

On Working, Writing, and Doubting

The question of how to make a living as a writer is at its surface very simple. The answer is: you write whenever you're not doing your real, proper job. The proper job, where you earn your proper living. The answer is: you feel grateful to have a job at all. The answer is: you tuck your writing away, like a cyclist rolling up one trouser leg so the cuff doesn't get caught up in the chain. The answer is: you have reasons to write other than to make any money – some of them banal and maybe even embarrassing, like wanting to be seen, wanting to be someone. Some of them grander and easier to own up to, like trying to understand what it means to be in this world when so many of us feel we are outside of it. To be part of a community that can provide solace, challenge, and escape. To advocate for the voices we hear less often than other voices in this community. Whatever your reasons, they push you forward.

But simple answers become less satisfying the more they are repeated. For weeks now, probably more than a month, while trying to write something about how to make a living as a writer, I've sat at my desk and slowly slid down my chair and onto the floor into a puddle. I've sat at desks and slid down onto floors in three different countries. Ann Lamott has said something along the lines of how writing is a process of repeatedly hypnotising then unhypnotising yourself, again and again. That's what it's like for me when I am writing. I hypnotise myself so that I can believe in what I am saying, I unhypnotise myself so that I can go over it all with a cold eye. And when I unhypnotise myself I realise that I'm the worst person to address the question of how to make a living, because the only reason I was able to travel to those different countries at all was because I had just been given an impossible sum of money for writing a book. Part of me still believes I've fallen into an alternate universe, and that you're all in here with me, or at least very good holographic images of you are here, which I am now imagining to be holographically naked. And because of the immense privilege of winning such a prize, it doesn't feel quite right to me to address even these naked holographic versions of you. I don't know where I am in the system anymore, other than that I am speaking from an impossible place, and I'm no longer sure whether my opinions should have any bearing. And that is why those simple answers are no longer satisfying to me: because this system is so unpredictable, so

unfair, so mercurial in its giving and withholding of affections. Affections, by which I mean money.

A literary prize isn't really something a person can put into their career plan as a sensible milestone. 'I'll flounder for a number of years and then I'll win a large sum of money from a prize committee that I haven't even heard of.' It would be like planning to buy the perfect pair of pants during a visit to a wig factory. It would be like planning to run your fastest time in a walking race that will disqualify you as soon as both your feet leave the ground. The idea of making money from writing seems possible only through the most unlikely combination of luck, sheer trickery, and the good humour of some official. That's why prizes mean so much to writers: you cannot plan them, or, at least, I don't believe you can if you have integrity. Instead, you can hope. Writers are good at hoping. Writers specialise in that long gap between how they wish the world to be, and what the world actually is. Sometimes I think it's unfair, this expectation that writers should be *above* cold-blooded schemes to win something, when real estate agents and lawyers and presidents get to talk about winning all the time. Who among us hasn't been tempted to write a book that just implores the reader to send them wads of cash? But no. You've got to tell a proper story. You've got to do 'the art'.

When I think of the question of how to make a living, I find that the first thing I think of is a second-year commerce student who, after I had bought him a large orange and vodka for \$5 one Saturday night at the Fat Lady's Arms in 2002, wanted to know how writing would ever get me a decent job. He asked me: 'What are you gonna do with that?', almost as if I'd just pulled some indescribable item out of my pocket and was demanding that he look at it. I remember, in that moment, looking at the university students dancing all around us to 'I'm Gonna Be' by the Proclaimers, the worst song in the world and yet also the song that people most often shouted into one another's faces. I said to the commerce student that I didn't know what I would do with the writing. A hot shame came over me then for not having a reasonable plan. I remember having a strong urge to join the dancers. I wanted to fall into oblivion, thrusting about unthinkingly to a song I hated, and to emerge reeking of other people's Lynx. The commerce student told me *his* career plan. I forget all the details other than that it was

long, and it ended with him making a heap of money, and probably the two of us sailing around on some super-yacht and letting off fireworks.

