



The Writer as Outsider

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IF THERE IS ONE OVERRIDING reason that writing is an outsider activity, it lies surely in the widespread popular conception that it isn't a proper job. Those who are very lucky – children's authors who spot a gap in the market, TV chefs, gardening experts, celebrities who don't yet feel rich enough from whatever they are famous for – may succeed in earning a living, or at least a supplementary income, from it. The rest are just wasting their time, spending a year perhaps in mental exertion, to produce something that virtually nobody will read.

This leads to the need for a certain level of circumspection when the question crops up of what one does for a living. There are male writers who think being a writer will impress the ladies, which it more or less literally never does. Best say you've recently been invalided out of the Royal Marines. I can never bear to tell whoever is cutting my hair what I do. I once told a young barbershop trainee I was a fairground safety inspector. That was good for a bit of rapidly improvised anecdoting, but still not as cool, I suspect, as playing bass in a thrash-metal outfit.

A writer is somebody who hasn't yet realised that making things up, or writing down what they think about things, is pure self-indulgence, increasingly so in inverse proportion to their talent for it. While others feel called to heal and to teach, to protect and defend, to support people through trauma or rescue them from burning buildings, writers only sit at their desks composing sentences about these activities, or ignoring them altogether.



This isn't, needless to say, the view that writers have of themselves. They tend to think that thinking is a virtue, an elusive gift, and creativity the means of enabling a society to reflect on itself, or at least escape from its present concerns for the duration of a chapter or two. Entertainers in other fields tend to be in direct contact with their audiences, but writers only address an imagined network of unrelated individuals, perhaps filling time on the morning commute or as the drowsing prelude to putting out the night-light. The audiobook was conceived as one way of circumventing the mute language of print, but the gulf between production and reception remains.

There are many ways to be an outsider, but anybody sitting alone hammering out words for a scattered community of other solitaries can be assured they are not at the pulsing heart of the economy. That's why they don't pay most of us a living wage. The adage that you can't put a price on words is all too literally interpreted. Then again, what might just emerge from a lifetime's swirling of the prospector's pan is the flash of gold that counts as insight, the enchanted word that encapsulates an era. You have to be standing on the outside to do that, not stuck in the besetting thick of it.