



Public Writers, Private Lives

by Ruth Quibell and Damon Young

Many people struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance. But what happens when you add a third component, such as writing, to the scales? For many readers, the public face of the writer that they encounter is in newspaper or radio interviews, at book signings in bookshops, or on panels at writers' festivals. But what happens when the journalist walks away, when the radio transmission is silenced, when the bookshop is closed and all the people go home, when the festival is over? *Island* asked sociologist Ruth Quibell and philosopher Damon Young to explore the private face of the writers' life, and the work-life-writing balance it entails.

The public face of writing is an edited, commercial one. Beyond book signings, blurbs and bullish advances are two stubborn tropes: writers are idiots, and writers are butterflies.

Idiot, from the ancient Greek *idiotes*, is someone who refuses community; a recluse or exile. A butterfly, while charming, never sits still for long. She flits and tastes, sits then flies – a creature of caprice. This is the author as a hermit or party animal; dying of tuberculosis and ennui in an attic, or playing with bon mots over cocktails. Whatever it is that the artist achieves – and this is often left absurdly ambiguous – this endeavour is otherworldly, and foreign to ordinary labour and polite society. Writing is not, in a word, bourgeois.

There are some good reasons for these tropes. First, the caricature of the mysterious exile or party animal works nicely with the romantic ideal. The artist is liberated, not only from ordinary labour, but from the etiquette of middle class respectability. She is often in touch with 'higher truths' invisible to anyone concerned with material concerns like net price, rent and groceries.

Since Plato, artistic reverie has often been put in the same ornate box as love and madness, and this makes sense: the craft of writing can indeed involve something like epiphany or inspiration. Discoveries can be made, seemingly without conscious effort, as if 'from above'. The author, in other words, seems to avoid dull labour or common sociability: she is more prophet than drudge. This specialness also provides some consolation – at least in the minds of the monied – for the financial insecurity of a writing career.

Second, some very successful modern authors have seemed to live this way, and their aura of hermetic austerity (Orwell) or public pickling (Hemingway, Dylan Thomas) provides tropes for the next generation. Plenty of brilliant writers have suffered madness (Woolf, Plath), chosen solitude (Proust) or both (Nietzsche, Wittgenstein). Virginia Nicholson's excellent *Among the Bohemians* (2002) exemplifies this outlook, with its tales of poverty, adultery and filth. Put another way, many great authors provide not only a wealth of aesthetic experiences, but also a stock of identities.

In film or on television, these become (ironically) simple caricatures for mediocre narrative. Need a poor loser to transform, or as a foil for the authentic hero? Make him a failed writer, preferably with something called 'writer's block'. Need someone who lives a 'fabulous' life of cocktails and cock, without a day job to confuse things? Make her a writer. The idiot and the butterfly keep screenwriters from having to think about other, more complicated animals.

As writers, we want a better-stocked menagerie. We are curious, not only about others' literary ideals, but also about the strife between these ideals and the reality of professional writing. To this end, we interviewed twenty authors from Australia and abroad, from a columnist in her first year of full-time writing, to a bestselling global author and television personality. What we gleaned was more nuanced, and often more banal, than romantic poverty or champagne soirées – and more compelling for this.

Bits of Money

'How do I feel about my literary income? Hungry.'

– Melbourne freelance writer Amy Gray

The most obvious fact of professional writing is money – and its scarcity. US author David Lebedoff, who works as an attorney, notes that many authors of the past were monied, and never needed to earn an income from writing. 'Over the centuries there were no doubt others of whom we know nothing now,' he writes, 'but were as gifted as Byron or Tolstoy, and who simply didn't have time to share these gifts because feeding oneself or one's family came first.'

Authors in Australia earn, from their writing, approximately one sixth of average annual income, and one fifth of the median: around eleven thousand dollars. It is rarely a living wage. Tasmanian author Peter Timms replied that he would 'have to be joking', when asked if he lived off his earnings. 'I rely on a bit of investment income and my partner's age pension.' The income from writing is often sporadic as well as meagre. Another writer and academic from Hobart,

The most obvious fact of professional writing is money – and its scarcity.

