenthood was a plus that helped me sell essays.

For writers, superpowers can come in all shapes and sizes. All of us have thoughts about war, for example, but what if you're a military veteran who's fought in one? You'll have experiences and insights about combat that many others don't. A friend of mine who's lived in Europe for many years has made a living by writing about various places that tourists might like to visit. Her superpower is that she's an American living abroad who knows the local landmarks very well but also knows how to explain them to folks living back in the United States.

Here's an exercise you can try: Think about some of your favorite writers, then list the superpowers that helped

them succeed. Vladimir Nabokov was a literary genius, but he gained an audience because he'd fled his native Russia and could write compellingly from the world view of an exile. Anne Rice was one of many horror novelists plying their craft, but she stood out because her life in New Orleans helped her create an exotic locale for her stories. Richard Wright grew up as an African American in the segregated South. When he wrote novels and nonfiction about matters of race, his personal journey gave his observations special weight.

The good news is that all of us have superpowers as prospective writers. We each have something unique to say. Finding that story – and telling it well – is what good writing is about.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing

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