My life then was filled with encounters like that. I'd buy somebody a drink, then they would find out I wanted to be a writer and they would ask how I would make any money. The answer, at least partly, was that I had to stop buying these people drinks. My bad dating decisions taught me that I had a knack for sitting in bars I didn't want to be in, with people I didn't like all that much if I'm honest, nodding along to the worst songs in the world. I had a knack for doing what *seemed* to be required. I wasn't really any good at learning anything from situations back then, but these experiences keenly suggested to me that if I wanted something else, I would have to find the gumption to turn away, and to keep turning away. If I did not, then my eagerness to please, to be as least disruptive as possible, would lead me into situations and maybe even a life that I didn't like very much. To try to be a writer is to disrupt. And to write well is to keep disrupting expectation. Anne Carson says: 'You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough.' *Never impede the movement harshly enough.* Of course, Carson is speaking about writing. But I also think of the rush and the urge of society flowing over us like a bad music, telling us all the time what counts as a successful career and a successful life. You have to shield yourself from it, shield yourself harshly, to keep it from submerging you.

I was lucky. I did get jobs. And even in early jobs, like working in Lotto stores selling people Instant Kiwis that very occasionally won \$5, I felt a thrill at being solely *at work*. I might have wanted to be a writer, but I was also learning how to be a person facing out into a world. Even though that ability must be learned over and over again as we get older, and especially now when the urge to turn away can be so compelling, I noticed that when I was out there working, each day I came back to my writing feeling like a slightly different person. I had listened, observed, eavesdropped, stored things away. There's an idea I picked up somewhere that all work is the avoidance of harder work. There is some truth in that. 'I'll just remove these little balls of lint from my coat instead of doing a whole load of washing.' 'I'll just revise this paragraph for an hour instead of writing the next one.' At my current job as an editor at Victoria

University Press, we sometimes talk about ‘constructive procrastination’, which usually means playing around with typefaces and looking at cover concepts, instead of writing a back-cover blurb or ringing up a poet you’re scared of. But that avoidant work, although it must always give way to the harder work, can be rich with spontaneity – with conversations you might otherwise not have joined or eavesdropped upon, thoughts you might not have had. So, yes, my day job is, in a sense, the avoidance of the harder work of trying to really make it as a writer and only a writer. The harder work of pushing and pushing against a system where the arts aren’t valued as much as boats or rugby or Briscoes sales are. And for now, so be it. Selfishly, I find myself wanting to save the energy that I would spend on fighting. I save it to write work that matters to me.

There are plenty of articles online about writers who rejected the traditional book publishing model, and subsequently became hugely successful using Amazon, and were able to give up their regular jobs. Maybe some of you have been profiled in such a way. *Morgan wrote her debut novel Forever Dreams in 2014. Underwhelmed by the returns from publishing, she penned two more books and listed them on the Amazon website. “I couldn’t believe the response from readers,” she says.* I’m not sure whether these articles are meant to be inspiring, or chastising – why aren’t the rest of you doing this? Catch up! They remind me of the many, many articles profiling young couples who have committed to living miserably and now own their own homes. I find it interesting – and I’m not sure how significant it is – how writers tend to be described when they’re in the news. A writer in the news can’t just *write* something. You have to *pen* it. And you’re not just a writer. You’re a wordsmith. You’re having ‘a love affair with language’. And if you win anything, you ‘pocket’ it. That sly verb ‘pocket’ – because writers glide around in huge coats lined with pockets, in case the opportunity should arise to pinch something to which they feel entitled, like a scented candle, or another coat lined with pockets. But, mostly, writers come across as these slightly otherworldly desperate fairy creatures, and if they have any monetary success at all, it’s novel. It’s amusing. They’ve bucked the system – the traditional system of writers being poor. As I saw one online commenter say below an article about the Indigenous Australian poet Ali Cobby Eckermann, who won a Windham-Campbell Prize earlier this year: ‘Well isn’t that nice? \$215,000 in poetry money is \$8 million in regular money.’ I think this also means that a 30-year-old poet is roughly 90 years

old in regular human years.

I'm digressing now, but before the Ockham Awards earlier this year, all of the finalists in the various categories were asked to answer the question, 'If you win, what will you do with the money?' Some of the finalists wanted to pay off their debts, or put some new lino on the floor, or buy their son a new pair of trousers. I remember Anthony Byrt wanted to buy some trees. These were fairly ordinary things that would make their lives a little easier and brighter. But I couldn't help feeling that, by being asked the question, the writers were being framed a bit like hungry animals in a zoo, with someone holding out a bit of meat through the bars, taunting. 'What about this, then? Wouldn't you like to have a bit of this?'

