

# WHO GETS TO BE A WRITER? EXPLORING PATHWAYS AND CHALLENGES IN LEARNING TO BECOME A FICTION AUTHOR

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A number of years ago I attended a workshop given by Stuart McLean, a well-known Canadian fiction writer. One participant said, "I'm not really a writer".

"Who says when you can be a writer?" he asked. "I give you permission to say 'I am a writer'".

But who can claim this identity? Drawing upon a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded study on lifelong learning, citizenship, and fiction writing, that includes interviews with authors from Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, as well as with "key informants" – individuals in the publishing, education, and policy sector, this paper explores the learning trajectories, supports and challenges that shape the careers of fiction authors. It begins with a brief survey of the literature pertaining to the development of identity in connection to learning in the workplace, and then gives an overview of the research study. Four aspects of developing the identity of a writer are then explored; a) envisioning a writing career, b) compelled to write, c) learning the craft, and d) getting published. The paper concludes with a consideration of how new technologies are impacting upon fiction writing and publication, and assesses some of the possible implications of this for existing writers and for those who are learning the craft of writing.

## Identity, Lifelong Learning, and the Workplace

In recent years there has been interest in exploring the concept of identity formation in connection to lifelong learning from a variety of perspectives, including how identity is linked to work and the workplace. Research around learning and work is complicated, because notions of what constitutes the workplace or what is perceived as being 'work' are not static and universally agreed upon. Fenwick (2008: p. 19) captures this complexity when she explains:

*"Work [italics in original] itself is a slippery category; it can be paid or unpaid, based in action or reflection, material or virtual, in or out of the home, or more often in various overlapping spaces among these categories. Just as neither workplace nor work can be referred to as some generic identifiable phenomenon, so does learning work take multiple forms, faces, and qualities."*

The learning trajectories that people engage in to learn about work vary quite a bit across careers and are influenced by many factors. Much of the research that has been done in the adult education/lifelong learning fields with regards to workplace identity has focused on workplaces that are organizations or corporations. In this context, identity and learning issues are often explored as concerns that employers might wish to take up. For example, Timma (2007) looked at how social interaction shapes a sense of workplace identity and consider how assessment practices factor in to impact upon a worker's sense of identity. Both Algren & Tett (2010) and Wojecki

(2007) look at how learners may overcome prior formal learning experiences that may have been damaging to consider how opportunities for learning in the workplace may foster more positive learning identities. Other researchers explore how learning connected to the workplace links with other social structural factors that help to shape identity such as race (Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, & Glalinde, 2009), ability (Rocco & Delgado, 2011), and gender (Hedlin, 2011).

Billett, Newton & Ockerby (2010) argue that linkages between identity and the workplace are negotiated differently by individuals, depending upon how they make sense of their work within various social and cultural contexts. It is easier to feel a sense of detachment from work that is simply a means of earning an income. When work is closely aligned with an individual's beliefs and values, however, it has greater personal meaning that impacts on one's sense of identity, and may be considered a vocation.

Choices that people make about work are important for a variety of reasons, including how work shapes one's sense of identity. Zhao and Biesta (2012: p. 343) draw upon the work of philosopher Charles Taylor to argue that the conditions of late modernity have turned the understanding of identity or 'self' into a 'project' or 'task' rather than a given, which results in

“A different ‘agenda’ for adult education and lifelong learning, one in which there is explicit attention to the intersubjective and moral dimensions of the formation of self and identity. The plurality of life options that is characteristic of late modern societies is, after all, not just a matter of (rational) choice, but also raises deeper kinds of questions about the kind of self we may wish to cultivate in light of a plurality of options and visions. This is not just a matter of choice but touches on questions about what our lives mean to us and how we want them to mean and be significant.”

The decision to become a writer is often closely connected to an individual's goals about engaging in work that is intensely meaningful. Being able to claim the identity of 'writer' is one that many individuals feel passionate about. But what does it take to become a published writer? It is often a long and arduous journey that requires dedication to learning the craft of fiction and a willingness to learn how to navigate the business of the publishing world, a world that is changing rapidly as a result of emerging technologies and the influence of globalization.

