

Why It's So Hard to Succeed as a Writer

Few things are more difficult to promote than writers and their works

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There are a lot of obvious barriers to success as a writer. For one, there's already a mile of text out there for every available inch of attention span. For another, it's rare to have to compete with those that live up the street *and* those that died a thousand years ago on some faraway continent. Good writing is immortal, and I'm not sure I'll ever be able to make a strong argument for someone reading my work over La Rochefoucauld's. Yet, beyond all the conditions that

exist out in the world, the reasons why most writers fail can be found in the very nature of writing.

What makes a writer

When I was young (and, to a lesser degree, even in the present) I had terrible social anxiety. Eye contact would send a shock through me, and talking to people was a little bit like touching the stove. My mouth was plenty good for eating food with, and I could smile as well as the rest, but it was useless for getting words out. A soul needs a mouth; I needed to express.

When I was in elementary school, I was given my first creative writing assignment, and my hand ran wild: We were asked to take 30 minutes to write a paragraph starting with "I found an egg in the yard...", but I wrote three pages and only stopped because we hit our time limit. It had all been bottled up inside, so it rushed out of me. The teacher loved what I wrote and told me so. I was dismayed when she insisted on reading it to the class; I hid in the bathroom while she did.

Years later, when I was about 9 years old, another teacher would accuse me of plagiarizing a poem. After being unable to find the supposed "original," she insisted some adult must've written it for me, as it was too good to have been written by a child. It gave me a shock at the time, and my anxious heart raced till I was breathless, but as the fear died

down, I felt proud. Unintended though it was, I had never before received such a grand compliment. After that incident, writing moved from being something I liked doing to something that felt connected to my worth as an individual. Every tool in the toolbox has its use, and writing felt like mine. I often hear stories like this from other writers as well.

Writing is lonely. It can be tedious. What we write is apt to fall short of what we want it to be. Writers certainly aren't regarded as society's stars. We're expected to be both pompous and poor—a rare combination, really. Why would anyone want to be a writer? I proffer that we write only ever as a second choice. One thing or another has worked to bar us from the world of social butterflies and cocksure gascons. Writing is a type of echo chamber, wherein the individual in isolation can, in a very real way, talk to themselves. We were forced from a place where we so wanted to belong and left without an outlet for that most human need: to express. Writing gave us a vent for expression; it, then, offered us an opportunity for redemption. It offered us a semblance of self-worth when we could find it nowhere else. That is the common journey I've heard of, over and over again, from different writers. Writing is an anti-social solution to a social want. The blank page is an ear to listen, and a mouth to speak back to us, when there is no other.

Show me a writer who isn't also a [reader](#). How many days of our lives have we spent in what seems like complete

isolation, when in fact we've been eagerly conversing with an unmet friend? If only you knew the conversations I've had with Nietzsche, or how engrossed I am when my old pal Dostoyevsky sets about telling stories! On a Friday night, it's expected that one would be found with friends at home or at a bar, and to many it seems an oddity that one should instead be alone with a book. Well, what you call spending time with friends is truly time spent talking, that is, trading words. My friends bequeathed me their words before their passing, and I've laughed, and quarreled, and been inspired by affection in response to my friends' words, just as you have with yours—I daresay my friends had more to say.

At base, the entire social tapestry consists of words. Lovers fall into each other's arms following an exchange of romantic phrases, business deals are settled after swapping technical terms, and friends know each other only as well as the syllables they've shared. Brotherhood is a type of banter, and love is its own language. Words are as elemental to relationships as hydrogen and oxygen are to the clouds and the oceans. If we didn't have a need to communicate with one another, we would've never needed them at all. But nature has designed us so that this tool is a part of who we are. The caged bird still flaps its wings, the fish stranded on dry land undulates its body in an attempt to swim, and the person in isolation makes words.

Promotion

Business is an inherently social enterprise. There is no such thing as commerce in isolation. There are, of course, extroverted writers, but they're something like day-walking vampires: a rarity or half-breed at best. And the bulk of the overlap, between extroversion and a propensity for writing, is found in those who have pursued some career in this or that field and chose to write as an extension of it. But among those who are first and foremost drawn to the quiet, solitary, pensive act, there is seldom a socially inclined individual to be found.

Being a writer is very much given to being anti-social. Being a successful writer, however, is not. Society measures success in terms of [fame](#), prestige, and wealth. Character, skill, and health are personal measures of success, but dreams of achieving these things rarely rouse the passions. Success, as we commonly conceive of it, is achieved by social means. Wealth is a function of commerce, fame is a measure of how many people recognize one's name, and prestige is but a mound of opinions. The degree to which one succeeds at these things is determined by headcount. She is more famous who has been spoken of by 1,000 and 1 people than whomever is known by only a 1,000.

If the writer is to have any success, they must make frequent forays out into the bustling world they've become so adept at avoiding. Though they are by nature withdrawn, they must assume a role reminiscent of a rock star. One must give lectures, attend book signings and readings, do interviews, etc. All of these occasions of social interaction,

personal divulgence, and events where one is the center of attention are necessary ingredients to a thriving career as an author. It is incredibly difficult to reach the point where it is even an option to hold events such as these. Only a smattering of writers ever achieve this status, and though they worked to exhaustion to make it possible, to what extent must they go against their personal instincts just to keep it going? Success as a writer often means going against the grain of one's being and swimming upstream against the currents of the soul.

A written work is inherently difficult to profit from. No matter how enlightening a book one writes, they won't find a reader who needs, for themselves, more than one copy. We need food daily, and new clothes annually, but a book lasts a lifetime. Once you have sold a person your work, there is no opportunity to sell it to them again. When we have gotten it into one set of hands, we must find another set of hands. To have any real hope of finding a repeat customer, the author must have at least two books to sell.

Moreover, writing doesn't lend itself to promotion. Isn't the best writing a nuanced picture of the soul? Isn't every masterpiece abounding with difficult to describe subtleties and concepts? It's easy enough to sell this product or that. You can show a picture of a pair of shoes, or a delicious meal, or a stylish piece of furniture, but how does one truly communicate the worth of a book? Even a masterful film can be advertised, however inadequately, through a two-minute preview. But write 200 pages of glorious text, and

most of your opportunities to sell it will come from a clever title, subtitle, and cover image. It is an achievement just to get the back cover read, much less the text inside. The creation is difficult to sell, and the creator has difficulty selling—the enterprise is structurally inclined to fail.

Conclusion

It's not impossible to succeed as a writer, but there is a reason for the reflexive eye roll that comes over people when hearing of a writer's aspirations. Selling our writing is hard. It's even harder since, by virtue of our career choice, we're not very likely to enjoy the social demands of [promotion](#). If any have a facility with language matched by a love of social interaction, better they become a politician and spare themselves the pains of editing. For all the rest of us, who found ourselves alone before a blank page by necessity, achieving success will be a difficult climb.

Still, the only insuperable obstacle is the one unrecognized. If, like me, you see clearly the fears to be faced and the ordeal to be endured, then I pray you understand that the only true barrier is ourselves, that one hand pushes against the other. If we were to find ourselves wrapped in yard after yard of chains, it might require only a tiny key to turn the lock and free us; in just the same way, it takes only a sliver of courage to unravel a lifetime of fear.

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