

# Trails of an Author

By Uma Menon

*Do you dream of becoming a published author yet believe that this may be out of reach for you as a precollege student? The road to becoming a published author may seem daunting; however, as one SET member describes below, determination and a refusal to be derailed by rejections can pave the way to success. Sixteen-year old Uma Menon, an acclaimed poet whose work has been featured in more than 25 magazines and who was shortlisted for the prestigious 2019 erbacce-prize for her poetry, shares how perseverance can pay off.*

From a young age, there was something about creative writing that reeled me in. In kindergarten, when all of my classmates dreamed of becoming princesses and superheroes, I hoped to become an author. English was my second language, but I immediately became fascinated with the innovation of the language. Ever since I learned to write, I kept a journal of poetry and short stories that I wrote, making writing a crucial part of my life. It wasn't until high school, however, that I began to take writing seriously. As a female of color and daughter of immigrant parents, I was struggling to reconcile my cultural identity with my American culture. I realized that a creative outlet could help me to navigate this identity.

As I began to write, I submitted my writing to several journals and magazines, but I was rejected by every single publication for the first two months. Understanding the intrinsic value of writing, I persisted—devoting more and more time to the activity. As I read contemporary writing, I understood that poetry didn't just entail rhyming words and nature imagery. Seeing poems with white space and writing without capitalization made me realize that confines only existed as long as I thought they did. With this knowledge, I began to embrace my identity in writing, rather than restricting myself to certain conventions. I wrote about my culture, my story, all of the things that

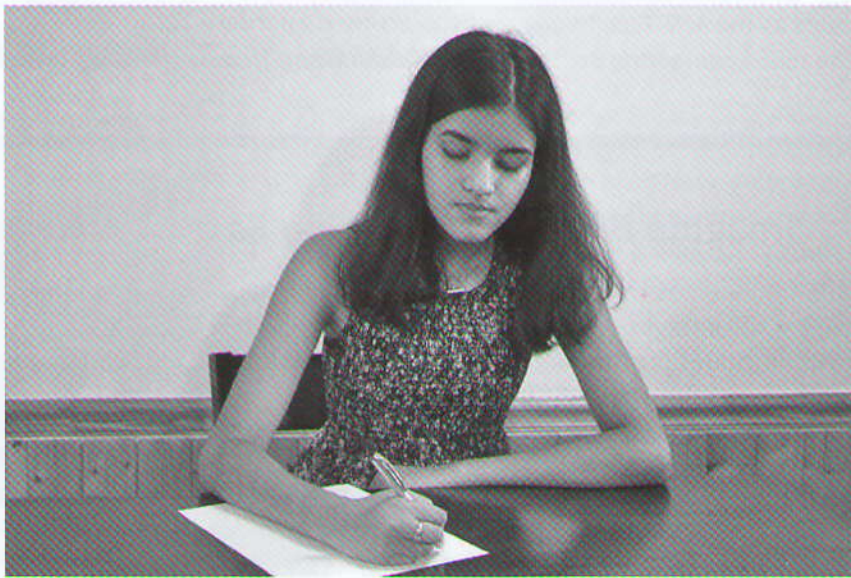
are unique in their own right. Writing this sort of poetry made me happier about who I am and proud of who I have become.

## Gaining Experience

Though many perceive writing to be an unstable profession, it is one of the most welcoming and accessible fields for young people. However, I was initially discouraged by the publications that rejected my work simply on the basis of my age. So I began by submitting to student-oriented publications. After amassing a handful of these publication credits, academic and commercial publications began to publish my work. I built relationships with editors who saw promise in my writing, allowing me to expand my network in a field of professional writers. I embraced every opportunity I could find to gain more experience in this field, including free courses, mentorships,

competitions, and even programs intended for professionals. Many times, I received standard rejections, but there were also instances in which editors wanted to feature my work and encourage young writing.

One of the most rewarding experiences in my interaction with the writing community has been editing. By volunteering and interning in the editorial department of several international publications, I exposed myself to a variety of writing styles.





It allowed me to see both the writing and editing sides of the publication process, strengthening my ability to evaluate the quality of my own writing.

### Finally, my first book!

After my work began to appear in international publications, I compiled my poems into a chapbook—a short collection that helps writers to launch their career—and approached a few small literary presses. After receiving a contract for my chapbook, I charged on to my next project, publishing a book of my poetry, which was one of my greatest ambitions. It was a longshot as a 15-year-old writer, but I remained determined. It was hardly a year after my first publication when I finished the first draft of my book, a collection that explored my identity and summarized my self-acceptance journey. I re-read the draft of the manuscript each week, making edits and replacing poems. I submitted it to over a dozen different publishing companies, and, naturally, received several rejections. Following the example of J.K. Rowling, I continued to edit and submit to more publishers, searching specifically for

companies whose purpose fit the nature of my book. In the end, I received opportunities from several companies, and signed a contract with Mawenzi House Publishing, one of the largest publishers of diasporic writing.

Throughout my life, creative writing has served first and foremost as an avenue to express my identity and thoughts. My success in writing is a result of this genuine passion rather than reliance on external recognition. Treat writing as a lifestyle rather than a chore—then, it will truly reward you.

**Uma Menon** is a high school senior and writer from Winter Park, Florida. Her debut book, *Hands for Language*, is forthcoming from Mawenzi House Publishing in May 2020. Outside of writing, Uma served as an intern with the Office of U.S. Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy and is the captain of her school's Speech & Debate Team.



## Uma's Tips for Aspiring Young Authors

Consider entering student writing competitions that may provide publication or performance opportunities. (For an extensive listing of writing contests, visit [cty.jhu.edu/resources/academic-opportunities/competitions/art\\_writing.html](http://cty.jhu.edu/resources/academic-opportunities/competitions/art_writing.html))

Seek mentorship opportunities to improve your writing. Take an intensive summer course or, if cost is an issue, explore less expensive options. *The Adroit Journal's* Summer Mentorship Program, for example, is a free online program in which selected student writers are paired with professionals. See [theadroitjournal.org/about/mentorship](http://theadroitjournal.org/about/mentorship)

Submit your work to publication outlets that welcome young writers. Consider submitting to *International Human Rights Art Festival (IHRAF) Publishes – Youth*, an online publication that I recently founded for writers 21 & under. We're open for submissions! See [ihraf.org/ihraf-publishes-youth](http://ihraf.org/ihraf-publishes-youth)

Explore other avenues for publishing your work. The following are either student-run publications that invite high school students to submit their writing and serve as editors or professional publications that have divisions for young writers:

*Polyphony Lit*: [polyphonylit.org](http://polyphonylit.org)

*Canvas Literary Journal*: [canvasliteraryjournal.com](http://canvasliteraryjournal.com)

*Stone Soup*: [stonesoup.com](http://stonesoup.com)

*One Story*: [one-story.com](http://one-story.com)

[PANK]: [pankmagazine.com](http://pankmagazine.com)

*Cleaver Magazine*: [cleavermagazine.com](http://cleavermagazine.com)

*K'in Literary Journal*: [kinliteraryjournal.com](http://kinliteraryjournal.com)

Create a spreadsheet of submissions, deadlines, and results to keep track of which pieces have been accepted and where.

Maintain contact with editors who have encouraged you or shown interest in your work.

Reach out to publications that are of interest and ask about opportunities to intern or volunteer.