

The Literary Impulse and the Ag Communicator

Kathy Kendall

If Shakespeare and his mythical sister were alive today, chances are they might be ag communicators. When I first thought about that, it seemed far-fetched, even ridiculous. But look at the facts of life for writers.

In 1979, authors were earning a median \$4800 a year. That's \$5000 for men and \$4000 for women, with the Norman Mailers and Gore Vidals and Agatha Christies averaged in; so of course most authors' actual income from writing is substantially less than the median, well below the government's established poverty threshold, even with the changes made by Reaganomics.¹

As biographies of writers show, this is nothing new. Writing has always been a tough way to make a living, and only a handful of writers have been able to support themselves by writing. Writers also have to have jobs of some kind or other.

Kendall recently resigned as a publication editor at Texas A & M University to pursue a doctorate. About this article she says: "I undertook this research to comfort myself. After many years of part-timing and freelance work which allowed me time to write, I was forced by economic difficulties to take fulltime work as an ag communicator. I feared I'd sold out, feared I'd never get around to flourishing as a writer. So I set out to learn which great writers had worked fulltime at jobs similar to mine. I collected pictures and short biographies. I compiled a slide show and wrote a paper for myself, and for others like me, supporting my hope that fulltime bureaucrats CAN be great writers— perhaps even because of, not just despite, their jobs." The short bios at the end of her paper accompanied slides which she presented at ACE Mississippi.

Until the last 50 years, writing, nonlucrative though it was, was a white male privilege. There were the rare, occasional geniuses—Jane Austen comes to mind—but they were usually childless and supported by relatives. Even more rare were the voices of men and women of color. Poor people, mothers, blacks, Indians, latinos, chicanos have been missing from the literary scene. Why? Because a white man, educated, with a decent job, a good wife, and maybe a servant or two, could pursue writing in his spare time. The rest of the world HAD no spare time.²

But come now to our technological age. Computers, satellites, crock pots, health insurance, blenders, car pools, and affirmative action. The white man loses a little of his edge. The odds are a little less stacked in the white man's favor. If he's married, his working wife expects him to share some of the housework. If he's single, he probably can't afford to hire a maid—and anyway, the women who used to be maids are now in secretarial school.

So we find ourselves, many of us, in this together. We all went to college and majored in English or communications, full of dreams of making our voices heard, making a difference. Those of us of the literary impulse: men, women, black, brown, together come to the point of looking for a way to make a living without completely abandoning our old dreams. Many of us have tried the meat-today-and-beans-tomorrow existence of freelancing. Many of us have tried part-timing: the broken-down car, the dentist bill sent to a collection agency, the kids begging for guitar lessons. No fringe, no vacation, no group insurance, no ACE conferences on the beach. But we find ourselves now working full-time in a temperature-regulated office, bringing home a decent and regular paycheck with fringe, writing not the great American novel or film, but editing a bulletin on tobacco thrips in peanuts, or putting together a slide show on new herbicides. We wonder if we've sold out.

I think the verdict on that question is still out. I see ways our work can enhance our literary style. I also see real danger.

First, the good news. Phyllis Naylor, author of 26 published books and 200 published short stories, says, "The most difficult thing of all to learn was how to look at my own writing as an editor would see it."³ We're especially trained to do just that; daily we practice editing, tightening, simplifying. Further, the editor of *Science* magazine says truly gifted

writers "almost instinctively empathize with their audience."⁴ Again, score one for our side, for the ag communicator's concern for audience is paramount. We keep our Fog Indices down to a respectable level, and we practice conciseness hourly. Another point: a good writer must concentrate (and that goes double for writers who are also parents or who must do their literary work at home surrounded by distractions). What better training for concentration than our crowded offices, our many projects with various deadlines, our days interrupted by phone calls, memos, office politics, birthday parties, etc. Lois Gould, who wrote the very successful novel, *Such Good Friends*, is an editor and ex-newswoman who says she sharpened her concentration skills on the job and took a leave to write her book.⁵

Another advantage of our jobs, and perhaps the most important, is the wide general base of knowledge required of us, our catholic reading habits, and our acquaintance with people and ideas from many fields. Up to our armpits in the affairs of the real world, ag writers and editors speak many languages. As liaisons between scientists and technicians, lab and field workers, business executives and small farmers, we can translate one jargon into another jargon and both into plain or ornate English. The scientists and engineers, the farmers and agribusiness people NEED us. And we are tickled to find this so. But do our jobs keep us from writing as we want to be writing? There's the rub. Here we come to the dangers, the bad news, the occupational hazards of the ag communicator.