To be clear: media attention is really important to writers. It's an essential road towards new readers, maybe even towards funding and residencies. I'm happy and grateful whenever I see a writer, especially a young writer or a Māori or Pasifika writer, profiled in the media. But we know, perhaps have always known, that it's out of the ordinary for writers to make much money. According to a survey earlier this year, the 'average writer' in NZ makes less than a quarter of their income through writing. When you visit the government's Careers website, there is a special page to describe Writer, and there is a sign like one of those Fire Danger Today indicators that you see on hot country roads. Only in this sign it's an indicator for good jobs, as in, 'Probability of a Good Job Today', and the arrow is pointing decidedly to Poor. I don't know why they had to make a whole sign out of it, and I resent it.

One of the joys and also the cruelties of writing, and maybe of all art forms, is that success can come in such myriad, surprising, and often economically immeasurable forms. A kind word from someone you admire, or when people besides your family come to a reading you're doing. When people pay attention to your work, it can remind you how people are often ready to reach back to you, after you've done so much reaching out at them. These kinds of successes show us what it feels like to be thrilled. They lift you up and, to be a bit saccharine about it, help you to keep your heart.

Back to the successful Amazon author. This is an author who is writing on average

eight novels a year, typesetting and designing them herself, and using her social media profile to promote her work. When I think about writing books as a business, this is what I think of. Setting a target for output and sales, diligently producing and marketing the books. What is rarely mentioned in the success stories is that, along with needing to be good at editing and designing your book, you must be a very savvy businessperson. You must pay close attention to what sells, what doesn't, which books are in the Top 10, what the correlation is between star rating and current ranking. You should research your ideal buyer – figure out their average age and income and what they're looking for, and what websites they like best. One popular thriller writer has this advice to give about writing e-books that sell: 'I'm tempted to say: pick a niche you actually enjoy reading. But this may not always be the best advice. I enjoy reading complicated literary novels and obscure texts in linguistics, but they're hardly the stuff best sellers are made of. Your niche selection should be in line with market demands. This is why spending time in the Amazon marketplace is important: it will tell you which niches are popular and which are not.' As for the writing itself, he notes: 'Writing an eBook yourself can be incredibly fun if you enjoy the creative process, or a mind-numbing chore if you don't.'

As I write now, picking myself up off the floor once again, I feel an overwhelming sense of risk, almost certainly doom, descending, because I am going to need to say what I think about the e-book business. Because this is one of the viable ways to make a living as a writer. And I'm afraid of talking about it. I'm afraid of coming across as out of touch: as cynical, joyless, pretentious. Also, as someone who works in publishing and gets to see the business side of it, where we have to think strategically about getting books into people's hands, I understand these are crucial, underpinning concerns, and that it would be naïve to imagine that once a book is written it just takes care of itself. At Victoria University Press where I work as an editor, we sometimes do find ourselves talking about 'how to create a buzz', and sometimes we coach writers in things like, 'how to do a good reading so that people might pick up your book. Tip one: Do speak directly into the microphone.' But, well, with ebooks, this is what I think of: when I read any book, I read to escape the world. I read to freefall out of this life and into some other one. This is how I have always read, from the beginning. There is something innately childlike about that escape. I am alone, but my sense of isolation becomes less acute. And when I think of the e-book author who is

writing books specifically to appeal to a certain market demographic, I think: You're no good at escaping. You're too inside the world to help me. I need a writer who is outside of the world enough to really see it. I want you to be outside of the world with me. If your singular interest is in getting me to buy this book, and then you abandon me as you go through the mind-numbing chore of writing it, then I don't think you're writing for readers. Maybe you're writing for skimmers, or for users of that app that summarises books for you so you don't have to read them. I want to be able to tell that a writer has been *moved* to write. I want them to have risked something by telling the truth as they understand it. I believe that a writer has a moral obligation to do this.