Helen Hayward, says she has made ‘bits of money’, but nothing to live on.

Some writers do cultivate more bohemian lives, purchasing the hours to write at the cost of income security and ordinary middle-class assets. Melbourne novelist, poet and playwright Alison Croggon writes full time, and is happy with her decision to give up journalism years ago as a promising young cadet. Her prolific and wide-ranging output – from poetry and libretti to genre fiction – has enabled her to live well and bring up three children on a writer’s income. But she recognises that she and her husband, playwright Daniel Keene, are living on their wits. ‘I guess the major thing I’d like,’ she writes, ‘would be financial security. We never know from year to year whether we’ll be OK, or if we’ll be broke.’

The anxiety of uncertain literary income is not radically different to that of many contractual or casual workers, jostling for cash. But writers often earn less for their labour, including years before ‘making it’. ‘I’d have to make a hell of a lot of money,’ writes blogger and forthcoming nonfiction author Clint Greagen, ‘to catch up on the hours I’ve put into it over my lifetime.’

Indeed, even successful authors are routinely asked to work for free. It is not unusual to have a speaking event staffed by producers, directors, publicists and sound engineers, all earning a wage – while the author is supposed to pay for groceries with applause and a bottle of wine. Amongst the general population frustrated by ‘high’ book prices, perhaps the idiot and butterfly tropes add to this: writing is not seen as skilled labour meriting payment, but as otherworldly or glamorous sorcery.

Whatever the cultural background, the miserly rewards can lead to rightful frustration. ‘Writers,’ Melbourne novelist and academic Tony Birch says bluntly, ‘are the most exploited workers in the publishing industry.’ Novelist Jennifer Mills, a vocal advocate for writers’ financial rights, agrees. She started the *@paythewriters* Twitter account to highlight the industry’s stinginess. ‘I’m an enthusiastic volunteer for projects I care about,’ says Mills, ‘but that doesn’t forfeit my rights as a worker.’

The point is not that it is impossible to make a living, but that the harassed grind is often out of proportion to the paycheque – and that this can take its toll. ‘Because there’s never any guarantee of income,’ says Sydney journalist Benjamin Law of freelancers, ‘we tend to err towards gangfucking our calendars with deadlines so there’s a constant supply of work.’

Even internationally successful UK author Alain de Botton feels the precariousness of literary work. He is, he says, ‘very lucky’ to have his income, but ‘scared (always) about the future.’

An insider’s view of the industry can certainly justify financial fear: stressed, distracted, sometimes paralysed editors and agents, watching publishers and newspapers leak lucre. ‘My US publisher owes me \$20,000 in unpaid advances and royalties,’ says US-based fiction author, David Francis,

because the publishing house is going belly-up; my English agent (who was wonderful) drank so much he had a leg removed then died; my New York agent (who was wonderful) has gone dotty and retired; the owner of my US publisher (whom I loved) recently died from drink and disappointment; and my French editor (whom I love) just left her job. My writing life is in a wonderful shambles and yet I have finished a new book and am naively hopeful and inspired, but relieved I’m not trying to live off the spoils.

This instability usually translates, not into romantic alienation, but into diminished material expectations or straightforward pragmatism. Tony Birch, who grew up poor, notes how the ordinary trappings of middle-class life are unattainable on a writer’s income. Despite his critical success, Birch’s writing cannot bankroll what many Australians would see as a ‘grown-up’ life:

Writing is not viable for me as an income. I have kids, a dog, a mortgage, a reserved seat at the football. I have worked full time since I was fifteen (as a telegram boy). I am now fifty-six, and even when I studied as a mature-age undergraduate I also worked. I come from a very poor family background and income security is very important to me. Certainly more than concentrating my time on writing.

There is a certain irony here: for all their appreciation of aesthetic and intellectual achievement, many authors are frustrated consumers. This was suggested, with no small dose of snark, by Edgar Allan Poe in his 1840 essay “The Philosophy of Furniture”. ‘A man of large purse,’ he wrote, ‘has usually a very little soul which he keeps in it.’ Unlike the monied, writers often struggle to possess the material reflections of their own cultural commitments. Philosopher and author John Armstrong puts the tension strikingly: ‘I feel caught by personal history: my idea of how to live is basically very bourgeois, my idea of how to work is basically bohemian. The two do not really go together.’

