

Pay the Writer

Are we all sitting uncomfortably? Then let's talk about money.

I chose writing, when I might have tried to make films or transform myself into someone else on a stage or thrown my paint-covered body at a giant canvas. In a way writing is all of these all at once: capture, craft, curation, exhibitionism, exposure but mostly

I chose writing because I needed almost nothing and no one else to do it. Because I knew that even if I returned to the hard times of my life, to homelessness or sudden poverty, whatever happened I could still find a pen and paper and write and keep writing for myself.

And perhaps I should have kept it that way. An act to ward off the wolves in my mind and my heart but not the ones at the door.

I do not have a rich husband to support me. Or a well off family to loan from. I don't own a home and it's unlucky for me that the closest place I have to a home is London which I reject and return to like a fiscally abusive ex. For years the solution was travelling, quite happily initially, to cheaper parts of the world. Usually former Soviet or Communist countries where I'd live like locals, on locals' budgets, except I would be entirely alone, separated by choice and language and my work. Until a few years ago I lived week to week, then month to month and it is only now - because I look at my budget every single day and plan with the zealotry of those who believe the apocalypse is nigh - that I finally have some savings.

Four years ago I stood in a building in Paris that appeared to be made of 80% gold and was awarded the Prix Femina Etranger. There is no physical award so instead I was presented at the foot of a long table after the judges had luncheon. They all shook my hand and I posed for a tight huddle of photographers next to a gilded fireplace. That night there was a big party in my honour with free-flowing champagne and tiny, tiny versions of the supermarket eclairs I'd coveted so much as a kid but that we could rarely afford. This, I thought, was IT.

I was newly in love and so, considering my heart but not my bank balance, I returned to London after the prize ceremony rather than another small city in the former Eastern Bloc. I found a place to live in a stranger's room for a month. I slept on their sheets and stepped over the baseball bat propped at an angle at the top of the stairs in case the unwieldy, outside might try and force itself inside.

I had expected to get a job when I came back but was delighted when a big organisation wanted to commission a project from me. I travelled a long way for a meeting where nothing was really resolved and I spent days putting together the requested project plans. I should have gone and got a job after all when they returned my invoice for the meeting and my travel expenses. *But you said when you invited me that you'd pay these*, I said, *those morning peak time train tickets*

were so expensive. Next they told me the project plans would need to be signed off but that that person was away for a while so I wouldn't be paid until then.

Thinking I would be paid in a month or so, I went to work in a call centre at the furthest edge of London to make ends meet. I felt ashamed, now I was closer to forty than thirty, and that year's most celebrated foreign novelist in France, but I reminded myself every day on the long, cold journey that it was honest work. Except it wasn't really. I was unable and unwilling to force pensioners to sit on the phone with me while I poached all their information in the guise of a sports survey. And, surrounded by sixteen year olds eating boxes of fried chicken as their phones auto-dialled, it was mutually agreed I wasn't suitable for the role. Besides, the tube ticket ate up a quarter of my daily wage so it was barely worth it.

In the nick of time, a few weeks before Christmas, the big organisation came back to say the project was now approved. But everyone was away so the sign-off and processing of my fee would have to wait until sometime in January for any payment to be processed. That was OK wasn't it? And what could I possibly say, so afraid at that point it would be taken away entirely? OK.

A few days later a university told me they'd have to reschedule an event with me. *It's the end of the term, students aren't interested, we'll just move it to February, yeah?* And I said, *yeah sure. Just, I've already bought the ticket could you reimburse that?* And they replied, *oh, of course, of course. Just fill out these three forms, send a scan of your passport and when finance is back in January they'll process it.* OK, I'd said, very, very quietly, subtracting the £200 from my income and the £70 train ticket. OK.

And a few days after that, now three weeks from having nowhere to live and no money for deposit or rent, the tubes were fucked and I missed the train to my last event of the year. When I called to explain, heart exploding from running the length of Kings Cross St Pancras to say, *oh god, I'm so sorry.* We all decided it was best if I didn't come. Of course, there would be no fee and the tickets I'd retrieved from the machine would simply be very expensive souvenirs of my trifecta of fuck ups. I called my best friend and sobbed and sobbed on the concourse of Kings Cross. It seemed I'd done everything that could have been expected and I was worse off than if I'd stayed in Great Yarmouth pulling pints.

