Click here to become an author

And the Nobel Prize for "author services" goes to...

They appear almost permanently on the edge of my screen now. Manuscript consultancy. Copy checking. Binding and printing. Self-publishing guides, e-publishing guides, e-publishing courses, creative writing classes, learn how to pitch, learn how to get published. Click here to become an author...

The precipitous plunges in revenue right across the spectrum of cultural industries over the last decade is rapidly reconfiguring the economic landscape for those in the creative arts. Once upon a time, perhaps not so very long ago, it was possible for a limited number of professional authors, musicians, journalists, film-makers to get by selling a 'product' (novels, albums, articles for papers and magazines) and survive on the proceeds. That number is shrinking fast. In a world where a younger generation struggles to even recognise the idea of 'copyright' and the price of a book, film, CD or magazine is ever tending ever closer to zero, the freeconomy is wreaking havoc on revenue structures across the board. And if cultural product fails to bring the money in, the industries of publishing, media, film and music will have to seek out alternatives. As writer Jeff Jarvis puts it in the acknowledgements to his recent 'Public Parts', the book of the future may simply be a calling card that will "lead to other business."

In this 'calling card culture' a novel is a way for authors to get work teaching creative writing; the CD album is a promo for live touring; journalism and full-length non-fiction is a path to after-dinner speeches and conference talks. The value in any creative product lies in the intangible kudos surrounding it. Just as our society in general has moved from hard goods to soft services, from products to processes, we move from a writing industry to an industry *around* writing: from authors to 'author services', that vague penumbra of manuscript doctoring, pitch coaching, copy-editing, novel consultancy, and anything else that looks like it might get a click in the Google sidebar

Of course teaching creative writing has been a crutch to writers for decades, as was book-selling, working in publishing and private tutoring for decades before that. But it is interesting to note how this industry seems to be flourishing at a time when the revenue is draining away from writing itself. Even over just the last half decade, respectable institutions such as the Guardian have begun to offer a wide range of courses – not just to aspiring journalists but

to authors and playwrights. Long-established publishers such as Faber, Penguin, Bloomsbury, presumably not wanting to lose out on a slice of this lucrative pie, are now getting in on the act and leveraging the kudos of their brand by offering classes, something Liz Thompson of Bookbrunch, an industry website, calls 'monetizing their slush pile'. There are certainly substantial sums involved here: the Guardian and the prestigious UEA charge £7,000 for some of their courses, a figure that many partially-employed writers would be delighted to be paid in a year. The fact that traditional publishers – once naysayers of the idea that writing can be taught – are moving into teaching creative writing must say something about the direction this economy is moving in.

The question of the efficacy of creative writing courses is too complex to discuss here; at their best, they can be a structured form of feedback nurturing the creative talents of their students; at their worst they can be an expensive form of ego-indulgence. What's for certain is that their spread is part of a shift away from writing as an industry subject to the tough brutality of the market, towards writing as an activity that must be sustained supported by a community of other writers. Writing increasingly becomes something people pay to do rather than something people are paid to do; personal expression as opposed to productive industry. What, if we're honest about it, is the Kindle list of free-to-download but a somewhat less exploitative echo of the days of vanity publishing? There will be many worthy exceptions among it, of course, but few of us would suggest that every single one of the 50,158 novels offered for free in 2012 were the work of undiscovered geniuses just too daringly *avant-garde* to make Random House's shortlist. Vanity will always go by other names when there are other names to go by; today a quick scan of the small-ads in a literary journal will regularly throw up 'publishers' putting out tempting bait to potential authors ('Olympia Publishing' is one such stealth vanity outfit that's less than forthcoming about its 'sharing' of costs with authors until the unsuspecting novelist submits their manuscript).

The prevalence of creative writing courses reinforces the notion that everyone has a novel in them – and the more the view spreads, of course, the more people want creative writing courses. The submission pages for agents and authors ask would-be authors to list their creative writing credentials; some even demand that the book has been 'pre-read' by a professional prior to submission. Author services may well raise the bar of writing (at least with the money to pay for them), but they also have the effect of professionalising a

sector of cultural activity that was once thrillingly amateur and chaotic. The more writers seek to bolster their work with author services, the more pre-read, pre-serviced manuscripts will become the norm ('I wouldn't dare set out to be a writer', an arts graduate I met told me recently: 'I haven't studied it'). Do we want a world where the only people allowed to write a novel would be those with an M.A. in writing a novel? Is not 'being alive' sufficient qualification in itself?

Against this background e-publishing and the blogosphere are generally offered as a beacon of hope to writers, with their convenient rags-to-riches fairytales of breakout authors 'discovered' online (although an industry whose pinup is E.L. James does make one wonder about the state of the industry). What's less talked about is the relentlessly competitive workload that promoting oneself in this attention economy entails – Twitter alerts, tweets and retweets, posting and reposting, fishing for blog visitors, the perpetual race to be 'Liked' by the masses...