Stolen Time

‘I’m not afraid of being a crazy old man as long as I can still write. I romanticize being flung into prison, not for the sex but the chance to write unimpeded.’

– novelist David Francis

As Benjamin Law’s ‘gangfucking’ suggests (one of those phrases one’s unlikely to write twice in one’s life), the financial pressures of writing can undermine the craft.

This is not quite the squalid hunger of Orwell's *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*, as Gordon Comstock counts his pennies for cigarettes, and pisses away his talent with guilt, jealousy and alcohol. It is more about hours for creativity lost to administruvia, weariness or anxiety.

Creative writing does have a romantic tinge to it. It is often treated quite differently to work undertaken for money – even when this work is also writing. While it is valued for the pleasure, lucidity or catharsis it gives the reader, many authors value writing for its own sake; for the joy of writing itself, including the reflection and daydreaming required to cultivate it. Historian Robyn Annear describes this as ‘the thinking about writing, and getting into the fugue, that requires time of a certain quality – uninterrupted/undistracted – and quantity.’

It is this time that is pilfered by the demands of paid work, child-raising and general busywork. For many, it is rarely granted, and often snatched by writers in small grabs. Writer and editor Rachel Power describes reflecting ‘on the train on the way to work, sometimes straight after I wake up, half time at my son’s football match... in those brief stolen moments.’ Thomas Farber, author and creative writing teacher at University of California, Berkeley, echoes Power’s sense of having burgled the world for time: ‘I’ve found that writing time is stolen from an unwilling world. [...] Like most people, I hate being harried. There’s dream-time versus machine-time...’

This notion of a ‘dream-time’ seems mystical, but is quite straightforward for many artists. It arises when the conscious mind is not devoted to anything strenuous, and often when (or just after) we are engaged in a rudimentary physical task: washing up, walking, showering, brushing teeth. Sometimes it is a state known as ‘transient hypofrontality’, in which the usual patterns of order between ideas break down, and new – often unpredictable – connections are made. It is, in other words, exactly the mindset required for creative writing. ‘Dream-time,’ writes Farber, ‘is sometimes in not writing.’

Yet the portrait of the artist idling in reverie can be misleading. Often authors require some other work – paid or domestic – to discipline themselves, or otherwise bring order to the day. This is not unprecedented. Poet T S Eliot, for example, worked at Lloyd’s Bank for many years, rising early and retiring late to allow time for literature (while caring for his sick wife). While his friends and colleagues lamented his drudgery, for Eliot the work was vital for his poetry: it gave him regularity and rhythm, and assuaged his guilt at choosing a less stable career.

There is a hint of Eliot’s outlook in novelist David Francis. ‘I was always fearful that legal writing would exhaust my juices,’ he writes, ‘but there’s something about the discipline and precision that comes with my law life that I suspect is not so bad for my writing.’ Matthew Lamb, *Island* editor and founding editor of *The Review of Australian Fiction*, also finds that paid work, for all its harassing demands, offers some structure.

While a four-week residency gave Lamb the chance to write the first draft of a novel, a nine-month stint in Dubai produced very little. ‘With no obligations whatsoever, no worries about rent or food,’ he says, ‘I managed to get little or no writing done.’ Returning to a busy full-time job and editing two journals actually helped Lamb to focus.

Jennifer Mills, likewise, feels that too much time would be a hindrance to her writing – she enjoys the structure that a heavier workload brings: ‘I am better at writing when I have several projects on the go at once.’ This sentiment is shared by others. ‘I’d rather be busy and urged to write because of the preciousness of time,’ admits Tony Birch. ‘I wouldn’t consider writing full time as I’d probably go to the movies then have a long run, and then read a book...’ While recognising that fewer hours hinder his writing, Peter Timms notes that ‘busyness with day-to-day things does keep me active and motivated.’ Robyn Annear, who works in a library, says that a part-time ‘customer-service, bookish type job’ is her ideal: socially stimulating, pays the bills, and leaves time for writing.

