

WHAT MAKES US WRITERS?

ANNE LOGAN

"So, what do you do?"

I hope I'm not alone in dreading these five words that often come up when meeting a stranger. I mutter something about being a freelancer because I can never bring myself to say "I'm a writer" with any conviction. I need to be honest in these situations, as in, what activity do I participate in that makes the most amount of money for my family? How do I explain that I love reviewing books, but it barely pays minimum wage, so I'm forced to do other things? Not easy banter for somebody I just met. And I know I'm not the only one faced with this crisis. What about the award-winning authors who still need day jobs to pay the bills? Do they consider their jobs "writing" if they do something else for a steady paycheck? At what point does our writing become more than a side hustle?

The online edition of the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines a writer as: "a person who writes books or articles to be published." So, if you write anything that's meant to be seen by other people, you are a writer? It's broad but also encouraging because I can define myself as a writer in public. But the real question is: will I?

I'm a proud member of the Writers' Guild of Alberta (WGA), one reason being it accepts people in all stages of their writing journey. The WGA is for everyone, even those who want to become writers but have written nowhere outside their diary. Joining the WGA solidified my intentions to write, even if it was just a personal blog. Putting my creative writing on the internet for all to see was intimidating and still is. Recently, I was speaking to a friend who is a capital W writer because she has published a book and many articles. I confessed to her I was experiencing a wave of crippling self-doubt whenever I pitched a new publication, and she quipped, "Now you're truly a writer!"

Regardless of the dictionary definition, how we define the term "writer" within the publishing industry is evolving. In 2013, The Writers' Union of Canada (TWUC) began accepting self-published writers, and since then, the popularity of, and respect for, self-publishing has grown. Some traditionally-published writers have even turned to self-publishing to maintain editorial or design control, forgoing the cachet of an established press. Would a first-time author turn down a publishing deal to self-publish or is the boost in reputation too valuable to pass up? Again, these paths of action are determined by your belief of who or what makes you a writer. We compare our validity as writers against the institutions for which we write. If you're a journalist, you'll likely follow up your explanation of career choice with an example of where you published. If you're an unpublished writer, getting accepted by a large house is a sign of ultimate success, as it's assumed it has substantial advances. Nowadays, the line between self-publishers and traditional houses is muddled; there are now hybrid publishers that offer a menu of services writers can choose from when completing a project. Although including self-published writers in TWUC may have created controversy initially, most would argue this is no longer the case.

Earlier this year, TWUC expanded its membership criteria and now offers a points system that rewards published articles, literary prize-winners and creative writing degrees as an accepted avenue for joining. I welcome this update, as it recognizes the various kinds of writers and writing that Canadians produce. And yet, I still don't think I qualify as a writer by TWUC standards, and I cringe at the thought of applying as a book blogger. But, as the space for highlighting our writing expands (into the online realm), so should our definition of writing.



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It's time to embrace these shifts in thinking to your advantage. Do you write daily in a journal? Then you're a writer. Do you have a book-in-progress that may never see the light of day? Then you're a writer. Do you dream of becoming a celebrated author that tours the world reading from your books? Then you're a writer! That editor/literary agent/publishing house will not determine whether you're a writer; the words you place on that page or screen are the only deciding factors. ■

Anne Logan has worked in the Canadian book industry for 11 years as a publicist, literary festival programmer and book reviewer. She is a past president of the Writers' Guild of Alberta and sits on the board of directors for Calgary Reads. As the book columnist for CBC Calgary, she reviews books on air for radio and television. Logan hosts Wordfest's monthly book club. We've Read This, and reviews books on her blog (ivereadthis.com).