

Interview with a Barefoot Writer: Chris Baty

By Mindy McHorse

"Novels aren't written by novelists. Novels are just written by everyday people who give themselves time and permission to write novels."

— Chris Baty, Author and Founder of National Novel Writing Month



Chris Baty

If you truly want to be a writer, you're going to love Chris Baty's approach to making that happen. He's the "accidental" founder of the wildly successful literary marathon known as National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo, for short), which first launched 16 years ago. Since then, Chris and the NaNoWriMo organization have inspired hundreds of thousands of people across the globe to sit down and write. And even though NaNoWriMo started as an ironic experiment, it's since prompted the writing and eventual publication of thousands of novels, nonfiction books, and even screenplays.

Chris has enjoyed great writing success as well. He's the author of *No Plot? No Problem! A Low-Stress, High-Velocity Guide to Writing a Novel in 30 Days*, and is the co-author of the *Ready, Set, Novel* workbook. He also teaches writing classes through the Writer's Studio at Stanford University, works as a freelance travel and culture writer for various publications, and travels around the world to speak to writing groups.

I met Chris on a bright, Saturday afternoon in Albuquerque and was immediately wowed by his enthusiasm for writing and his keen understanding of the peaks and valleys all writers face. Enjoy his honesty as you read about why writing helped Chris overcome an early sense of failure, and how doing so unintentionally prompted the biggest writing movement of this century.

What's the biggest benefit of participating in NaNoWriMo?

I think it helps give you this great sense that *you* are a writer. We're all writers, and doing this feels great. And it does have some amazing returns. Around 2003, we had the first published NaNoWriMo novel. It was by John Mertz, and was part of a vampire detective trilogy. We've now had at least 10 *New York Times* Bestsellers. An author named Lani Diane Rich won a RITA best-debut novel award for her first NaNoWriMo novel. We've had hundreds of traditionally-published novels that started as NaNoWriMo manuscripts. Tens of thousands of self-published novels. A couple of years ago, I had a very surreal experience of going and watching my first big Hollywood feature that was based on a NaNoWriMo novel. It was *Water for Elephants*, based on Sara Gruen's novel. That actually began as a NaNoWriMo manuscript.

Wow ... and to think, you launched the contest that got her writing! Can you tell us how NaNoWriMo first came about?

It is kind of a strange writing contest, and it came out of a strange time in my life. I started this in 1999, when I was 26 years old. I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area and everything was going crazy at that time. That was when Internet 1.0 was happening and the economy was in full bloom. It felt like the rules of life had been forever changed, like you could launch any dot-com and succeed. And most of my friends were getting these jobs at these companies and they were all making ridiculous amounts of money. Their offices all had slides in them. It was this really amazing time. And I was five years out of college, working at the one uncool website in San Francisco. It was a website for business travelers and I was editing listings of high-end florists in Houston, Texas. And I just had that moment that hits around age 25 or 26, that quarter-life crisis moment where you're just feeling like, "I thought I would have done *more*."



I can relate. That was the age I dropped everything to become a writer.

Exactly. And I think I was just so hungry for something that was going to shake me up and give me something big to bite off, and to test myself. So I looked around at my life, at the things I wanted to do. And I have always loved books. I'm an only child, and you know, books are kind of like your sibling when you're an only child. I remember spending so much time in the backseat on road trips just devouring these books. And I had always kind of thought that novels were written by novelists, you know what I mean? That novelists were this super-human species of person who had a different brain from the rest of us and were born with the ability to type. I was just a huge fan of whatever they were producing. There was nothing more magical to me than books. And so when I was trying to come up with something that would be my biggest challenge, I thought, "Okay, I want to write a novel." And I decided to invite all of my friends to do this thing with me.

And this was because I was terrified, and I was pretty sure it was going to be this doomed quest and that it was going to be kind of humiliating and it would be one more thing that I hadn't done in my life. So I sent out this email to all my friends that basically said, "Hey, is anybody up for this?" And I was blessed with a group of friends who say "Yes" to very bad ideas. Very bad ideas!

They all have a long track record of doing this and I preyed upon that for this novel-in-a-month scheme.

And they said yes?

Yes, 21 of us agreed to do this. Nobody knew what they were doing, nobody had any experience. We hadn't really written anything since ninth grade or something like that. But we all liked this idea of doing something together. So we had this 50,000-word goal, and we would get together, once the month began, and we would actually write together.

I love that you all just dove in without overthinking it.

