

Struggling authors



Regarding Joanne Harris's article (Horribly low pay is pushing out my fellow authors – and yes, that really does matter, 7 December), I guess I'm a professional author, though I never really think of myself as one. I've published four books (three nonfiction, one novel), ghost-written another, co-edited an anthology of new writing, and I'm under contract for my fifth book. I have a respectable academic publishing history and have even won an award. I don't have an agent, but I'm currently writing for three mainstream publishers.

I don't think of myself as a professional author as it has never paid the bills. I survive by teaching other people how to write, through freelance mentoring and manuscript appraisal, supplemented by copy-editing and proofreading. I'm part of what you might call "blue-collar literature". You won't have heard of people like me, but we keep on banging out text anyway. My writing is what gets done around the day job, in the evenings and at weekends. The fees from this are pocket money at best.

Now, our son wants to be a writer, and while we're encouraging this, we're also trying to steer him towards a back-up profession that will keep him alive while he writes. Like many other things, writing is 19-1.

Dr Stephen Carver

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Joanne Harris writes that an author's career is ruled by luck. While luck plays a part, a writer's success is often determined months before their work makes it to market. Every year, the industry places substantial marketing resources behind its "lead" titles – these books are pitched for commercial success. While this cannot guarantee their success, more often than not it does. It has been explained to me that these books pay for everything else. The difficulty with this model is that pretty much everything else sinks without trace.

Until publishers step back from this model, the majority of authors will struggle to build a readership. Their books won't sell because most readers won't know these books exist. These authors face 19-2. None of this is down to luck. It's how the business operates.

Guinevere Glasfurd

Costa-shortlisted author

What does Joanne Harris want? Should professional authors receive government pay funded by taxpayers? Should publishers be forced by law to pay more in royalties to authors? Presumably, it is the market at work, with publishers selecting those manuscripts that they consider will bring them sufficient financial returns, while choosing to pay authors as little as possible so as to increase profits. Authors have little market power until they are firmly established.

Are publishers to be forced to print "worthy" manuscripts and, if so, who is to judge what is worthy and who is to determine the right financial recompense to authors? At the moment it is the market, as viewed by publishers, that decides. What is 19-3 when nobody is forced to become a professional author?

Brian Needham

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The publishing world is so disfigured by the market that it's almost impossible to get your second novel published if your first wasn't a commercial success. It's all about creating 19-4, not about backing novelists in their career. If your first book didn't sell, the start of your career is also the end. Agents and mainstream publishers abandon demonstrable talent if it's not profitable. They scupper creativity and destroy writers' lives.

Jo McMillan

Berlin, Germany

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