I also believe that the writing that holds real value for us very seldom comes into this world in a planned, tidy, rational way, as in a business plan, without disarray and confusion along the way. I really believe that people who are writing anything truly of value will make some amount of mess as they are figuring out the necessity of their work, as they are clawing towards what is most difficult to say. I like the way Ann Lamott puts it: 'You assume that the rational mind gives you the truth, because the rational mind is the golden calf that this culture worships, but rationality squeezes out much that is rich and fascinating.' There are some classical stories that the 16th-century essayist Montaigne retells in his *Essais*, one about a man named Lycas, who went about his ordinary life and held down an ordinary job, all the while believing that everything he saw and experienced was taking place on a stage, like his life was a theatrical performance. Then a physician was able to cure his delusion, and Lycas became utterly miserable, blaming the doctor for robbing his pleasure in life. And similarly, a man named Thrasylaus believed that every single ship that came into the port where he lived was carrying a wonderful cargoe especially for him. Every time a ship came in, he rejoiced, and 'welcomed them with great gladnesse'. He didn't seem bothered that he never actually got to open any of these cargoes. But anyway, his delusion was cured too, and that was that.

For a writer, working with what's irrational is in most ways unquantifiable, even though it's really hard work. No one sees all of the pushing and pulling, except perhaps for other writers. We carry this work around with us, and in turn it pushes and pulls on *us*. This is partly why it is so awkward when we're asked – as I'm sure many of you have been asked – to write something without being paid. We want to say,

‘But you don’t *understand*. I have to make this thing that wrings sense out of all of *this!*’ It feels like the work of writing has not been *seen*; it goes unacknowledged. But that work is where a writer lives.

Recently, I met the indigenous Australian poet Ali Cobby Eckermann, who I mentioned earlier. I’m not sure how to describe Ali in a way that would do her and her work justice, but to my mind she is an essential voice. She writes about her experience as part of the Stolen Generations, which refers to the roughly 100,000 Aboriginal children who were taken from their birth families by the Australian government and sent to boarding schools and church-run missions. When she was a baby, she was forcibly taken from her mother and given to a white family to raise. Ali’s mother, too, had been taken from her parents as a child. When she became pregnant at 18, Ali was pressured to give her son up for adoption, in turn. It was only when she was in her mid-thirties that she was able to meet her son, and to meet her birth mother. When Ali heard that she had won a Windham-Campbell Prize from Yale University, she was unemployed and living in a caravan in the desert, caring for her adoptive mother. In articles about her success, much was made of the caravan – here was this poet, unemployed, living in a lonely caravan, receiving a life-changing phone call to tell her she’d won a vast prize in literature. I admit I thought it was an incredible story, too. She’d been saved from a terrible caravan life. When I talked to Ali about that at Yale in New Haven, where we both were in September, she was bemused by how her caravan had been described. ‘I love my caravan,’ she said. ‘It’s a good caravan. I love where I live. It’s just a simple life.’ I guess that one detail just shows how eager we tend to be for absolutes, in stories about writers’ success – a caravan equals poor, probably miserable – rather than more complex realities. There was something else she said too, that the unconventional way in which she’d chosen to live was important in itself. It had helped her to recover. It gave her time. She actually didn’t want to follow any conventional path for the sake of fitting in with a society that had been so cruel to her and that still, she felt, hadn’t welcomed her and didn’t know what to make of her. She said she was going to use her winnings on her own terms – to build a place where more of her family could be together, rather than needing to travel all the time. And she would continue with her work of voicing the stories of a people who for so long had been unheard. I guess I just tell that story because Ali’s making a living was about confronting and helping to heal at least some

of the damage of the past. It was having enough money to continue living on the edges where she had always lived, and to continue doing that work of healing, only now she had the gift of the validation and support of an institution like Yale.

This is a small digression. My father would sometimes have us film our own family versions of *Mastermind* or *Sale of the Century* in the lounge. Each contestant would be sat in an armchair with a torch shining directly into their face. And one of my brothers would have a camera over his shoulder to film the episode – we'd hired a video camera from the local electric goods store, Dalziels. I remember it being huge, about the size of R2D2. My father was the Quiz Master, so he would shout the questions, mostly questions about local geography, politics, rugby. If you got the right answer he would shout 'That is correct.' He was also in charge of the buzzer noise for when someone gave a wrong answer. It was this terrible nasal yell: *Ehhhhh!* My memory of being in the hot seat at *Mastermind* is muddled, because partly I remember being quizzed – the intensity, the pressure of it, the brightness of the torch in my eyes – and partly I just remember watching the video later on. One scene went like this.

