

BREAKING IN

Debut authors: How they did it, what they learned, and why you can do it, too.

BY CASSANDRA LIPP

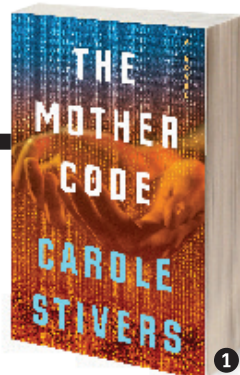
Carole Stivers



The Mother Code
(Sci-fi/thriller, August, Berkley)

"The Mother Code chronicles the bond between mother robot Rho-Z and her human child, Kai, as they navigate life after a manmade apocalypse. When he encounters government survivors determined to destroy Rho-Z, Kai fights to save the only parent he's ever known."

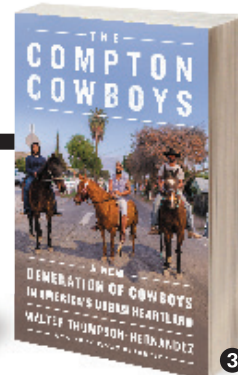
WRITES FROM: San Francisco. **PRE-CODE:** I spent over 30 years as a scientist in medical device development. Late in my career, I picked up creative writing as a hobby. I got a few short stories published in journals and wrote and published a serial online mystery novella, *The Butterfly Garden*. But the bulk of my writing time was devoted to *The Mother Code*, a novel that just kept nagging at me. **TIME FRAME:** I have notes for *The Mother Code* dating back to 2004. But I didn't get serious about writing it until 2011. I used it as a vehicle to obtain a "personal MFA," employing writing classes, conferences, beta reader critiques, craft books, and freelance editors as my teachers. I wasn't finished with *The Mother Code* until the last line edits were completed in October 2019. **ENTER THE AGENT:** I met Elisabeth Weed of



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The Book Group in 2017 at Lit Camp. I pitched her the idea for *The Mother Code*, and she urged me to keep in touch. I had been working with a freelance editor, Heather Lazare, and when it came time to find an agent, Heather helped me query those interested in sci-fi. **BIGGEST SURPRISE:** I'd always assumed an agent wouldn't take on a project unless he or she thought the manuscript was ready. I wasn't prepared to rewrite the second half of the novel multiple times, which was what I wound up doing after signing with Elisabeth! But the final result was much better than what I originally submitted. I was also surprised by the optioning of film rights for the book before we signed with Berkley! **WHAT I DID RIGHT:** As someone with no connections, utilizing a freelance editor with ties to the publishing industry was key to finding an agent. Taking classes and workshops, getting to know other writers, responding constructively to criticism, and reading craft books on writing (and good

books in general) were invaluable. **WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY:** I started out as a "pantser." In the future, I want to be more of a "plotter;" my goal is to leave a lot less on the cutting room floor. **ADVICE FOR WRITERS:** Open yourself to criticism, and don't take it personally. Writing can be an amazing team effort! **NEXT UP:** I'm currently writing another sci-fi—this one a "cli-fi." **WEBSITE:** CaroleStivers.com



Al Pessin

Sandblast

(Thriller, April, Kensington)

"In the midst of a wave of attacks, young Afghan-American U.S. Army Lieutenant Faraz Abdallah is given a mission: infiltrate the Taliban and find the new terror mastermind."

WRITES FROM: Delray Beach, Fla. **PRE-SANDBLAST:** I had five foreign correspondent postings and was part of the White House and Pentagon

press corps during a long journalism career. I got the idea for *Sandblast* during the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, but didn't get to writing it until years later. One inspiration was a citizenship ceremony I attended for U.S. troops, immigrants who had volunteered and were serving, even though they were not yet citizens. I started to think about the unique capabilities they bring to the fight. **TIME FRAME:** Eight years from having the idea, about a year to finish the first draft once I sat down to write it. **ENTER THE AGENT:** I got an agent within two months of the start of querying, but I was not satisfied with her performance and severed the relationship 14 months later. After another year of querying agents and publishers, Kensington offered me a three-book contract. **WHAT I DID RIGHT:** I hired Lourdes Venard of Comma Sense Editing as a developmental editor. Her guidance was invaluable as I transitioned from writing fact to writing fiction. Before hiring Lourdes, I researched dozens of editors to ensure she had the right background and edited the right kind of books. I also took classes, joined critique groups, enlisted beta readers, joined organizations, and attended conferences. I tried to take something of value from every seminar, comment, and edit, whether I implemented it or not, or (my favorite) to accept the criticism but find a third way. **WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY:** I've become more of a planner during the last couple of years. I don't necessarily do the whole plan first. I still write scenes and chapters that come to me. But pretty early in the process I do a synopsis. It helps to know where you're going and have an idea how to get there. It's easier to foreshadow, easier

to find something to write if I don't want to write what comes next, and harder to make continuity mistakes. **ADVICE FOR WRITERS:** I've presented a seminar in which I tell students that the most important four words I will say are, "Take a professional approach." It includes doing all the things mentioned and continually reading WD and other sources for advice on how to up all the aspects of your writing/querying/pitching/platform game. **NEXT UP:** I've submitted the manuscript of the first *Sandblast* sequel, *Blowback*, in which the action shifts to Syria. I'm now working on the synopsis for book three in the series. I'm also trying to get my play produced for a second time. The first run of *Murder at the Butcher's*, a farce, sold out in 2019. **WEBSITE:** AlPessin.com



Walter Thompson Hernández

The Compton Cowboys

(Nonfiction/culture, William Morrow, April)

"This book is about a group of African-American friends who defy stereotypes and find belonging and redemption through horse riding in one of the one most stigmatized cities in the world."

WRITES FROM: Los Angeles. **PRE-COWBOYS:** I was a *New York Times* reporter while working on this book. I was working on stories about global subcultures in countries like Japan, Ghana, Cuba, Madagascar, and Brazil. **TIME FRAME:** I was a *New York Times* reporter during the early stages of this book and had to complete most of it in a series of airports and flights around the world. I began

working on this story for about two weeks before it went to print on April 1, 2018 [in *The New York Times*] as a featured article. By the time I began writing the book, I had already spent six months with the cowboys and took about seven months to complete the book. The story felt personal to me—it felt like this story had existed inside me long before I began to write. **ENTER THE AGENT:** My agent, Chad Luibl, reached out to me after the *New York Times* story went to print. We had an incredible discussion about the value of telling important stories and it was a great fit. **BIGGEST SURPRISE:** I've interacted with so many departments and people at William Morrow/HarperCollins and it's all been humbling to know there are others who really believe in my book. **WHAT I DID RIGHT:** I don't feel like I've fully broken in yet, but I am attempting to do so and simultaneously create more opportunities for writers who come from communities like mine. **WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY:** I would ask more questions and consult with others who had been in similar situations. **PLATFORM:** I am still publishing with *The New York Times* and have an NPR podcast coming out this June called "California Love"—which will feature *The Compton Cowboys* in episode one—about subcultures in Los Angeles, told through my personal lens and deep reportage. **ADVICE FOR WRITERS:** Early morning writing is the best writing. **NEXT UP:** I am in the process of writing a memoir and have signed on with a production company to host a TV show about global subcultures. **WEBSITE:** Wthdz.com **WD**

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