

Pursuing Lifelong Dreams: Published Novelists Who First Succeed After 40

By Jennifer Murray, Ball State University

“Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand”

George Orwell (cited in Goodreads, 2014).

Pithy but dire quotes on the perils of writing like this one abound by published writers. Then there is waiting for publication. What quality of motivation did Dick Wimmer possess to endure 162 rejections over the course of 25 years until his novel, *Irish Wine*, was finally published in 1989 (Hievsii, 2001)? What meaning did *Irish Wine* hold for him that he was determined not only to write it, but that the world should read it? Many people think they want to be a writer, someday. Only a small number ever decide that someday starts now. Fewer people finish writing their novel manuscripts; fewer still publish them.

Purpose

This research explores the stories of authors who became first-time published novelists during middle or late adulthood to discover the meaning that writers hold for the process of writing their first novel and to better understand their motivation in this self-directed learning process.

Writing a novel for the first time involves a significant learning process. People aspiring to become published novelists must be self-directed in their learning, their decision making, their goal setting, and their writing. While there is research on how adults become motivated to undertake learning projects or the characteristics and processes of self-directed learners (e.g. Zimmerman, 1990), these studies are often set within a formal learning context, such as pursuing a higher education degree or providing instructors with tips for fostering self-direction in their learners (e.g. Zimmerman, 1990). There is a need for research on how adults become engaged in larger personally meaningful projects, such as writing a novel. An understanding of the meaning adults place on this process will be helpful to adult education practitioners who work with adults who have various goals of their own.

Writing as (Un)Realized Dream

Writing a novel is a goal of many people, but few achieve it. Keyes (1995) researched the writings of authors to uncover patterns of fear that had the potential to paralyze writers, leading to self-sabotaging actions. He identified fear of failure, fear of success, fear of failure after success, fear of exposing dark secrets of the family or of the writer’s own mind and fear of nothing important or interesting to write among other fears that stop writers from reaching for the pen or keyboard.

For the non-writing writer, the dream remains alive by talking about the story that will one day become written. “This approach is nearly guaranteed to keep one from actually doing it. Fiction writers find that telling stories usually dissipates the energy needed to write them” (Keyes, 1995, p.94).

Understanding how the participants in this study accomplished their goal of writing and publishing their first novel can certainly help other aspiring and floundering writers which in

itself is a sizeable population, 200 million Americans, according to the website Publishing Perspectives (Goldberg, 2011).

Self-Direction Is Key

Research on self-directed or self-regulated learning continues to be important when studying the adult learner. While many researchers have studied self-directed learning in formal education, Tough (1979) and Roberson and Merriam (2005) demonstrated the desire many adults have to direct their own learning projects towards achieving goals they have set.

In Garrison's (1997) comprehensive model of self-directed learning, he noted that three areas integrated for successful self-direction: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivational processes. Key to motivation is finding personal meaning in the activity and believing in one's ability to complete the task successfully. This study will seek to uncover the meaning that these adults placed on the first novel that they published, how this meaning guided them through the self-directed process of successfully completing this novel when so many writers give up along the way, and what they learned along the way.

Discussion

During the conference presentation, I will present my findings from the research I will be conducting April-June 2014 and we will discuss experiences of pursuing and even failing at achieving life goals. We will discuss how the lessons of these successfully published authors can enlighten our practice in facilitating adult learners as they pursue their own personally meaningful goals.

References

- Garrison, D. R. (1997). Self-directed learning: Toward a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48, 18-33.
- Goldberg, J. T. (2011, May 26). 200 million Americans want to write a book, can they? *Publishing Perspectives*. Retrieved on February 15, 2014 from <http://publishingperspectives.com/2011/05/200-million-americans-want-to-publish-books/>
- Goodreads. (2014). Quotes by George Orwell. Retrieved February 21, 2014 from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/4854-writing-a-book-is-a-horrible-exhausting-struggle-like-a>.
- Hievsi, D. (2011, May 25). Dick Wimmer, whose persistence got him published, dies at 74. *The New York Times*, Retrieved on February 15, 2014 from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/25/arts/dick-wimmer-74-irish-wine-author-is-dead.html?_r=0
- Keyes, R. (1995). *The courage to write: How writers transcend fear*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.
- Roberson, D. N., Jr., & Merriam, S. B. (2005). The self-directed learning process of older, rural adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55, 269-287. doi: 10.1177/0741713605277372
- Tough, A. (1979). *The Adult's Learning Projects* (2nd ed.). Austin, TX: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Zimmerman, B. J. (1990). Self-regulated learning and academic achievement: An overview. *Educational Psychologist*, 25(1), 3-17.