The next section provides a brief overview of the study that this paper draws upon, and then moves into a more detailed discussion of some of the findings that incorporates quotes from some of the writers who were interviewed as a part of this research project.

## **Research Study**

This study is funded by a standard Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant. My collaborator, Susan Holloway, and I, along with several student assistants, have worked on this research study for the past four years. It has involved interviews with over thirty writers, mostly Canadian, and with

half a dozen American and UK authors included for cross-cultural comparative purposes.

The interviews with writers used a biographical or life history approach, in that they were asked to reflect upon various aspects of their upbringing and their lives that they believe impacted on their career development as a writer. As Antikainen (1998, p. 216) argues, 'as the life experiences of a person are the very foundations of educative process, it is natural that the biographical method is also used in educational research, and especially in adult education'. In addition, shorter, semi-structured interviews were carried out with more than a dozen 'key informants' – individuals in the not-for-profit, government and educational sector, to learn more about programs and supports for writers.

The interviews were transcribed and sent back to participants to review and to edit if they chose. Writers were asked to reveal their identity, although they were given the option of confidentiality for any sections of the transcripts where quotes might be taken that they would prefer not to have ascribed to them. Key informants were given the same options, but were also given the opportunity to request complete confidentiality.

Preliminary categories for analysis were developed in connection to the interview schedule, which asked about influences such as schooling, family, and structured learning opportunities (i.e. writing courses), in addition to questions pertaining to citizenship. As Marshall and Rossman (2011, p. 210) note, 'reading, rereading, and reading through the data once more force the researcher to become intimate with the material'. Transcripts have been reviewed continuously, and thematic codes have been added as a result of discussion between different members of the research team.

From this thematic analysis, in this particular paper, four different aspects pertaining to identity and the development of a writing career are discussed; a) envisioning a writing career, b) compelled to write, c) learning the craft, and d) getting published.

### **Envisioning a Writing Career**

One interesting aspect of becoming a fiction writer is that it is a particular kind of work that is pursued by personal choice. People do not generally stumble into writing fiction for a career. It is not the type of employment that parents recommend that their children consider. It is definitely not a 'default' job that individuals fall back on because it pays well and offers benefits. Antikainen (1998, p. 216) argues that

"In late modern culture we still have enormous opportunities to organize our biographies, and in the course of our lives we produce many meanings related to ourselves and our social framework. From our biographical or life history point of view, we have more choices than we can ever put into practice."

It is interesting, therefore, to explore why an individual might be motivated to become a fiction writer. Out of the many 'choices' available, why pursue a career that is so difficult to succeed in?

The authors in this study began their writing careers at different stages in life. A number were intrigued with the idea of being an author from the time that they were young. Canadian mystery writer, Susanna Kearsley said:

“When I was about seven years old I read *Little Women*, and reading about Jo was the first time I read about a writer. I hadn’t thought about somebody doing this for a living; that there were writers who were women. I always found that really interesting and I sort of took after her.”

Some authors began with other kinds of writing and gradually found their niche in fiction. Children’s author, Gina McMurchy-Barber, explains that for her, it was a matter of building confidence:

“I started to tinker around with writing stories. I submitted little stories to my town paper, and they accepted them all; I was thrilled. I came to the end of my degree and I was trying to decide whether I wanted to go on and do an MA or go into journalism, because by this time I was having some success in writing but I never envisioned myself as a fiction writer. I thought I could maybe write non-fiction and for a newspaper, so I decided to start there.”

There were a few authors who did not envision being a creative writing career until later in life. Canadian author, R.J. Harlick, discusses her path to becoming a fiction writer:

A. “I did enjoy creative writing [but] I never really thought of writing as a career. It didn’t enter into my mind at all and I went off to do other things. But at the same time I had a little dream in the back of mind that it would be nice to write. It would be nice to sit in some wonderful location and squirrel away and write, so it was always in the back of my mind.”

Q: “Did you ever talk to anyone about that?”

A: “No, I never did. Even my husband didn’t know I had this desire. It was just something that was always back there because I enjoyed writing... I started my career using computers, so there wasn’t much writing there. However, I quickly became a consultant, so for most of my career as an IT person I was actually writing: reports, manuals, and proposals. I liked the crafting of words, the conveying of ideas through words, and the influence of words because words are very powerful.