You know, there are some advantages to not knowing what you're doing. Like, I tried to get into a creative writing course in college, but I was an anthropology major and wasn't good enough to get in. So, my idea of how you write a novel was one, you get terrified, and two, you get your friends together, and you all write in the same room. Obviously not a traditional approach to writing!

Certainly not the secluded-writer stereotype. What did your meetings look like?

We would go to the coffee house that was near my house, and we would all set up in the booth. But remember, this was 1999, so we're bringing our 1999 laptops that were the size of washing machines with keyboards attached. Their battery life was like three nanoseconds. So we're also bringing those long orange extension cords and literally using gaffer tape to tape down these cords. The coffee shop had never seen anything like it. We would sit kind of facing each other, and people would come up to us and say, "Are you guys playing Battleship?" We became known as the laptop people. You know, nowadays we all take it for granted how easy it is to go to Starbucks and set up your laptop. But in 1999, it wasn't that common. You know, you might have been on the cutting-edge of bringing a writing tool out in public, but it was weird. We were weird. People would stare.

I would kill for a picture of that.

So we started writing and Week One came and went. It was all right. Week Two came and went and we started getting that book malaise that comes around as the novelty wears off and your character isn't all that exciting anymore. I think all of us would have happily quit at that point but we had already scheduled out our month with these times to get together. So it was a lot like when you get a gym buddy, because you hate exercising so you decide to get a buddy who will show up at the gym at the same time as you. It works. Because you don't want to be the loser who flakes. And that's what kept us writing through Week Two, which sucked so badly. And then around Week Three, this really amazing thing started happening. These books that we had started without characters, without plots, and without competent storytelling ability of any kind whatsoever, started to come alive. And these characters quit their jobs and joined heavy-metal bands and they started going in different ways than we thought they would during our first week. It was that moment when the electricity starts flowing through a writing project and you can just feel it. And all of us were feeling that.



What do you think was the turning point?

I'm not sure, but I knew that it happened because I had listened to so many interviews you know, on *Fresh Air* and the BBC with my favorite authors, and there's always that one moment in interviews with authors where the interview starts with, "In your latest masterwork, your protagonist meets an untimely demise at the beak of an angry penguin ...". And the author says, "Yes." And the interviewer always says this line that I've never quite understood, which is, "It was so *true*." And the author says, "Yes, thank you thank you." And the interviewer says, "I have to ask ... how did you pick a penguin?" And there's always this pause where the author kind of rises up to full magisterial authority and says, "I didn't pick the penguin. The penguin *picked me*."

[Laughter] Yes, I know exactly what you're talking about!

Because it turns out, that if you start writing and you keep writing, the penguins just *come*. They come for everybody. They come, whether you know what you're doing, whether you studied writing or not. And for those of us that had not written a novel before, this was incredible. This experience really changed the way I think we saw ourselves, and for me, the way I saw the potential of everybody around me. Because that was when I discovered that novels aren't written by novelists. Novels are just written by everyday people who give themselves time and permission to write novels.

So how did that one month of writing turn into a national movement?

Six of us made it to the finish line and crossed the 50,000-word mark. We had a thank-God-it's-over party on my living room floor, and you know, those books that we wrote that first year ... I wouldn't say they were great. I would say the industry definition for the books we wrote that year was that they were bad. They were bad books. But they were promising. You know, it's that feeling of starting a month with nothing, and ending it with a reasonably unhorrible novel. It was amazing. And nothing was really the same for me after that. So what started as this over-cafeinated dare became this important meaningful experience in my life.

That was 1999. And that first year of the event I actually put up a website. I used this little-known function in Word called "Save as HTML." Oh yeah, it was beautiful. We had maybe two links in the website and only one of them worked. So the second year, a friend volunteered to build a website and we put it up and it looked like a reasonable website for the year 2000. And we had 140 people that year. I didn't even know everybody, and that was the first time I thought, "Oh God, who are these people?" I remember my mom asking me, "Where did they come from?" And I said, "Mom, they came from the Internet!"

So word had started to spread.

Yes. And remember, this was before social media. So the fact that it was starting to get some traction was all because of word-of-mouth. There was no PR plan. I think it had a lot to do with the name, National Novel Writing Month, which started as this kind of ironic, funny banner. Because remember, we were all in the Bay Area and none of us thought we were actually going to write a novel or survive the month but we had this solid, important-sounding name, *National Novel Writing Month*.

Everybody thought it was the real deal.

