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Will C. Knott

How to Write and Publish Your Novel

Will C. Knott



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Printed in the United States of America.

This book is dedicated to Lew Turco a fine poet and a friend indeed

Preface

I bring good news.

There are editors who want—who need—your book. Even more important, there are readers out there demanding those characters and their stories that only you as a writer can create for them. Far from curling up and fading away as so many prophets of doom have been warning for years, the novel is here to stay. Indeed, television—which was supposed to have weaned the reading public from printed matter—seems rather to have increased the demand for the joys and sorrows, the sheer excitement of fiction.

Remember this: in fiction the reader gets under the skin of the characters the writer creates for him. He becomes privy to their most secret thoughts. Aided by his own imagination and the skill of the writer, the reader is able to create worlds more terrifying and far more intense than those one-dimensional worlds—no matter how cleverly they are constructed—one finds portrayed in film and on television.

And there are no commercials.

What does this mean to you? It means that if you are willing to work hard enough and long enough to master the craft of fiction, you will find editors anxious to publish your work and readers clamoring for more.

This mastery will not come easy, however. The rewards of a successful writing career are enormous—certainly as great as those reaped by a successful surgeon or lawyer, or any other highly trained professional. It should not be surprising, therefore, to find that your own apprenticeship as a writer will certainly be as long and perhaps almost as difficult before the time comes when you may expect to achieve that same level of success.

But it will not be impossible.

You do not have to be a genius, a child prodigy, or the nephew of a publisher to succeed in writing fiction for today's market—as long as you are willing to take advice and work diligently. Accordingly, this book, the fruit of twenty years of successful free-lance writing, is designed to start you on your way, to lead you from the characters your mind creates to the story that springs from them. With your novel completed, this book then advises you on the serious and very important business of packaging and submitting your novel for publication.

In short, writing and selling your first book is not at all out of the question. I wrote and sold my first book, and a student of mine in the only adult education class I ever taught—a married woman of twenty-eight who had never published anything before—followed the course of action I have included here and sold her first novel on its initial submission.

Such swift success is not the rule, of course. Still, it is something you should keep in mind as you wonder if your hope to get that book of yours published is a reasonable possibility or just a foolish pipe dream. For me, publication of my first book was never a pipe dream. It was a possibility I refused to deny myself.

I sincerely hope that you will not deny yourself the chance to see your first book published either—and that this book will show you how.

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Part One The Writer and His World

What follows is a brief discussion of certain attitudes and assumptions I have found to be so misleading and inappropriate that they seriously hinder the novice writer's chance of achieving even a modest success. The most damaging of these attitudes and assumptions are clustered about three basic topics: writing for money, the fictional world as opposed to the real world, and the degree of commitment required of the writer. Accordingly, you might do well to read these three chapters carefully before proceeding further into the text, since they may well convince you of the wisdom of retaining your present amateur status. On the other hand, what follows could embolden you to abandon that status and begin to think of yourself as a professional.

Chapter One This Precarious Profession

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money." SAMUEL JOHNSON

Many feel it is bad form, or worse, for a student of writing—indeed, for any writer—to give serious consideration to the possibility of monetary reward. Yet I have been approached on countless occasions by individuals who expect to realize quick fortunes on the strength of a novel or short story they are in the process of writing. Others, equally annoying, are openly suspicious of me. After all, they imply, if I have published so many books, why am I not riding around in a Rolls Royce? Just what, then, are the financial realities of this profession? This chapter should give you some needed perspective on this troublesome matter.

WRITING FOR MONEY

What the good Doctor Johnson meant by that remark, of course, was that no one but a blockhead works for nothing. There comes a point in every endeavor, no matter how genuinely unselfish the motive, no matter how fulfilling the task, when *some* just compensation is not only legitimate, but downright necessary.

Writers—like lawyers, doctors, politicians, businessmen, jockeys, gangsters, used-car salesmen, composers, mechanics, artists, professors of English, editors, and plumbers—have to eat on a fairly regular basis and are responsible, in many cases, for providing clothing and shelter for their young. Unless, therefore, the writer is paid for his or her talents, that writer will have extreme difficulty functioning in this society. The writer who insists on writing without compensation will soon find himself unable to write. The reason Dr. Johnson and *all* professional writers demand payment is not that they are unregenerate hacks who have sold their talents to the highest bidder; rather, they simply enjoy writing and wish to continue to be able to work at their craft, however modest the fruits of their talents may be.

Indeed, for the average writer, far from being the great enemy to a writing career, money is the one indispensable element without which there can be no career, pious hopes to the contrary. As one who has known many professional writers personally, I can state with some authority that the well-paid writer is the happiest of mortals—and as a result, one of the most creative.

Unfortunately, few beginning writers can hope for much real financial backing for their first creative efforts. This is often true for many established professionals also. Schools, colleges, and newspapers, as well as the editorial staffs of magazines and publishing houses, contain many writers who are working solely to supplement their writing income.

In short, it does not always follow that wealth and fame are the certain rewards of a writing career. It is only fair to point out, in fact, one very lamentable but inescapable truth, one that the fledgling writer had better learn to live with: Writers do not make very much money. Not too long ago, in the Columbia University Survey of American Authors, it was found that the average free-lance writer earns less than \$5,000 a year—not a very princely sum, you must admit.

Of course some writers of fiction do make it big, and it gives all writers heart when they see one of their number succeed. But these writers are the exceptions, not the rule.

THE SHRINKING FICTION MARKET

Years ago the ratio of fiction to nonfiction published in our magazines was three to one. Now the situation is reversed. Fiction is no longer the staple it once was, and nonfiction has moved in to take its place. What has happened to cause this? Well, for one thing, television now provides the kind of escape fiction that used to be the chief bill of fare in the so-called pulp and mass slick publications. Another reason is that the real world has proven so complex, so fascinating, and so deadly that today the average reader turns to it as avidly as he once turned to fiction. Think over this last decade—if you had created that period as a piece of fiction, an editor might well have mailed it back to you, commenting that your writing was totally lacking in believability.

What all this implies is obvious: There are fewer markets, and there is tougher entry into those that are left. And for the very few short story markets that remain, the payment—except for the top men's magazines and one or two of the top women's magazines—is disappointingly low. The confessions seem to be holding their own; but even these markets seldom pay more than five cents a word—tops.

In brief, for the writer of short fiction, times are indeed rough. There was a time when a writer could earn a fine yearly income writing short stories alone. But that day is past.

WHAT THIS MEANS TO YOU

What is left, then, for the fiction writer are the paperback or category novel for the softcover houses and the mainstream novel for those few hardcover publishers which still accept unsolicited manuscripts—a tribe whose number grows rapidly fewer as publishers slash their staffs, merge, change direction, or simply disappear.

Of course I realize how negative this must sound to you. And yet, what choice have I? This book is being written for the *serious* student of writing. It would not be honest for me to sugarcoat the facts.

Summary

It will take hard work and a clearly remarkable commitment for any beginning writer today to master its difficulties well enough to be able to support himself or herself immediately. At best, the young writer will have