As Annear’s mention of ‘people-contact’ suggests, other occupations and pursuits can satisfy urges that writing cannot. These are broader human needs for company, exercise, and practical, political and ethical goals. For example, David Lebedoff’s ideal writing day begins with writing from morning until noon, then lunch with friends, chores and errands, a long walk (‘exercise... absolutely critical’) then dinner and ‘an evening devoid of writing.’ A full day’s writing is sometimes necessary, but rarely welcomed. Thomas Farber has earned a living from writing, but also from teaching, editing and social justice projects. ‘I needed these various kinds of work, not simply for income,’ he writes, ‘but to satisfy me in ways writing cannot.’

But many other writers are more ambivalent about their competing needs. They find it difficult, not only to switch off from creative writing, but also to stop other work and family matters eroding the literary state of mind. Novelist Charlotte Wood says her manuscript ‘leaches’ through her whole life. ‘I have not,’ confesses Rachel Power, ‘built adequate defences against the demands of my day job.’ Balance is particularly difficult for writers with young children, whose basic needs cannot be put off.

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Writers, however solitary their practice, are rarely alone. They have spouses, partners, children, parents – each of whom brings generousities and obligations, anxiety and contentment.

The Pram in the Hall

'I have that faraway glazed look that writers often have, especially on holiday.'

– essayist and broadcaster Alain de Botton

Writers, however solitary their practice, are rarely alone. They have spouses, partners, children, parents – each of whom brings generousities and obligations, anxiety and contentment. These intimacies inhabit and, in some cases, justify, the author's imagination. At the very least, these relationships demand an outward sensitivity at odds with the aloof stereotype.

Some of the established writers we spoke to have little difficulty switching off from the demands of family life. For Alison Croggon this habit of 'focusing in the midst of chaos' is one she cultivated early on in life. 'I could be oblivious,' says Croggon, of her kids' early years, 'until I heard THAT scream (or THAT ominous silence) which meant I had to go and deal with something.' For Thomas Farber, this problem has practical solutions: 'industrial ear protectors to muffle sound. I never answer the phone.'

Others are more divided about the relative value of writing and parenting. 'I refuse to switch myself off from my friends,' declares historian Maria Tumarkin. 'I do not leave my son in after-school care. I put relationships before writing.' Helen Hayward has arrived at a similar resolution. For her 'own mental health' she wants to take care of her family and home 'in order to keep what I care about buoyant', while also respecting her work of writing 'which I fit in whenever possible'. At this point, neither family nor writing is more important than the other.

Importantly, parenthood and writing need not be at odds. Helen Hayward, for example, writes to better understand her family, while novelists Dawn Barker and Emma Darwin say having children allowed them to write in the first place. 'I don't think I'd have written,' reflects Darwin, 'if I hadn't had children, even though that's not what I write about at all.' Darwin says her children made her 'think about things for the first time.' Dawn Barker says having children has given her the emotional space to start writing: the break she needed from her demanding career as a psychiatrist. She takes regular time away from her young children to write, and is a 'much more satisfied and happier mum' with a creative vocation she is proud of. She escapes the pram in the hall by working at the local library.

A handful of writers also believe that the profession's flexibility leaves them more available to their children. For columnist and sole parent, Amy Gray, writing allows her to be 'physically available', including walking her daughter to and from school. A parent of young adult children, Alison Croggon similarly reflects that she and playwright husband Daniel Keene were 'much more available as parents than we would have been if we had had conventional jobs... I think it made a very great difference, especially during the teenage years.' Contrary to the cliché of unhappy writers' children, Croggon's recollection of parenting is one of fun: 'We've always had a lot of fun together as a family because we've never stopped talking to each other and being interested in what each of us are doing.' Importantly, this is as much about marriage as it is about parenting.

First Readers

'My partner is a bare-bottomed writer just like me. We support each other, shelter each other. We read each other's work. We don't raise an eyebrow if there is only one para at the end of an intense day of writing. We understand why it takes so long (it takes as long as it takes).'

