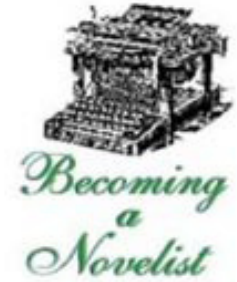




Becoming a Novelist



by
Hollie Snider

People have asked me, “How do I become a novelist?” The answer is easy; hard work. The process is not.

Becoming a novelist is not like becoming a doctor or an accountant. College creates these folks. It does not create the novelist. Sure, you can get a degree or a doctorate in creative writing or the modern novel, but that doesn't make you a novelist. That little scrap of paper does not transform you. You are still an ordinary citizen. So what does? Publication.

An unpublished novelist is about as socially acceptable as a bag lady or, in some areas, a used car salesman. It's not fair, but there it is. Society has determined that novelists, unlike their close kin the nonfiction writer, must not take like seriously, that they write about made-up worlds because they live in them. To avoid the social stigmas, you must have had the honor of publication conferred on you, and no, self-publishing does not count. You cannot bestow the honor upon yourself. The bright side is, just as every chicken was first an egg, each novelist was first an unpublished one. Yep, even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Harlan Ellison had to endure the social stigma, though it may have bothered them less than others.

There are also ways to lessen or even avoid the social stigma all together. The first, don't tell anyone you're writing anything. Personally, while this would avoid the stigma totally, I don't recommend it. It's too hard to write in a dark closet and keep keyboard keys quiet to keep your secret while trying to let your creative side out. You'll only end up frustrated and with a headache.

The second is to tell people you are a writer instead of a novelist. There is a difference in connotation. Writers tend to be nonfiction or dabble in fiction. They are socially acceptable. Novelists write nothing but fiction, and long fiction at that. They are not, as has already been stated. Let people assume you're a nonfiction writer. There are even creative ways to further the assumption. Say you're writing a novel about college students messing with a Ouija board and unleashing a supernatural hell-beast on the campus. If someone asks what you're working on, tell them it is a work on the effect of the occult on college students. Okay, so it's not exactly honest, but at least you won't have people snickering and asking when you're going to get a real job.

A third way, and the most expensive, is to enroll at the local college in an English Literature program. Unless you want the degree, take only the “easy A” classes and lock yourself away from the world with your computer. No one is going to ask any questions because you are a college student and trying to better yourself.

Now, if you don't care about social stigmas, then by all means, tell the world. Any of the above methods will work for dealing with society as a novelist.

Okay, so you have an idea, a typewriter or wordprocessor, perhaps a college degree, a method for dealing

with society and the talent. All the things needed to become a novelist, right? So, why aren't you one?

Let me tell you exactly what the above mean in the publishing world. Squat. Okay, so the degree may be worth a little more than squat, but not much. Being a novelist is more than knowing technique and putting ink on paper. We are all something else besides novelists. But the key is, in our hearts, at the very core of our being, we are novelists. We are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to share our stories with the world. If you are looking for social prestige, wild orgies to participate in or want to work in your underwear, you are not a novelist.

The qualities a doctor needs for success can be listed easily; compassion, wisdom, dedication, a college degree, the list goes on. But if you were asked what qualities a novelist needs, how would they be listed?

A college degree? Nope. Truman Capote, Charles Dickens and Ambrose Bierce never went to college. What about talent? Talent does help, but attend just one writer's conference and you will see there is no shortage of talented people who are novelists. Many untalented novelists have been published, so talent isn't a necessary quality. Often, talent just gets in the way of becoming a novelist. If you have talent, you expect writing a novel to be easy. It isn't. Anyone who tells you it is, is lying.

So then what qualities does a novelist need? Determination, self-discipline and optimism.

Novelists must be determined. They must keep writing and submitting to publishing houses. After working a full eight-hour day, spending time with family, going to the store, the dentist, the bank, whatever, the determined novelist still finds time to write. How? Here's where the self-discipline and sacrifice come in.

A novelist is willing to sacrifice time and energy, emotional and mental, for the sake of his craft. Your favorite television show is on? Record it and watch it later, if you have time. Your goldfish died? Nope, you can't attend the funeral and you can't take time to go buy a new one. Have someone tell you about the funeral later, and send someone else to the store. You actually found a few hours to go to a party because you finished your daily writing goal early and got tanked to the gills? Congratulations! Now you have a hangover and don't feel like writing? Take some aspirin and get back to it. You don't have time to be sick.

Few novelists have a wide circle of friends or an active social life. Why? Because both require time and energy to be taken away from writing the next novel. Social events tend to be writers' conferences, or the local writer's group meetings. Friends tend to be fellow novelists. While this may not hold true for every novelist, it does explain the hermit qualities in many.

Third, the novelist must be the eternal optimist in the face of all adversity. Rejection letters should be turned into wallpaper. Brag about being rejected by the big houses because, "they rejected Stephen King at one time, so at least I'm in good company." Don't look at a critique as someone hated your work. Rather, look at it as a means to improvement and the reader liked it enough to comment, even if the writing does need work. Remember that all readers and editors are your friends. They only have the goal of improving your work and thus sales at heart. Pessimism has killed a great number of would-be novelists.

Finally, don't be fooled by the publicity department. Most novelists lead very dull lives. They rarely go to parties and at the few attended, the wise novelist stays quite and sober (remember the hangover thing?). He knows that each word will be weighed and judged before being ultimately misquoted.

The stories of William Faulkner drinking his way through Hollywood are exceptions, not the rule. Besides, those stories are greatly exaggerated by the biographers. Romanticizing the lives of famous novelists sells more

books.

Being a novelist is hard work, damn hard, and often lonely. It is a constant struggle between your creative powers and your self-doubts. Sometimes words flow out faster than you can type. Other times it's like chipping away at a concrete block with a toothpick. There are times when you read what you've just written and honestly wonder if raising tropical fish wouldn't be a better venture. Other times, it is the most brilliant, wondrous thing you've ever written, beyond your wildest expectations . . . until you give it to your agent or publisher. Wondering about the tropical fish again?

So, why would anyone want to become a novelist? Personally I think we're all crazy or gluttons for punishment? Or maybe, just maybe, it's knowing that, in spite of everything, you've gotten to share your story with the world.



Hollie Snider is the author of "For the Rank of Master," and a founding member of the Colorado Springs Fiction Writer's Group. Visit her website at www.holliesnider.com.