

## A Literary Accounting

**W**HAT kind of writer makes a million dollars? Well, there are “writers” like Julian Assange and Sarah Palin, there are writers like James Patterson and Audrey Niffenegger, and there are also lesser-known scribblers you would never believe could make that kind of money. Like me. And maybe you.

I am not a celebrity or a best-selling author but I have, in fact, made a million dollars from my writing career. To be clear, I racked up this figure over the course of twenty-two years and 948 separate payments, so my story is not a one-check dream come true. But to struggling writers with a dream of supporting themselves doing what they love, it may be just as newsworthy.

I started writing poetry in 1969, at the age of eleven; that same year I sold a helpful hint about organizing one’s closet to *Co-Ed* magazine for ten bucks. From that moment on, a pattern began to emerge—commercial efforts helping to fund more esoteric ones—that continues to this day. For the next two decades I wrote mostly poetry, and though I had a few victories here and there, there were no Benjamins or even Georges involved. Occasionally I was given a free beer at a poetry reading, and for that I was grateful.

When I wrote my first personal essay in the late 1980s, I had been supporting myself for years as a tech-and-marketing writer at a software company. I had sort of given up sending things out. But these humorous pieces, I thought, had more potential than anything I’d done before. And though the *New Yorker* didn’t think so, and *Glamour* and *Cosmo* didn’t think so, and the *Paris Review* didn’t think so either, on January 15, 1989, I collected sixty-five dollars from my local, free, alternative weekly newspaper, the *Austin Chronicle*, for a personal essay titled “How To Get Pregnant in the Modern World.”

While there is not a long tradition of writing in my family (I might be the first to take this career path), there is plenty of bookkeeping. Both of my parents, my sister, and many of our relatives were or are CPAs. Perhaps this is why, when I received that check, I wrote it down, and thereafter recorded every sum of money I collected from my writing career: articles, broadcasts, readings, book

### HOW I MADE MY FIRST MILLION



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advances, and so on. By the early 1990s, I was using Quicken on my Macintosh to keep track.

Earlier this year—on January 14, 2011, to be exact—I entered a payment for a half-day creative nonfiction workshop at Carlow University in Pittsburgh. Although they failed to give me a beer, they did pay me \$1,500. And with that, the ledger total was \$1,001,429.86. Who says writing doesn't pay?

**O**F THE entries that make up the million dollars, there are none with six figures, but there are a few five-figure sums. The first is twenty thousand dollars, in 1993, from the National Endowment for the Arts for a fellowship in creative nonfiction. That very same month I signed a contract with Villard for my debut collection of essays, *Telling: Confessions, Concessions, and Other Flashes of Light*. But it all started with those personal essays in the *Austin Chronicle*. John Burnett, a National Public Radio reporter, had read them, and suggested me as a commentator for *All Things Considered*. At that time, NPR commentators like Bailey White and David Sedaris were on the best-seller lists; once my essays started airing, it looked like maybe I could join them. I got an agent, I got a book deal, and I quit my day job, replacing it with freelancing for women's magazines, parenting magazines, travel publications, and newspapers. (These gigs, unlike tech writing, I counted as "real" enough to record in the ledger.)

My hardcover, paperback, audio, and foreign advances for that first book totaled nearly a hundred thousand dollars. It didn't meet sales expectations, but there were high hopes for my next book, for which I received sixty thousand dollars. Unfortunately, the trend continued. Not long after my third book, I left Random House and parted ways with my agent. Everybody was very nice, but even if they liked me as a person and as a writer, I was a failure as a commodity.

But I wouldn't say die. I sold my books to smaller outfits without using an agent (I was inspired to represent myself after reading articles by Gary Fincke and Steve Almond, the latter having been published in this magazine in 2004), and my advances dropped by roughly 50 percent with each successive publication. For my sixth book, in 2009, I negotiated a twenty-five-hundred-dollar advance from Counterpoint, a very fine small publisher in California. I was not sad about this at all—on the contrary, it seemed like a miracle. And I still haven't given up: I just wrote another memoir and got a peppy new agent, one who was hardly out of grammar school when I was taking my first shot at stardom.

Writers always fantasize about the film and TV options that are going to set them up for life. While this sometimes amounts to some poor independent screenwriter cutting you an annual check from his personal account for five hundred dollars, one of the biggest payments I ever got was from CBS: twenty-three thousand dollars for the purchase of the option to make a television pilot based on my book about single motherhood, *The Lunch-Box Chronicles*. It starred Monica Potter, Steve Carell, and Andy Richter; the final script did not contain a single line that I wrote; and it never aired on TV. If I tell you they had added a sheepdog to the cast of characters, you will understand what a desperate situation this was.

With my book advances steadily plummeting, I've had to fill in that million with other things. I teach half time in an MFA program now, but I don't count this income in the writing ledger. I did count, in the past few months, fifty dollars from the Baltimore Writers' Conference, fifteen hundred dollars from *Ladies' Home Journal*, and six hundred dollars from the Howard County Poetry and Literature Society. I collected three hundred dollars for a book review, two hundred fifty dollars for an electronic-reprint permission, and

thirty bucks from Baltimore's Poets in the Park.

The biggest royalty check I received last year (\$832.69) was not from a book publisher, but from Quotable Cards, which has made both a greeting card and a refrigerator magnet listing the seven helpful precepts I offer in one of my books, *Rules for the Unruly*. Pretty good, don't you think? (On the other hand, I have never received a cent from the company that often uses a quote from me—"Nothing says oops like a wall of flame"—in its spiral-bound agendas for schoolchildren. Well, that outfit doesn't pay Thomas Edison or Robert Frost either, so at least I'm in good company.)

By the way, the second biggest royalty check I got last year was from Counterpoint for that book for which I got the twenty-five-hundred-dollar advance in 2009. This is the magic of the low advance: You can earn out and collect royalties! While my other books do keep selling in their low-key, print-on-demand way, there's not much hope of their earning out—unless that poor screenwriter dude finally hits it big and we all go to Hollywood, at which point my backlist will be reissued with pictures of Zooey Deschanel on the cover. I often picture myself struggling up the red carpet with my walker, my home health aide at my side.

When I hit a million dollars, I decided to mark the event. I bought myself a beautiful if tiny landscape painting by Brian David Martin that I'd been ogling for some time (\$1,000), and I threw a crawfish boil for my son and his friends in New Orleans (\$395). The riches already disbursed, I had to stop there.

If it weren't for the blood of accountants that runs in my veins, I might not have been able to do this. It took an entrepreneurial spirit, negotiation skills, persistent collections calls, and a businesslike doggedness, but most of all, it took record keeping. Without record keeping, I might have made a million dollars and never known.

See? You may have already won! ☞