I was lucky I found a kindly social worker on Gumtree who took my internet press cuttings and references from other sublets in lieu of a deposit and let me move into another two-month sublet. That January I was awarded a cash prize for literary promise. The project money did eventually come through too, three months later than expected and accompanied with an air of great annoyance at my persistence as though I was obviously not really in it for the 'art' at all.

And the wolves were no longer at the door. But they were still in my heart and in my head.

I'm honestly not saying poor me. Though it was really, really shit at the time. I should have swallowed my pride and got a waitressing job. I should have accepted that I could be both a

prize-winning novelist and someone who needed the dole. I shouldn't have returned to London - even though that's why I'm now happily married. I should never have left my real job when I did - though without that I would not have been able to do a tenth of the things I did that got me known in an industry fuelled on contacts and word of mouth.

In the end it turned out OK. French folk bought my book in their droves and the Net Book Agreement - whereby the cost of a book is set - meant that my royalties allowed me time to write a third novel and a proposal for my memoir, *Lowborn*. I've been just about able to touch the sides for the last few years. As one bit of money runs out another arrives. When money comes in some even goes into savings. My husband has a modest but stable salary. On my busiest year, working as much as is humanly possible, I can now almost make what I made ten years ago in my job in the charity sector and I consider myself very, very lucky.

But I do not mistake that for stability. I'm well aware that the career I've been building for a decade now can go away just as quickly. That you can be on the front cover of magazines one year and begging someone to pay your £100 invoice the next. My pension plan is fatalism - if Trump doesn't get us Climate Change will, and anyway, I might die before then. If I was sensible, I'd go to evening classes and learn accountancy for when that day comes. But work is consuming, not the writing even, but all the surrounding work that makes it possible to continue to live as a writer: events, commissions, teaching, mentoring, interviews.

It is my choice. I choose writing. But I'm aware it's easier because I do not have children or a mortgage or a family who needs my help. I have very little to lose and a lot to gain. Mostly a life that is well lived and explored. I still wish I had the luxury of measuring my success in reviews, prizes and reader's letters but my greatest measure of success is that I can finally not panic when I know rent day is coming.

The problems are clear to most writers, just ask them. You can spend two years working on something that will not make you a single penny. Advances are small and shrinking and typically spaced in four payments across at least two years but that schedule that can change by several months with no prior consultation. Royalties, come twice a year, if they come at all, but until it's in your account whether and how much is a mystery. We travel across the country for a £150 fee - and, yes, £150 is a good amount for an hour talking about what you love - but not if you lose a day and a half to travel and eat every meal in cafes and then have to send multiple emails chasing that amount for months to come. Train tickets to events, sometimes several events a month, are usually bought by writers to be reimbursed so we end up with money constantly tied up (one writer told me recently she was waiting for over £1500 in travel expenses). For women, of course, it's worse still. We're paid less - a recent study found women's books are priced on average 45% lower than books by men - and many of us will have children or dependents and many of us will be the primary caregivers. So, we must subtract the expense of scheduled childcare from the dwindling, vague income we might make and think of them and their needs when weighing the risk of writing for less than the minimum wage. Writing is not about money but I defy anyone to write their best, most beautiful work, when they are terrified about whether they will be homeless in a week.

I have yet to meet a writer - barring those who are wealthy - who has not faced these financial difficulties. It seems to me, writers are often seen as expendable. If one does not like the conditions set out, if they become 'difficult', then there are twenty more in line with equally empty bank accounts and books that deserve attention. So, when we have the power to say something, I feel writers should speak up for all the other writers who are unable to. If you are the one who pays writers, consider would you be OK if you were asked you to cover the cost of work trips? If your payday was moved not just by days but often by months? If you could budget effectively not knowing what you would be paid, or when? If you feared complaining about that would lose you your job? If you would then stay in that job, no matter how much you loved it or how good you were?

Pay the writer. Pay them on time. Pay them as you would wish to be paid.

Writing is a privilege and a joy, yes. But it also work. It is hard and skilled work. Pay the writer.