

# Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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## And the Award Goes to...Socially Engaged Fiction



Are you writing a novel about "the world as it is with an eye for how it could be"? If so, [Barbara Kingsolver](#) may have a prize for you. Check out the submission guidelines for the [PEN/Bellwether Prize](#).

Kingsolver launched the PEN/Bellwether Prize in 2000 to promote "fiction that addresses issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships." The biennial prize is awarded for a first novel. The winner receives \$25,000 and a contract with Algonquin Press.

Kingsolver (*The Lacuna*, *The Poisonwood Bible*) insists that “there *is* a place for political fiction in the U.S.” As hallowed examples, she cites John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and David Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars*.

“Is it risky to blend fiction and politics?” Kingsolver asked at a recent event at BookExpo America. “Of course. But fiction is full of risks.” And because fiction creates empathy, she says, it is inherently political.

Kingsolver’s goal in establishing the award was to encourage writers to take the risk of writing political fiction. “I wanted the prize to change a life,” she says. “To open a door to a career. To give the winner a chance to ask, ‘What do I want to say next?’ rather than ‘What do ‘they’ want?’”

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Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at [www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com).