Meanwhile I still thought it would be nice to write and at that time I was reading anything and everything... I always enjoyed fiction but I’ve never liked non-fiction which was why I found it hard in university. I just didn’t want to read my study books because they were boring. I want to be transported to another world, which is what fiction is all about. So when I decided to write my own stories, I knew it would be fiction.”

While many authors indicated that their parents were supportive of them building their skills as writers, they were advised to plan to have a career that would bring in a steady income. Young adult (YA) writer Christine Walde discusses the influence of her parents:

“So they encouraged it. I think they always thought that I would do something else. I always remember my father saying, You can't eat your dreams. It's a very fatherly thing to say ... and then I applied ... because I didn't think that I could make a career in creative writing. I went to Carleton for my first year of university and took journalism as a way, I thought, to write and make money. But the emphasis there at that time was very much on political journalism and being in the scrum on the hill...and that really wasn't what I wanted to do.”

Highly acknowledged Canadian poet and literary author Daphne Marlatt said:

“At some point in my teens I told my dad that I wanted to be a writer. And he didn't laugh or say I couldn't. He was always encouraging about my writing and essays, he would look them over and correct anything that wasn't quite right. So when I told him I wanted to be a writer, he said, if you want to be a writer, you will have to earn your living in some other way; teaching or something. That was okay. So I said I was going to be a child psychologist, but I knew I didn't really want to be a child psychologist.”

Finances are a serious concern for most writers, so the majority of writers found that they did have to establish a different career in order to 'make a living'. It is probably for this reason, as well as the time it takes to learn the craft, that many published writers are middle-aged or older. Some, however, have been able to cobble together a career that blends different interests. American mystery author, Cathy Pickens explains:

“I was a writer who went to law school because my mother told me I needed to find a way to support myself; very wise advice to give an eleven year-old. It has been a good thing to be a college professor, a lawyer and a consultant, in addition to writing. Those things fed the writing and allowed me to indulge in the writing.”

Unlike most authors who often mentioned they had limited exposure to other published authors before starting their own careers, Irish author, Emma Donoghue, now living in Canada, grew up in a household where her father, Denis Donoghue, had established a career as a well-known writer and literary critic. Thinking back on this, she says:

“It gives you a huge sense of confidence if one of your parents is publishing books; you think, Oh sure, I could publish books. That seems like a natural thing to do. I didn't have the mental blocks that some authors seem to have; I didn't think it was inconceivable that I would become an author.”

At the same time, her mother who was a career guidance counsellor, said, 'You need a solid job as well'. Emma reflects that she was fortunate in not needing a solid job after all - she is one of the few authors interviewed who has been able to make a living as a commercially published literary author. Her recent book, *Room*, was shortlisted for both the Booker and the Orange Prize.

### **Compelled to Write**

A number of the authors revealed a deep-seated personal drive to write. As Zhao and Biesta (2012) alluded to in their discussion, an essential component of identity for many of the writers seemed to be how they envisioned their lives and what they wanted their lives to look like. Writing, and the identity of being a writer, appeared to be an integral aspect of who they wanted to be.

Canadian mystery writer, Gary Ryan, who had a long career as a teacher in the public school system reflects:

A. "I think I always had an interest in writing, but maybe 30 or 35 years ago I started setting some goals and started writing novels. I wanted to get a novel published by the time I was 40; that was kind of my goal. It didn't happen until I was 50."

Q. "Did you write as a child too?"

A. "Yes, I think so, but I just think it became more and more essential to life as I got older."

Q: "Initially it was more of a hobby?"

A: "I don't think it was ever a hobby; it was always just something I needed to do. It was kind of like breathing."

Canadian literary author, Dawn Bryan, explains:

"It was always something I knew I would do. I figured I would do it in combination with something else. If I'd seen a movie I liked, I would be an actor. This would be my wonderful life and I would also write novels. If I'd seen someone who was a physician, that suddenly looked interesting. I would do that, but I would also write novels. So my fantasy life really depended on what sort of influence there was in my immediate vicinity. But I knew I would always write novels no matter whatever else I was doing."