– historian and writer Maria Tumarkin

For most authors, the support of their partner and wider family is crucial. Partners encourage them by taking an engaged interest in their work, with most acting as trusted 'first readers' of works-in-progress. 'He's my first reader and biggest fan,' says Robyn Annear, of her partner. 'He thinks I can do anything (and sometimes convinces me so).' 'Both my family and boyfriend tell me they're proud of me,' says Benjamin Law, 'and buy magazines when I've a byline. They're all really cute.'

Some writers, like 'bare-bottomed' writer Maria Tumarkin, have spouses who also work in creative fields and share an intimate understanding of its demands. 'She's a creative person too,' says Jennifer Mills of her partner, 'so she gets it.' Alison Croggon sees her playwright husband as her colleague: 'It's never a question of support – our work is absolutely imbricated in our relationship. We are both each other's first readers, which is quite handy.'

Support can also be practical and financial – anything that gives authors more time to write, even if this necessitates some loneliness. This is particularly important for writers with young children. ‘If I have a deadline,’ Clint Greagen says of his wife Tania, ‘she will help make time for me by shuffling her own work around with the kids. Without her support I wouldn’t be able to do this.’ Rachel Power puts it bluntly:

When you have kids, no amount of verbal encouragement can replace practical support. My ability to write relies on my partner’s active help, which means freeing up time for me by looking after the kids or washing the dishes.

And sometimes the best support is being left alone, or putting up with the writer’s mental absence. ‘They can’t directly help,’ says Alain de Botton, ‘but they leave me alone, which is almost as good.’

Embarrassment and Enthusiasm

‘I feel like our family life would run much more smoothly if I didn’t have the desire or ambition to write.’

– writer and editor Rachel Power

So much for the logistics – what of the passions? One of the most marked divisions between writers is how they think writing impacts upon them and their intimates. For some it is a source of deep joy and identity. ‘It’s the most important thing in my life, making things,’ said A S Byatt, in a 2009 interview which epitomises this view. ‘Much as I love my husband and children, I love them only because I am a person who makes things.’

It is this enthusiasm about writing and creating that informs Clint Greagen’s talks with his kids about the ‘joys of being creative.’ It is implicit in David Francis’ advice to other writers: ‘Write what is yours alone and because you love it, not for anyone else. Unless, of course, you want to make money.’ It is why Dawn Barker says that being an author allows her to do all the things she loves: ‘reading and writing and talking about books!’

For others, writing is a more painful commitment. ‘I am far more anxious than I ought to be,’ reflects Alain de Botton, ‘far more irritable. I would be nicer if I were a lawyer.’ Rachel Power similarly feels that her writing ambition is frustrating her family’s peaceful life. ‘But because I do have that desire,’ says Power, ‘I become deeply unsatisfied if I’m not writing, and that has a negative impact on my family.’ Another writer, speaking anonymously, says anxiety and embarrassment are part and parcel of writing:

Writing is quite an embarrassing career, hard for others to understand. It’s also linked to high anxiety (though I don’t see the anxiety as the result of writing, rather as its fuel). So my family have to live with a very strange person. The full consequences of this are not yet clear.

A handful of writers are partially liberated from some of these concerns by circumstances: being single, childfree, or parentless. ‘If my parents were alive,’ says Charlotte Wood, ‘I would probably worry about offending their sensitivities from time to time.’ They acknowledge that this liberates their hours and energies – though not without sacrifice. As David Francis put it: ‘I think writing may have kept me single. Waking up alone is lonely but conducive to writing.’

Identity

‘When someone asks me what I do for a living, I say: “I’m a writer and a lawyer, depending upon what time of day you talk to me.” Those who go on to ask: “What kind of lawyer?” I tell them “not very good” and I don’t like them nearly as much as those who ask: “What do you write?” But, yes, I see myself as a writer. It’s where my spirit and psyche live.’

– novelist David Francis

Full-time writers are as rare as six-figure advances and newspaper columns. Most novelists and nonfiction authors we spoke to have day jobs: lawyer, librarian, journalist, academic. Their literary careers are worked in around the edges. While they often retain the identity, ‘writer’ or ‘author’, they have no simple fit between vocation and profession. Melbourne novelist and creative writing lecturer Tony Birch put it simply: ‘I’m a runner, reader, writer, in that order.’ This does not make writing less important, but it can lessen its centrality.