The internet once seemed like an undreamt-of opportunity for the voiceless to be heard above the din of mainstream culture. Now the din of the web is itself so loud few can shout above it. Just as the labour saving consumer goods of the post-war period famously increased the work housewives did, because expectations of cleanliness shot up with them, the information revolution hasn't made getting 'recognised' easier, it's just massively upped the bar; if a writer might once have combined novels with the occasional article or feature, now they're expected to be both artistic introvert and multi-tasking Über-socialiser, and the levels to which some are prepared to turn their lives into a sort of interactive pageant is truly astonishing. Here's the email signoff for one prominent writer on the online scene:

http://danholloway.wordpress.com my personal websitehttp://thecynicalselfpublisher.blogspot.co.uk/ self-publishing advice http://agnieszkasshoes.blogspot.com (my raucous opinions)http://lastmanoutofeden.tumblr.com/ my online playpit for 2012http://eightcuts.com (a literary project and publisher I run)http://www.youtube.com/lastmanoutofeden my YouTube channel – performance poetry My books Last Man Out Of Eden http://www.amazon.co.uk/Last-Man-Out-Eden-ebook/dp/B0083LLM00

Songs from the Other Side of the Wallhttp://www.amazon.co.uk/Songs-Other-Side-Wall-ebook/dp/B003LN1UBG(life:) razorblades includedhttp://www.amazon.co.uk/life-razorblades-included-ebook/dp/B003QTDLBWThe Man Who Painted Agnieszka's Shoeshttp://www.amazon.co.uk/Man-Painted-Agnieszkas-Shoes-ebook/dp/B004QGYH6MBlack Heart High - http://www.amazon.co.uk/Black-Heart-High-ebook/dp/B0053CPFDC ...

By the looks of things it would take a fortnight just to get to the end of Dan Holloway's websites, let alone sample his actual output. And he's far from alone. According to this model, the aspiring writer is ever on-call – not just promoting one's blog or eBook, but making contacts, participating in the community, offering advice, generally being a 'presence' on the web. Self-published US sci-fi author Michael Hicks suggests sending out promotional tweets once an hour, all day. Steven Lewis, author of a survey of authors using digital publishing as an alternative to traditional print, emphasises the importance of discussion, to be "interested in others", to "reply to everyone". Nobody denies the altruism and the community spirit here, but one wonders how much time that leaves for actually writing anything. One writer quoted in a 'Guardian' piece on self-publishing keeps Twitter onscreen even when writing, so that he can presumably tweet between sentences. Somehow it's hard to imagine Dostoyevsky coming up with 'Crime and Punishment' that way.

Of course it's easy to dismiss social networks as more time-wasting froth without also acknowledging how powerful they are in enabling artists of all stripes to gain an audience, however small. In the transitional stage, the web was seen as a sort of testing ground along the way to success in the mainstream (paying) arts industries; now most of us are familiar with the idea of the 'long tail' – the tiny niche audiences that the web makes it possible to cultivate – as the *only* kind of audience many of us can ever hope for. If the cultural critic Kevin Kelly is right and 'a thousand fans' is our realistic ceiling, then we need to learn how to pitch ourselves not to the mainstream, nor even to the traditional gatekeepers of the cultural industries – editors, agents, publishers – but to our family and friends and people we know. As customers. Paying ones.

Here, perhaps, is the darker side to the switch to the artist as lifelong self-promoter and *de facto* salesman. The collapse of writing as a paid profession

means that the writer hoping to sell their books, e-books, magazines and anthologies to the general public will often end up targeting their own social circle – and it's here that the boundaries between 'friend' and 'customer' become increasingly blurred. Several times a week I get a message from someone I know about their show or gig or gallery or eBook, inviting me to donate to them, buy something from them, subsidise them. Since the readings of published authors are often attended substantially by other published authors, many of the books sold here are to other writers. It's a curious circular economy the creative class increasingly inhabits; sometimes it seems to cost more to go to the free gigs than the ones where you pay at the door. At least a flat charge doesn't come with an appeal to your friendship.

Of course we shouldn't romanticise the role of the writer in centuries past; even when the book was culturally dominant revenues were still mainly concentrated at the top of the best-seller pyramid, and most writers have always sought an alternative livelihood in a notoriously tough profession (Orwell, himself no stranger to part-time jobs till late in life, memorably complains of the public's stinginess towards paying for printed content in his 1946 essay 'Books and Cigarettes'). The web certainly didn't invent the long tail, though it may have helped to lengthen it. But while family and friends have always supported amateur creativity, the idea that they would be the *only* ones buying the artist's work is relatively new. What does it do to your social circle once you start thinking about it as a marketing opportunity? Can friends remain friends when they also become customers?

It seems fairly probable that things are not about to suddenly get any easier for writers, neither those doing penance in the slush pile nor even the ones lucky enough to have been published. Now the vast majority of us inhabit a long tail that gets longer every day, it's inevitable that social relationships will adapt to the new landscape. The fact that I emailed this article will have alerted Google to the keywords within it, so my sidebar will no doubt be eagerly flashing up more 'Author Services' links for many months to come. Manuscript consultancy. Copy checking. Binding and printing. Sometimes I wonder if my own name will one day appear among the names in the consultancies. After all, in a world that expects all culture to be free, the modern creative is going to have to get creative to make any kind of living at all.