Louise Penny discusses leaving her career with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to focus full-time on her writing, with her husband's support:

"And I suffered from writer's block for five years... I think a big part of it was ... oh, it was a number of things. Like *Waiting for Godot*, the subtext is, is it better to try to live your dream or to leave it as just a dream, because if you try to live it and you fail then you lose everything. You lose your dream, so maybe it's better to just leave it as a dream and come up with any number of excuses not to do it. And here I was - I had no more excuses."

Despite the struggle with writer's block and numerous rejections, Louise Penny felt compelled to continue writing. She eventually attained a second place in the British Debut Dagger competition, which led to her obtaining a literary agent. Her career quickly soared upwards, with her most recent book, *A Beautiful Mystery*, landing in second place on the New York Times' Bestseller List.

### **Learning the craft**

Many people engage in creative writing and desire to claim the identity of being an author. Aspiring writers may spend hundreds of hours working on manuscripts, attending courses and conferences, networking on the internet, and reading books. Yet the amount of time and labour expended on learning the craft of writing is generally invisible to most people as writing is a somewhat solitary pursuit.

Reflecting upon the experience of learning to develop as a writer, Susanna Kearsley said,

“I think I learned to be a good writer by reading good writing and by reading bad writing; knowing what I didn't like. I read a lot of the stories that you get lost in, the ones where you pick up the book and by the second page you're just in a different world entirely. I mean, those are the ones you try to emulate. And when you're young, you learn by imitation. I think humans learn everything by imitation. Having had children, that's the way they learn to speak and to move; they imitate what you do. I think as a writer you tend to be very driven in your first efforts. Your first poems sound like Tennyson or Browning or whoever you happen to be reading; your first stories sound like whoever you happen to be reading.”

Learning how to write and how to edit one's own work takes a great deal of practice and persistence. Emma Donoghue reflected, ‘My first novel, *Stir Fry* had about seven drafts. I really had to learn the nuts and bolts of what bits do you say and what bits do you leave out?’

Some authors, like Donoghue and Kearsley, worked mostly independently as they strived to develop their capabilities as writers. Similarly, Canadian literary poet and writer, Roy Mikki, says, ‘I've never been a communal person when it comes to writing...I keep it private until it gets into a published form.’

Other writers, such as crime fiction author, Vickey Delaney, talked about the importance of getting feedback from other authors through taking writing courses. Literary author, Dawn Bryan, discusses some of the considerations of taking creative writing instruction:

“one of the issues in creative writing pedagogy is: Can you actually teach it? There are so many ideas around "inspiration" and those magical kinds of things that are not theorized, and we don't talk about them in a practical kind of way. And yet at the same time there is

something really practical about creative writing; it's not a magical activity.”

Internationally acclaimed Canadian literary writer, Alistair McLeod, who is also a professor, explains, ‘I teach creative writing myself and...you can't give them [students/learners] a subject, but you can say, well, did you ever think of telling it from this point of view? So I think ... if you take writing courses it gives you tools that you might not otherwise have.’

A number of writers indicated that they valued the connections that they had formed over their careers with other writers. These relationships were often important in shaping their careers and helping emerging authors to both learn the craft and the business of writing. In previous research (Gouthro, 2012), I explore the importance of Sisters in Crime, as a grassroots organization that advocates for women as crime fiction writers and provides practical supports, networking opportunities, and educational events for its membership (which includes men as well as women).

Canadian poet and author, Fred Wah says, ‘one of the greatest advantages of writing to me, ironically; it’s not a solitary pursuit at all. It has very much always involved a community; various communities.’ Canadian literary author, Nino Ricci, concurs:

“There are all kinds of literary festivals and you run into other writers that way and form sort of informal communities. I teach most summers at the Humber School for Writers, so I have those tools as outlets. That has certainly been important; to feel part of a community and feel supported within that community. Working in concert with that community makes things happen for writers.”