Our editing talents so useful on the job can also nip our new ideas before they flower. We can be, at times, hypercritical, our own worst critics and cruelest editors. We can fall into the habit of editing our imaginations out of existence. Technical language is a second danger. The various jargons we use in our work invade our honest prose or poetry with their inputs, optimizing difficulties in vocabulary, and facilitating the deterioration of our idea-generating skills while limiting our feedback potential. After a hard day at the procedure manual, "A rose is a rose is a rose" becomes, "A rose is any of a genus of the family *Rosaceae* with pinnate leaves and spiny cuticular protrusions on its stems —" and we go on. Is the editing function, then, antithetical to the writing function? Are we ruining our futures as writers by becoming such good ag communicators?

A fellow named Chuck Lawliss, who is an editor who started out wanting to be a writer, wrote an article on that very subject for *Publisher's Weekly*.⁶ He reports on a sophisticated, \$300-a-head aptitude test he took to determine whether he was more suited to writing or editing. Inconclusively enough, he learned he has aptitudes in both fields. But what is interesting about his study is that he learned something about aptitudes themselves. He found that, while one can, by hard work and discipline, function in a field in which one has no natural aptitude, one will seldom succeed in that field. Worse — and this is where we have to pay most attention — he found that unused aptitudes can actually damage one's performance. He writes, "A sublimated desire to write may also, in turn, make one a poor editor, despite aptitudes for editing."⁷

The more aptitudes one has, the less likely one is to find work that puts all of them to work and makes the best possible use of her or himself. Unused aptitudes fester. Aptitude, or, to use an old-fashioned word, talent, can be a curse.

Here we come to Shakespeare's sister. Virginia Woolf wrote about an imaginary Judith Shakespeare. She's a bright sixteenth century girl with literary talent, like her brother. But she is denied William's education (unfit for girls), and she lacks his freedom and safety in travel (unwise for girls to travel alone), she can't find a job, she can't make it. Frustrated on every side, she eventually subsides into a kind of madness and commits suicide.⁸

Times have changed a little. Judith could get an education now, though she might be sexually harassed by boyfriends and male professors while getting it. She can travel alone, at least in daylight, and if she studies martial arts. She can find a job, though if she's also a wife and mother, or even a busy mistress, she'll find she has precious little time for developing her unused aptitudes after working hours. And, as I said before, she is thrown onto the heap of the rest of us, men and women together, trying to make something of the talents we were cursed with. And all of us have, at times, felt so frustrated we could just about foresee the madness and even maybe the suicide lurking ahead of us. Every one of us has colleagues who have hit the liquor or the tranquillizer bottle with regularity as their old dreams ebbed slowly away. There are many ways to commit suicide, some speedier than others.

It seems clear to me, though, that for us to prosper — those of us who have aptitudes as writers, and who have

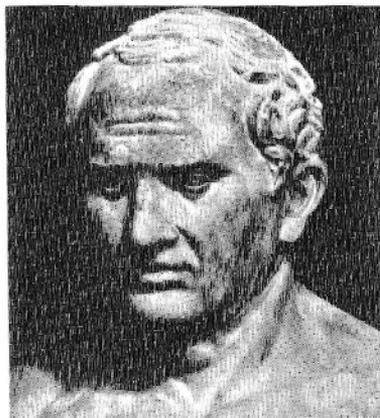
written, still write sometimes, and mean to write again someday — it is very important to find time to pursue our own writing in addition to the communicating we do in our jobs.

Tillie Olsen, in her speech to the Modern Language Association in 1971, warned that unused powers atrophy. We lose what we don't use. Yet Olsen, herself a working woman who only began to find time to write after her kids were grown, added a footnote to this, and here is the ground for our hope: Even for so-called full-time writers, "four hours daily has been the norm. . . . Zola and Trollope are famous last-century examples of the four-hours; the Paris interview with writers disclose many others."⁹

If four hours is the norm for a full-time writer, two hours may yield much. And when two are impossible, even one hour a day of writing what many of us loosely call "my own stuff" may be enough to keep our unused powers from atrophy while we wait for the kids to grow up, while we work for the next promotion on the job, or while we plan for retirement. A little daily writing time can also give relief from stress, voice to what in us is too often silenced, a ground of being to that elusive writer-self which was once an identity. And maybe even some day, one of us will get around to a great American short story, novel, film, play, poem, or multimedia extravaganza. The point seems to be to keep in practice — not just by writing the feed and fertilizer minutes, but by carving some piece of time into every day and using that time — in journals or letters, in notes, in actually crafting pieces of poems or stories — for our own writing.

