

Potatoes or Butterflies? Writing Failure and Success

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Talk at a session titled **Bookers or Blockbusters** at Melbourne-Age Writer's Festival, 1 September 2001
with Jane Sullivan, Magnus Mills, Joan London, Sandy McCutcheon

Since I have written neither a Booker nor a Blockbuster, my technique is hardly useful to you. I am not quite sure why I have been asked to be on this panel. Perhaps I am meant to represent what aspiring bookers and blockbusters should avoid. I'll do my best.

Whether you write a Booker or a Blockbuster or both does not only depend on your intention, your technique or your skills as a writer. For one, blockbusters must satisfy some widely-shared popular taste, and popular taste changes with time. It must be *seen* to satisfy popular taste, which brings in the advertising hand of the publishing industry. A bestseller in one market may be a non-starter in another. All of which are elements outside the writer's control. So if we were to give the topic anything like a thorough examination, we would need to add to our panel other actors in the publishing industry: agents, publishers, publicists, booksellers and so on, with all respect due to my fellow panelists.

With this qualification in mind, and having started by declaring our panel unfit, let me go back to elements within the writer's control and see if I have enough clumsiness to antagonize the audience as well. When it comes to the writer herself, there is, I think, a factor that is more fundamental than technique, gift and intention. That is the motivation for writing.

Why do you write in the first place? There is of course no simple answer. But let's begin with two extremes. Take for example a writer who is so interested in writing for its own sake, so obsessed by writing—say a mad poet—that she is totally indifferent to money, worldly gains, social status, family, relationships and so on. Such a person is likely to be a respected writer whose life is all misery financially and probably a string of disasters emotionally. Someone you'd love to read but in whose life you'd never wish to be entangled. The other extreme is the worldly writer who is purely after monetary benefit and would drop the pen instantly if he were to find out that growing potatoes or chasing butterflies were more profitable. Someone you would rather neither read nor meet, let alone be entangled in his life.

Now these two extremes are so extreme, they don't exist in reality. I haven't met such individuals myself. I think that the pure-profit-seeking writer doesn't exist simply because writing is such a risky investment that, unless you happen to be Gore Vidal or Stephen King,

growing potatoes or chasing butterflies is likely to be more profitable—especially if you can do both, chasing butterflies while waiting for the potatoes to grow. The writer-without-a-life is an even more ridiculous proposition of course.

But while the extremes are unrealistic, they define a spectrum that is useful for describing the writer's motivations. And the interesting thing about the title of this session is that it is strongly tilted towards the worldly extreme. Bookers, after all, tend to be relative blockbusters. I have never heard a Booker-prize winner complain about book sales. I think that we should add other categories to commercial success and literary commercial success. There is I would say a third category of neither commercial nor literary success. So it's Booker, Blockbuster and Bugger. And another category representing literary success without commercial success. (Don't worry, I won't give it a name).

The reason for widening the scope of the question (apart from giving me the opportunity to indulge in my refined linguistic acrobatics) is that it brings up more interesting questions. What is literary success without commercial success? After all, to have anything like literary success, one must be published. So we're probably talking about those books which are talked about by writers and discerning readers and which sell very little.

But a more fundamental question relates to the total-failure category. Is it possible to be a writer with no commercial or literary success? After all, if it is conceivable in other professions, why is it not in writing? Or, to go further, is it possible to be a writer—with all the social and professional meaning invested in the word—when one is unpublished? Before printing was invented, all you had to do to become a writer was to *write* the book. On the other hand, you were lucky if anyone other than your wife and your cook read it. Unless you happened to have written the Bible. In which case you had the benefit of monks who locked themselves up somewhere remote, abstained from sex, ate and drank just enough to keep their minds going, and spent half their adult lives reading your book. Wouldn't you trade the Booker for a single reader of this caliber? On the other hand, we do have PhD students nowadays. I am only making the joke because I was one myself.

But to go back to the question. Is it possible to keep writing when neither commercial nor literary success are forthcoming? In other words, could the reader 'exist' without the mediation of the publishing/advertising industry and without the sanctioning of the literary establishment (such as the Booker)? Is it desirable? There is of course an experiment going on today which implicitly addresses this question. It is called the Internet. I have no idea which way it'll go. But what I would like to do is answer one of these questions in light of my own experience.

I started writing my first novel in 1992 a few months after moving from England to Paris and went through the usual extended period of self-doubt during which I avoided using the “writer” label to describe myself, at least in front of others. (When I am talking to myself, on the other hand...). In the three or four years that I unsuccessfully attempted to publish my novel, I remember a rough date around which I realized that regardless of whether I get published or not, I will keep writing. It was then that I started writing my second novel, even though I had no offer for my first one. I was deriving so much pleasure from the writing itself, it had become an addiction. I see this now as a watershed in my writing career. And I think it was around that time that I became comfortable calling myself a writer.

Now, the interesting thing is that it didn't mean that I stopped caring about being published or being read. Quite the opposite. Because I intended to keep writing as long as I was alive and because I knew that this would be extremely difficult without readers, I had more, not less, interest in being published. And yet, somewhere in my mind, the act of writing had been liberated from its publication outcome.

I know that some of the aspiring writers in the audience must be feeling disappointed. They come here to learn about how to achieve success and all I do is hold out the prospect of a long life of unpublished writing. This is not my point at all. There is no question that publication is central to us as writers and that we know no other viable way yet of nurturing our careers.

My point is that because of the peculiar economy of writing—the kinds of risk, skills and emotional investments involved—you can only hope to achieve success—literary or commercial or both—when at some level you have liberated yourself from that ambition. Simply because, if you weigh the odds you'd be put off instantly and, more importantly, because if you waste too much time on the ambition, you could end up stifling rather than stimulating your gift. Thank you.