

The Rise of Professional Authorship or Don't Give up Your Day Job

Michael J. Davey

In entitling this panel as we have, our purpose was to draw our collective attention to the material conditions of authorship, and in so doing to examine how writers of the Western Reserve have dealt variously with the demands placed upon them by readers, by editors and publishers, and by themselves. Upon entering the market, the writer is no longer simply a private artist, but is forced to subject his or her work and ego to the whims and vagaries of the book reading and book buying public. The professional and personal rewards, and costs, of this fact are the focus of the four panelists you will hear today.

Professional authorship in the US originated in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Although sermons, travel narratives, and even novels and plays were published in the early republic, prior to roughly 1820, no writer—and certainly no writer of fiction—was able to earn a living by the pen—mostly because primitive copyright laws as well as the cost of manufacturing and distributing books made it impossible to do so. As a result, there was, properly speaking, no such thing as a professional writer. Instead, a writer was either a beggarly poet—a dim, unkempt, but romantic figure who usually suffered from TB along with terminal poverty, and who worked feverishly in some garret before dropping dead in a fit of frustrated apoplexy. Or a writer was a genteel amateur, someone who wrote because he or she—and as the century progressed more often than not a writer was also a she—was at leisure to do so. There was never any question of actually earning a living by writing, rather, genteel authors wrote because, like landscape painting, it helped to pass the time between dinner and supper, or between one fox hunt and the next. No self-respecting member of the upper class would ever stoop so low as to actually try to earn an income as a writer (it would have been foolish to try), and neither would any member of the middle class who desperately wanted nothing more than to appear genteel or—even better—to become in fact wealthy enough to gain access to the parlors and drawing rooms of his or her more privileged peers.

However, in 1814, Sir Walter Scott published the first of his Waverley novels in England and it soon became clear that not only could a genteel man or woman make a profit writing fiction, they could become incredibly rich in the process. As a result, it suddenly became respectable to try to earn one's living by the pen. The era of the professional author had begun. By 1826, James Fenimore Cooper (who, along with Washington Irving, was one of the first literary professionals in this country) was known in both Europe and the US as the American Scott, and regularly sold up to 5000 copies of his historical novels such as *Last of the Mohicans* and *The Pioneers*. A genteel person could now call his or her self a professional writer and expect to garner the same respect afforded to any other fine upstanding member of the emerging professional and managerial classes. Indeed, as differences in dress, income, and living and working conditions continued to develop and to distinguish manual from nonmanual workers in this country, the image of the professional author as a respectable member of the white-collar world stabilized. By the 1850s, canals and railways had substantially lowered the cost of producing and distributing books, copyright laws had slowly but steadily modernized, and the US's huge literacy rate (90% among whites compared to just 60% in England), helped to raise the potential sales for a best-seller dramatically. Twenty-five years after Cooper first proved that an American novelist writing fictional narratives about American topics could expect to reach a sizable audience, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would sell over 100,000 copies in the first year alone. In just twenty-five years, what it meant to call oneself a writer had changed dramatically.

Yet, a new problem emerged along with the rise of professional authorship and has remained part and parcel of the profession since Cooper's time—how to negotiate that delicate balance between what the writer wants to write on the one hand, and what will sell on the other, or between art and economics. And as we shall see today, race, class, and gender could compound the obstacles a writer faced once he or she chose to enter the market. Some writers, such as Cooper and Stowe, were able to carve out relatively stable careers, selling books in respectable numbers which for the most part turned out exactly as they envisioned them. Cooper, for example, refused to rewrite or edit any manuscript he submitted to his publishers, demanding compensation on those rare times when he was forced to rework something. And when his career did begin to slide,

Cooper simply returned to a character he and his readers loved—Natty Bumppo, otherwise known as Hawkeye—and revived his rapidly sinking sales figures. American women authors in this period were particularly successful. The overwhelming majority of readers in the nineteenth century, as now, were middle-class women. And women writers by and large had few problems finding a ready audience for the sentimental and domestic fiction which they typically chose to write, and which were the best sellers of their day.

Other writers, however, found the negotiation between their own interests and the interests and moral sensibilities of their editors and audience a bit more difficult to manage. Both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville lamented in letters that they felt incapable of competing with their female counterparts. In a famous letter, Melville exclaimed: “Dollars damn me. . . What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.” And Emily Dickinson’s career never really got started. Rejected by the only editor she ever submitted her work to, Dickinson chose to remain a private poet for the rest of her life, only reaching the public after her death, and even then entreating and admonishing that public to treat her and her work with kid gloves. In one of her most anthologized poems she wrote: “This is my letter to the world/That never wrote to Me—/The simple News that nature told—/With tender majesty./Her message is committed/To Hands I cannot see—/For love of Her—Sweet—Countrymen—/Judge tenderly—of Me.”

Our panel in particular attempts to bring into relief what it meant and what it continues to mean to be a professional writer of the Western Reserve, with each panelist providing a slightly different focus. Some of the presentations are academic and historical in orientation, providing us with an understanding of how a writer’s response to the demands of both art and economics are additionally influenced by race and gender. Other panelists will give us more personal insight into what has and has not changed over the last 200 years. Taken as a whole they will provide us all with a richer understanding and more complete sympathy for that most noble but beleaguered of vocations: the professional author.