Selected Biographies of Writers

CICERO was a fulltime government bureaucrat who wrote essays, poetry, and letters after working hours.





← **SAMUEL PEPYS** was a clerk; he copied letters and documents in careful script in the days before typewriters. In middle-age he ran for Member of Parliament and won. He kept colorful personal diaries in his private hours; many of us still read the many printed volumes of them with pleasure.

SAMUEL JOHNSON wrote newspaper columns and called himself a hack writer. He compiled the first English dictionary, in which he defines lexicographer as "a harmless drudge." His essays and short stories remain a staple of English lit. courses.



← **JAMES BOSWELL**'s business went bankrupt; he flunked out of law school; he supported himself tenuously as a newspaper columnist, doing freelance writing on the side for extra money. He's now widely regarded as the greatest biographer of all times for his *Life of Samuel Johnson*.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE was a lifetime British postal worker. He invented the letterbox, was a supervisor of mail carriers, and in his off-duty hours wrote 47 novels, many travel books, and an autobiography.

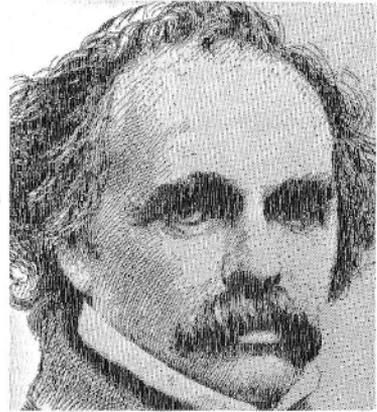




ALEXANDRE DUMAS (PERE), like Pepys, was a copyist-clerk. When his novels or plays were successful he would quit work, but he spent his money quickly in binges and returned again and again to a desk job. He wrote 200 novels, 60 plays, and countless articles and is probably best known in the USA as the author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*.



NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE wrote *The Scarlet Letter* while working as a Custom House clerk in Salem Mass. Another clerk there, Herman Melville, wrote *Moby Dick*.



ZORA HURSTON, born poor in a large Florida family, worked her way through college and studied anthropology, but jobs then as now were scarce, so she often took maid's work to make enough money to survive. She wrote two great novels and four collections of Black folklore but died in poverty, working as a maid.



JAMES JOYCE dropped out of medical school, worked for a while in a French bank, and taught English as a second language for many years in Berlitz schools in Switzerland, Italy, and France. Off the job he wrote *Ulysses* and other works.



LORRAINE HANSBERRY was cashier in a grocery store as she wrote *Raisin in the Sun*. Though her family was well-off and put her through college, she was unable to find suitable work. She died at 34, of cancer. Her husband, the grocer's son, finished her work in progress and called it *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*.



EUDORA WELTY worked as a journalist. During World War II she wrote a column on war events for the New York Times under the name "Michael Ravenna." She supported herself with journalistic writing till she was 47 and had published enough prize-winning novels and short stories to retire from the job market and write her own stuff fulltime.



MARGARET WALKER worked her way through school till she got her M.A. in Creative Writing and won the Yale Younger Poets Award with her first book of poetry. Then she married, mothered 4 children, and worked fulltime as a teacher for 20 years. Only when her children were grown did she get around to writing her first novel. That, a best-seller and prize-winner, is *Jubilee*.



Bibliography

1. Jean Strouse, "What Do Writers Earn?" *Newsweek*, 97, June 22, 1981, p. 77.
2. Numerous essays explain this phenomenon in careful detail. Two excellent ones are Tillie Olsen's, "One Out of Twelve: Women Who Are Writers in Our Century," published in many anthologies including *Working It Out*, edited by Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels (New York: Pantheon Books) 1977, pp. 323-340; and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, published as an individual volume by Harcourt/Brace in 1957.
3. Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *How I Came To Be A Writer*, (New York: Atheneum) 1980, p. 24.
4. Philip H. Abelson, "Communicating with an Elite Readership," in *Technical Communication: Journal of the Society for Technical Communicators*, 28, Second Quarter 1981, p. 4.
5. Lois Gould, interviewed in "Such Good Writing: An Interview with Lois Gould," in *Writer's Digest*, September 1980, p. 27.
6. Chuck Lawliss, "Why Editors Edit and Writers Write," in *Publisher's Weekly*, 219, June 26, 1981.
7. Same, p. 31.
8. Virginia Woolf, in reference 1, above.
9. Tillie Olsen, in reference 1, above.