Yeah. So Year Three, we jumped from 140 people to 5,000 people. Yeah. And I'm freaked out of my mind. The website that this friend of mine built, is was all manual. So — keep in mind, 5,000 people did this — to register for National Novel Writing Month that year, they sent me an email, I sent them back a personal welcome email, and then I sent them out an invitation to our Yahoo! club. I would then get into the HTML of this website and hand-alphabetize their names. So this is where that first crew of friends who have trouble saying no to bad ideas came in handy again.

What was the bad idea this time?

My bad idea that year was that I asked them all to come over to my house and drink Red Bull all night and help me process NaNoWriMo sign-ups. Which they did, and it was incredible. And it took us about two weeks to get everybody in there. And the other thing was back then, to update your word count, which you were supposed to do two or three times throughout the month, you emailed me your word count, and I built a progress bar with these little gifs. And that was obviously not going to happen in Year Three. So, there was a participant who stepped forward and said we could create a way for people to just update their word counts. He said, "We can create a box, but I don't have time to put in a password or any kind of security." So, being remarkably un-savvy about websites, I thought, "Well, nobody's going to mess with somebody else's word count."



Oh no ...

So within maybe 30 minutes of implementing this feature, the entire website was hacked, there were nearly-naked tennis players posted all over, and all kinds of things. So that year was a crash

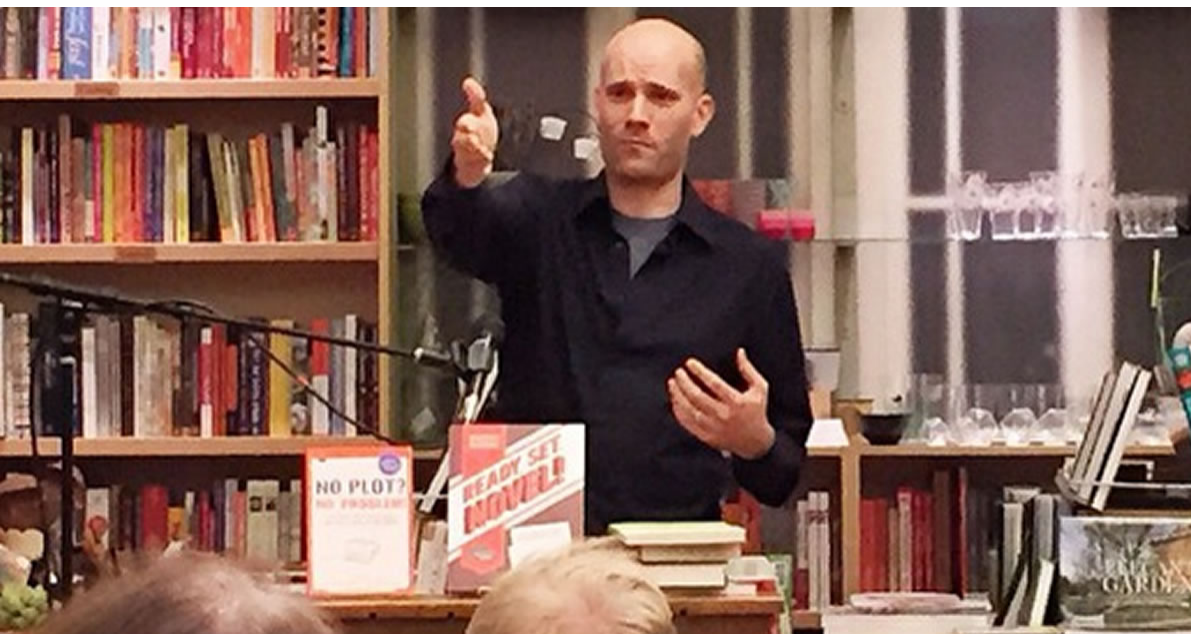
course in me doing exactly what you should not do and paying the price for it. It was a growing year, as they say, but I survived it, and I think the people that had signed up for it kind of believed in it in a way that they wouldn't have if it were just called "Ass-Kicking Writers of Berkeley, California." It's like they saw it and thought it must be a vetted literary initiative funded by the federal government.

So the website issues didn't shut you down.

Well, hey, nobody's websites worked in the year 2000. But that's the amazing thing about confidence when you are a writer. You rarely have your own self-confidence, but you can take confidence from other writers and other sources. And I think that name, which really was just supposed to be funny, ended up reassuring people that, "Okay, this is doable. There are people who did this before and I'm going to do it." And they did it. And that was the start of this idea of the month-long novel.