A number of authors had employment experiences that in various ways also helped them to develop as writers. Canadian Education professor and children’s author, Kari-Lynn Winters explains:

“And in my theatre background I learned that there's an action that requires a reaction, which will cause another action. So it really helped to do a lot of that scene work and character work that I did at Brock and National Theatre School. It has helped me with putting the scenes together in such a way that formulates a story.”

American crime fiction writer, Frankie Bailey, draws upon her background as an African-American scholar to inform the work of her protagonist, who carries out research activities in her novels. Giles Blunt, who writes literary and crime fiction, commented that his work in social services with troubled adolescents provided him with insights into the challenges that many marginalized youth face – knowledge that has proven invaluable in informing his writing and developing some of the characters in his novels.

## Getting published

Learning to write, finding the time to write, and having the persistence to finish a major project, such as a fictional novel, are all challenges that authors have to address if they are to develop a successful writing career. But beyond that, the biggest hurdle for many aspiring writers is getting their work published.

Canadian Linwood Barclay, who in recent years has become internationally successful as a crime fiction writer said:

“Probably my first four or five years as a reporter I was writing novels – none of which were ever published, thank God – but I wrote a few and sent them around. I have rejection slips from some of the finest publishing houses.”

Giles Blunt is quoted at length here as he discusses the long trajectory that he pursued in striving to become a successfully published author. In talking about the challenges of his writing career, he says, ‘I kept writing books and everybody kept turning them down. I mean, it was ten years before I got another book published.’ When asked ‘what kept you writing?’ he explained:

“Stupidity, I think. I mean, really anybody else would have quit. I wrote ten screenplays that didn't get produced...This is years, and years, and years of work. You don't get a dime for it. And after *Cold Eye* I wrote one novel that didn't get picked up. It got a lot of glowing rejection letters. And then I wrote another one ... I don't really think of it as a novel because I basically novelized one of my own scripts which had come within an eighth of an inch of getting made. And then I wrote another literary novel which is still close to my heart, and that one just got published last year by Random House, fourteen years after I wrote it; *Breaking Lorca*. It's not a crime novel, it's a literary novel.

But, what keeps you going... when...you work at writing long enough, you do get ... I suppose there are some cases where somebody could work at something that long and really have no talent and no idea of what's good, and be totally deluded. But I think I had a pretty good sense of what was good, and I just couldn't believe people were turning these books down. It just made me angry. It was just like ... why are you turning these down and publishing this shit that they publish, you know? I couldn't believe it. So I just kept going. I was just convinced that one day they would see the error of their ways...eventually I got to the point ... I finally did get a real break which wasn't that long ago.

I mean, if I made a million dollars a year for the rest of my life, it couldn't make up for the career I had before that. People have ... in Canada, anyway, people have this illusion that I'm quite successful, but actually I had an awful career. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. It's really been quite awful.”

While some other authors did not face years of struggle and rejection, Elizabeth Duncan's story was somewhat unique. She explained that she never thought of becoming a fiction writer until she read a newspaper article one day that sparked an idea. She began to write a novel and entered the first few chapters in a contest, which she won. She entered the final draft into another contest, and won that. From this contest she won a publishing contract and was able to secure a well-known literary agent to represent her work. Reflecting upon her experiences, she says:

“My road to publication was remarkably smooth. I have no drawer at home filled with manuscripts or rejection letters. I have no sad story of being down to my last twenty dollars. There was nothing negative about the journey at all; it was remarkably effortless, really.”

But for most authors, it often takes years of work before they are published. When considering why an individual would exert that much effort into an activity for which there is no guarantee that there will be any economic return or even a sense of personal accomplishment in seeing one's book come out in print, it is useful to think about Billett, Newton and Ockerby's (2010) research that suggests when personal interests are closely aligned to a career, it may veer into a vocation. For the majority of the authors, writing seems to be a vocation that they are willing to pursue, even though it may take years before they meet with any success.

The final section of this paper takes up a more general analysis of how the writing world is changing in response to globalisation and emerging technologies. The implications of this for current and emerging writers will be discussed, taking into consideration who can claim the identity of 'writer'. Comments from a couple of 'key informants' are also included in this section.

