



The Writing/Life Balance

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I OFTEN SUMMARISE my practical writing advice as: *Try to marry someone who has a well-paid job.* I say this because I've been married to a GP for thirty years, and the truth is, if we had to survive on just my writing income, we'd probably be in a cardboard box. This sounds a bit crass or flippant, I know, but staying afloat financially is one of the many 'real-life' factors that exist in a complex push-pull relationship with this thing we call 'writing'. Our aim – not just as writers, I would suggest, but reasonable human beings – is to find a way to keep these things in some sort of balance.

Of course, it might be a false dichotomy to imply that our writing self is distinct and separate from everything else. Our raw material as writers is nothing more than the mass of our memories and attitudes and experiences, and these are not unaffected by our situation or state of mind. We think of Virginia Woolf's assertion that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'. I certainly remember those periods of my life when I've been the parent who changed nappies or sorted bottles at midnight, who delivered the children to nursery or school and fixed meals and oversaw homework when they returned. There have been other, less positive, times when writing slid down my list of priorities — during pandemic lockdowns, or when suffering from mental ill-health. Conversely, there have been moments – with a deadline looming for a TV script, say – when it feels that I have no other concerns at all. I am a creature that writes and, occasionally, eats and sleeps.



This is not a healthy state to be in, and I am observing rather than recommending this. But life is a constant rearrangement of priorities, and sometimes we need to remember that writing – though a compulsion we love, a lifelong illness that we can't quite shake – is just one of them. We are compelled to write, but to do that, we must be alive — we'll never complete that novel or film script or cycle of poems if we've driven ourselves to absolute exhaustion, or worse. But more than simply living, or surviving, I believe we should try to live *well*. I wouldn't have missed all that time with my kids for the world, and anyway, it's hard to argue that me getting words down on paper and screen and worrying about fictional people is more important than my wife mending or saving lives in the real world — whatever that means. The psychological landscapes of many writers are still populated by starving artists in their garrets, and I've heard television executives say they don't care how vile or selfish a scriptwriter is, as long as they're creative geniuses. I have no idea how many tortured or self-absorbed authors there are out there, but personally I've never been keen to join their ranks. As far as I'm concerned, putting other people first – or putting your own mental health first – does not automatically make you a bad writer. It might, however, make you a better human being.