'What is the name of the RIVER that runs through TE KUITI?!'

'Ummmm ...'

'*Ehhhhh!* The Mangaokewa! Who is the Prime Minister of NEW ZEALAND?!'

'Ummmm ...'

'*Ehhhhh!* David LANGE! Name one NEW ZEALAND WRITER!'

I was about five years old at this time. I was sucking on the head of a teddy bear and rocking back and forth in the armchair, and squinting into the torchlight.

'Stop shining that torch in her face! Come on, dear ... famous New Zealand writer.... Janet.....? Margaret ...?' (This was mum, cheating.)

'Ummmm...'

'Ehhhhh!'

'Mahy! Mahy!'

'Ehhhhh!' At this point both of my brothers would be joining in on the buzzer noise, and adding farting noises.

My older brothers had been through the same Mastermind gauntlet – more successfully than me – so it wasn't like I was being treated unfairly in this instance. Mastermind was a lesson in how the real world worked. You had to know facts. If you didn't know the right thing almost immediately, then you got buzzed. But sitting there in the armchair, the torch shining in my face, I felt a blinding sense of injustice. It was as if all the right answers were there in front of me but somehow I wasn't able to reach them. The name 'David Lange', for instance, was a group of meaningless sounds that ungrouped and dispersed as soon as they'd been uttered.

The thing is I really wanted to have all the answers, and to have them effortlessly. I dreamed of being asked questions not about the government, rugby, and famous authors but about my life and my special creative ways of doing things. It was only in these scenarios that I had answers. I remember out the front of the house I would bike around in ever-tightening circles, imagining I was being interviewed on live TV – 'What advice would you give to viewers who want to do these tricks on their bikes?' – and I was telling them all about the importance of swivelling this certain way or how you had to do this flourish as you dismounted. The same when hitting tennis balls against a concrete wall. 'The important thing is,' I'd whisper to my interviewer, 'you can't get angry when you miss the ball; you've just gotta pick it up and try again.' I would pretend to be Alison Holst while adding chopped nuts and Milo to my bowl of ice cream, explaining my interesting techniques. 'Sometimes a spoonful of jam can be very nice. The important thing is to mix it all up very thoroughly.' It was performative, but it felt so satisfying to me to have all these interesting answers and to be able to imagine the interviewer nodding along, impressed.

I guess I'm telling this story partly because I've realised that I'm the kind of person

who only has answers for questions that are not being asked directly of me, and I think that's why I'm a writer. Writing, and reading, doesn't usually feel like having a torch shone expectantly in your face. So many other times in our lives, we do have torches shone into our faces. Instead you sit in the dark until your eyes adjust. A piece of writing, for me often an essay, tends to start with a question – sometimes as simple as 'Why does this thing feel the way it feels?' or 'Who was that person anyway?' or 'Why were we like that?' – and then, in your own time, you start trying for a response. This feels to me like being inside one of those weird whispered monologues when I was little, circling around on my bike or whacking tennis balls against a wall, muttering my explanations and imagining, or hoping for, someone listening and nodding. Writers are so often responding to questions that haven't explicitly been asked, which perhaps is why our work is so difficult to measure and reward. The system in which we must live says to us, 'What are you even *for*?'

When I started writing this piece, I knew it would not be business-like or even educational, and that this would likely be frustrating. My writing has always lacked businesslike aspect: it tends towards disarray and clings towards what I find sustaining. But I find myself coming back to Montaigne, who was so interested in the idea of what consciousness was, that he had someone regularly shake him awake in the middle of the night so that he could catch a glimpse of unconsciousness just as it was leaving him. It was like he wanted to be in a dream, a reverie, all the time; yet he also wanted to be firmly grounded in reality and to feel as much of it as possible. As a writer, he was able to be lost in himself as well as to hang on tightly to everything that happened in his life – so that he could pull it back when he needed it in his work. Living as a writer, living at all, means learning how to hang on.