### **New Technologies in a Global World of Publishing**

What often distinguishes whether or not a person is considered to be a “real writer” is whether or not they are able to be published. Globalised changes in the world of book publishing intensify this competition, but also open new possibilities. Increasingly, with changes in technology, many people are choosing to by-pass the funnel created by agents/publishers, the individuals that Lavin (2011, p. 159) notes have traditionally been important to “mediate literary careers”. Instead, they choose to become “indie-published” – self-publishing their work, usually on the internet. Ironically, at a workshop that I attended last year run by Sisters in Crime, it became clear that this seems to have led to a whole new industry springing up, with indie-writers paying for services such as website design, cover artwork, and professional copyediting.

When asked about the legitimacy of writers publishing through different venues, including self-publishing on the internet, one of the key informants suggested that it was being rather ‘precious’ to limit the identity of writer to individuals who followed traditional publishing routes, and provided some examples of people who had become extremely successful through indie-publishing. As well, increasingly authors who are already established are using the internet to self-publish, for instance, short stories or poems, sometimes as a means to draw in new readers who might then purchase their books. For authors with older books which would not otherwise be

available because they are out of print or the publisher is no longer in existence, being able to publish their backlist on the internet gives a new life to these novels.

Yet indie-authors are often not given the same recognition as traditionally published authors. While there are talented writers who self-publish, there is no screening process. Anyone who is willing to pay the couple of hundred dollars that it takes to upload their book to Amazon, can do so. It does not matter whether the book is incoherent and poorly edited, or astoundingly brilliant and professionally presented.

Who gets to count as a 'writer' is an issue that most writing organizations are grappling with. This issue raises questions about who has the right to mentor new authors, sit on panels at writing conferences, or serve as voting members within professional writing organizations. Increasingly, the wide-spread opportunities for self-publishing afforded by new technologies such as the internet and POD (print-on-demand) has unleashed a flood of self-published authors, many of whom are quite vocal about claiming the identity of being a 'writer'.

At the same time, this blurring of identity around who is to be considered a 'writer' may offer unique pedagogical opportunities. Kell (2009) suggests that 'fan fiction' can create innovative ways for young people to engage in learning about writing. Fan fiction involves taking characters from existing books, such as Harry Potter, and then writing new stories to circulate on the internet.

New technologies can introduce learners to the broader writing community, creating innovative learning opportunities from a young age. Echoing the point raised by Susanna Kearsley in a quote given earlier in this paper, Olthouse and Miller (2012, p. 6) note 'talented writers often model their practices after expert authors, and find they are unique, but not alone'. Opportunities afforded through technology can introduce gifted young students to peers also interested in writing, as well as provide connections to established authors, regardless of geographical distances. Virtual networks may help to counter some of the sense of isolation and invisibility that writers learning the craft of fiction may otherwise experience.

Using the internet and new technologies may open up spaces for emerging writers from different backgrounds to gain a space for their voices to be heard. Literature shows that members of underrepresented groups, such as the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Transgendered, Queer (GLBTQ) community, often feel the publishing sector does not support them adequately (Hurley, 2010). A key informant talked about the importance of having funding to support the development of writers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, asking, 'who wants to participate in a sector where you can't see yourself reflected on the stage or on the page?' One way that emerging writers from diverse backgrounds may hone their craft might be to explore options around publication using new technologies.

Social media is also changing the way that some writers interact with their readers. Increasingly publishers are requesting that authors set up websites and use interactive social media such as Facebook or twitter to connect with their readers. Most literary authors have less of social media presence than genre or children/YA authors, but some, like Margaret Atwood, use the internet extensively to connect with the reading public. The opportunity to actually meet other writers seems to have

been very important to a number of the authors in helping them to visualize actually becoming a writer themselves – so through social media writers become much more visible to the public.

At the heart of current contentious debates around copyright, many authors feel that their labour is being rendered invisible when the public is unwilling to ensure that they are fairly compensated. It is difficult to predict how changes in publishing and the emergence of new technologies are going to shape the careers of writers in the future. Yet it appears that for many authors, the identity of 'writer' is an integral and valuable part of their identity, one that is worth a lifetime of hard work and learning.

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