What lawyer David Francis has in common with full-time writer Alison Croggon and other prolific or established writers is a firm idea of his own literary vocation. Despite his legal career, Francis identifies strongly with his own creative ambition, and claims space and time for it whenever possible. On a ship to Alaska, David writes:

As soon as I enter a place where I’m staying, I sniff out my writing space. As soon as I got on this boat, I found the ‘bridge room’ and I’ve taken over a felt-covered bridge table. I just hope the others don’t find me.

Most authors who write full time are confident of this identity, even when it is shared with other roles. Thomas Farber, for example, says he is a writer, but

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Because we are social animals, we often share experience: so what adds to the author's life also adds to the reader's. And this is another source of value for writers: the communion with audiences...

also a 'husband, son, citizen, sibling, editor, teacher, consultant, etc'. Yet as we have noted, he sees his writing practice as precious, and is 'single-minded' about pursuing it. UK novelist Emma Darwin, who unproblematically identifies as a writer, is equally resolved about her writing hours. When she has to interrupt writing to teach, she immediately quarantines hours for creative work. 'I start by ring-fencing writing time for that week,' she says, 'and fit children and paid work and social life round that.'

In short, before answering the question 'how much time ought I have?', many writers first ask 'What am I?' There is an existential aspect to the writing life, which provides the justification for later struggles and sacrifices. While wary of its apparent pretentiousness, Peter Timms identifies as a writer: 'It's what I do best.' Hence his willingness to devote himself to literature instead of income.

While the stakes of this commitment can still be high, positive feedback – publication, praise, sales – can put risks to one side, or reveal the broader benefits of the vocation. As David Lebedoff puts it:

Writing is a solitary act, and it must take time away from family, at a moment in history when the family already has less time together than any of its members might wish. But there's something good about one's family seeing that commitment.

This commitment does not usually lead to blithe romantic conceit: the absent, aloof genius. More often than not, it simply justifies a few extra hours away. Debut novelist Dawn Barker, for example, is not entirely comfortable with putting her children into care, but publication has strengthened her resolve to value writing. 'I only felt confident to call myself a writer,' she says, 'when my novel was published.' Likewise for Clint Greagen, who is a stay-at-home father of four, 'It was only when I started earning consistently that I started boldly declaring I was a writer.'

Interestingly, Matthew Lamb is convinced that many 'writers' are in fact nothing of the sort. (A few tweets does not a 'writer' make.) Despite his substantial achievements as an editor and writer of short fiction, Lamb will not call himself a writer until he has three books published. 'There are a lot of talkers out there,' he argues. This diminished vocational identity, in turn, provides Lamb with no justification for the 'theft' of time. 'The

argument I have with myself,' he said, 'is whether or not my own writing is as important as the writing I can elicit from others (as an editor). And at the moment, it's not. That said, it is probably arguable whether or not I should call myself an editor either.'

These labels can also have different cachet, depending on circumstances. For those whose daily work involves text, creative writing can become more sharply distinguished from the more prosaic labour of journalism, editing or copywriting. Amy Gray identifies as a writer, as her income is derived from her columns. 'But don't ask me,' she continues, 'if I'm a proper writer.' Rachel Power says she is a 'writer' but not an 'author', where the latter suggests creative work, particularly books. Not coincidentally, Power struggles to claim time and energy for her own creative writing: her status as a mere 'writer' cannot always justify her time away from chores or paid work.

The Work

*'The writing... "relieved my soul of incoherence"
as I think Shirley Hazzard put it.'*

– novelist and writer Thomas Farber

Anxiety over being a 'mere' writer, or not a 'proper' one, partly stems from ephemerality. Amy Gray says her journalism is not, and perhaps should not be, valued because it is 'transient diversions' linked to the news cycle, and 'easily forgotten'. In short, to be a *real* writer is to leave something of lasting worth behind.

It is easy to be idealistic about this sense of value – clichés of 'immortality' and 'eternity' ooze out of the pen. But as philosopher John Dewey argued in *Art as Experience*, art is the creation of *an* experience from the chaos of things. It is a new, somewhat stable unity, which allows us to experience our experience: in a more vivid, elegant or otherwise memorable form.