How did it feel to have launched something that got so big, so quick?

It really felt like a virus that had escaped the lab and started mutating in the wild. And that's when we started having the first chapters that were formed — people in Los Angeles and people in South Africa who were like, "Hey, let's have some get-togethers and we'll have a celebration at the end." And so I'd say, "Alright, here's the structure. You have a kickoff party and you have some write-ins during the month, and so forth." And it was amazing. The next year we jumped to 14,000 people, and it just kept rolling from there.



NaNoWriMo isn't just for fiction writers, correct?

The very interesting thing about National Novel Writing Month is that we have a lot of writers doing it, but we also have a lot of other people using it to get other things written. So I would say about 80% of the participants are writing novels. And other people are writing everything from memoirs to screenplays to PhD dissertations. So it's great. And we send out all these encouraging emails; some are from me, some are from other authors who write these pep talks from all different genres. The idea is to really fill your inbox with this message to "keep going" in November.

What are some of the advantages of going the distance and signing up for NaNoWriMo, as opposed to just doing it on your own?

So you write offline, but you get to use these message boards. If you've ever spent time on a NaNoWriMo message board, it's like its own little city: Equal parts help and terrifying. But one of the things I love, is that for those of us who are really research-impaired and tend to forget to do research, there's this "Character and Plot" section where you'll find answers to anything. Like one question is, "Can a brown bear outrun a golf cart?" Another one, which was from a 13-year-old participant who was writing her debut novel, and she asked, "What does it feel like to fall in love?" And the answers are just so good you can't stop reading. People try to put into words the things we take for granted.

What do you get for completing the 50,000 word count challenge?

So you write and you update your word count, and at the end of the month, you aim to have written at least 50,000 words. When you get to that point, you upload your number onto the site and our magical robots count it, and there's this moment of terror, and then all of a sudden you get the PDF award that says you have completed NaNoWriMo. You have to download it and print it and write your own name with a pen. [Laughs]

But it feels great. It feels pretty amazing. And the whole prize is obviously just the manuscript itself and getting to spend a month running amok in your imagination. Kind of just bringing a world to life and seeing it through.

How big is NaNoWriMo now?

Last year was the 15th NaNoWriMo, and we had somewhere north of 400,000. We have volunteerrun chapters in 500 cities and towns across the world. We have a Young Writers Program that brings a version of National Novel Writing Month where kids in K-12 classrooms get to set their own word count goal and then they battle against each other to see who reigns supreme. And we provide stickers to children because if you have children, you know that they will do anything for stickers, so we airlift thousands of these stickers to classrooms. We also have Common Core mapped curriculum for teachers and free downloadable workbooks for every grade level. And last year, we had 1,000 classrooms that were teaching National Novel Writing Month. So, there were elementary school kids who were writing their first books and coming away from this experience with a relationship to books and writing that will never be the same again. Because when you write your first novel when you're in fifth grade, nothing is scary again. No writing assignment is going to give you pause.

Incredible. So do you still actively participate in NaNoWriMo?

Absolutely. I still look forward to this month-long novel writing challenge with just as much excitement as I did that first one. I keep waiting for this to get old, but instead, every November, there's this almost Pavlovian response for me and a lot of other writers. The weather gets a little cooler and you just start typing.



If you had to give one word of advice to somebody starting a novel for the first time, what would you say?

I think the biggest thing I would say is that everybody has a novel in them. In fact, everybody has *dozens* of novels in them. And the secret is just having faith that you can pull this off because you *can*. Just knowing you can do it is the most important thing. I never would've thought that I have a novel in me, and now I've written 15 first drafts and I've revised a bunch of them, and I

love it. There's nothing I love more. And I never would have known I could do that if I hadn't tried this. So just know that you can do it and know that it's important.

This interview was previously published in the November, 2014 issue of *Barefoot Writer*. To read more interviews from fellow Barefoot Writers be sure to check out [The Barefoot Writer's Club](#).

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1 Response to "Interview with a Barefoot Writer: Chris Baty"

Love this article. I have completed the NaNoWriMo challenge twice now. Chris is right about reaching the goal. It is amazing! The feeling of euphoria when you hit that 50K mark and suddenly think "I did it!" and then do a little happy dance...

It's crazy. It's fabulous. It's frustratingly glorious.

Thank you Chris Baty and your friends that say yes to bad ideas.

Michelle H – over a year ago

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