



## The Writing Life

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I'VE ALWAYS HAD an interest in the etymology of words. Consider the word *life*. Noun. Old English: 'animated corporeal existence; lifetime, period between birth and death; the history of an individual from birth to death, written account of a person's life; way of life (good or bad); condition of being a living thing...' but also from Old High German: 'perseverance': 'to stick, adhere.'

In recent weeks, I have come somewhat 'unstuck' and I have begun to question this writing life of mine.

I came to writing late in life, having never for a moment thought I would become a published novelist. It was not a childhood ambition, nor some guarded, guilty secret I kept close to my chest through my adult life. It simply never occurred to me that I could or ever would become a writer. My working-class roots put it well beyond any horizon of mine.

I started to write my first novel ten years ago. Since then, I have published three novels. A fourth novel (written between my first and second published novels) was rejected. I developed several arts' projects over the same period too — work that took me to Australia, South Africa, North America, the Netherlands, France and around much of the UK. I have worked with filmmakers, artists and musicians, with architects, developers and city planners. I've worked with some brilliant people. This work has been some of the most rewarding of my life, taking me well beyond the scope and confines of a novel.



Looking back, it has the appearance of a body of work that can, when viewed in retrospect, be described as something approximating to a 'writing life': of time spent successfully in pursuit of this goal. But the words 'success' and 'goal' jar. Looked at through that lens, it all seems far less certain.

Writing is a precarious existence for many, no news there. Very few writers are able to make a living from their work. But, comes the retort, isn't writing something that sits above the grubby business of money? Shouldn't a writer write for the love of it, *because they must?* The novelist Anne Enright puts it in stark terms. 'The first twelve years are the worst', she wrote. How I value her honesty. Others tell me that it's about the 'long game'. Even so, there are no guarantees. Publishing is business and the business churns on.

Back to the etymology I cited at the start of this. Perhaps the Old German form of the word has it right: of life being, *and meaning:* 'perseverance'? And, whilst I understand that, *writing is work*. And if after a decade there isn't a living in it, what life is that?

Does it all come back to class in the end? Or is that too bleak an assessment? All I know is that as the cost-of-living crisis bites, a writing life is a luxury I am struggling to afford.

This is not just about me, of course.

The bigger question remains: why are so few writers able to make a living from their work?