As art, literature can be vital for the development of identity: it enables us to more readily recognise ourselves, the world, and the ties between the two. For the author, the book or feature is not only a material manifestation of their labour. It is also a way to encounter parts of their character that might be murky or rickety. The work can also add to what Charlotte Wood calls 'beauty and culture'. As *an* experience, it contains new harmonies and cadences, which give aesthetic pleasure to self and others.

For many writers, this bond between the work and the self is essential. ‘The writing of my books made things that to me are beautiful and true,’ says Thomas Farber, ‘the houses I’ve been able to build, so to speak.’ Likewise, Robyn Annear notes the challenges met, and virtues encouraged, by writing; the sense that literature provides an ongoing test for her ambition. ‘What fascinates me too,’ she adds, ‘is to get an inkling of the depths there are to myself and everyone else... under the surface.’ Benjamin Law notes this same combination of curiosity, empathy and existential enrichment. ‘I know it sounds corny,’ he says, ‘but... there’s something about being a writer that can help you become a better human being.’

Because we are social animals, we often share experience: so what adds to the author’s life also adds to the reader’s. And this is another source of value for writers: the communion with audiences, who discover some verity and beauty in their words.

‘Enough people read what I write for me not to feel that my words fall into some cosmic black hole,’ says Maria Tumarkin. ‘I do feel that I am connecting to something and someone. This feeling is an immense source of energy for me.’ This is a common sentiment amongst writers, whether from literary festivals or letters. Tony Birch writes that readers are his ‘bread and butter,’ and that he is regularly ‘humbled’ by their engagement. Benjamin Law says he is a ‘rather lucky motherfucker’ to have people buying his books, and praising his writing.

In this way, it is almost impossible to disentangle creative work, identity and income. Having a robust literary self often pushes writers to cordon off hours to work: Darwin’s ‘ring-fencing’ and Farber’s ‘stolen’ time. The more hours spent writing, the more identity can be enriched and enhanced by art and, in many cases, by professional recognition: from industry professionals and readers. Professional recognition often goes hand-in-hand with higher – though rarely high – income, which can also justify further hours devoted to the craft and business of writing. For the majority of writers, whose main income is outside writing, the financial rewards of success are less important than the existential and social aspects: affirming a more creative character, and developing bonds with a broader community of writers and readers.

Work-in-Progress

‘What have I gained being a writer? A sense of possibilities.’
– historian and writer Robyn Annear

The point of this essay is not to give a complete or final portrait of the writer. The point is quite the opposite: to complicate the common caricature.

Yes, some writers are vaguely ‘bohemian’ in lifestyle – but, they are often also partners, parents and diligent literary professionals. Other writers have day jobs to

secure cash. Employment can augment their talent for fiction, or leave them spent – often both.

Children can certainly take hours and mental acuity from the author, but they can also provide some greater comprehension of the full catastrophe, and benefit from more fulfilled parents. While writing can be solitary and lonely, it is rarely hermetic or misanthropic: writing time is usually negotiated time. Most writers have their partners’ support, but not by default. Their absence has to be continually managed with goodwill, mutual assistance, and often some measure of success: sacrifices are rarely made for expensive vanity.

And vital for this project is identity: writers affirming that they *are* writers, whatever else they might be. It is a fraught, mercurial role, which is not always enough to substantiate the labour. But overall, a firm idea of the vocation allows many writers to endure the various deprivations and diversions of a conflicted life. (It is *always* conflicted.) This is partly psychological, but also practical: the identity justifies the effort, which develops artistry and recognition. The ideal is worthless unless translated into work.

Put simply, writers are rarely idiots and butterflies. If their vocation involves more ‘dream time’ than mainstream jobs, it remains something rare and often compromised: for money, love or sanity. What’s most common is an urge to realise the identity, ‘writer’ – an aspiration that is worked out, piecemeal and in private, amidst very familiar tensions. The ambition, like the art, is a work-in-progress. ▼

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Ruth Quibell and Damon Young are married (to each other). They live in Melbourne with their two children and too many books.