

How to survive between the book deals

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Soon after I became a full-time author 11 years ago, any romantic notions of living the 'literary life' were surgically removed by the scalpel of the monthly bank statement. Book deals with piffling advances take time to set up and even longer to deliver. Although I'd enjoyed a sporadic and unreliable income as a feature writer for a diverse range of magazines, the prospect of an empty fridge and imminent bailiffs soon had me scuffling around for any kind of writing work I could turn my hand to. I discovered that every trade, each corporate vocation, has its own peculiar literature, from the bizarre language of estate agents to the hip histrionics of the music industry.

Although I've managed to satisfy some of my literary ambition by publishing seven books in the past decade, they've done little to keep the wolf from the door. My first work, a World War I naval biography, had a mere £2,000 advance, less my agent's 15%. What remained funded a two-week research trip to Russia. Despite 18 terrific reviews, I haven't seen a penny in royalties. Other publishers' advances may have been better – £7,000 in 2003, £5,000 in 2005, some translation rights sold in 2007, but the holy grail of a royalty cheque seems as remote as ever. Therefore I give thanks to an innate versatility which has earned me the less-than-highbrow designation on my local literary circuit of 'jobbing writer', because without it I would have been bankrupt several times over.

If you're a struggling scribe trying to pay the bills between lack-lustre book deals, you have to remember that you have a precious asset – a way with words. Look at your own background. What are your specialist areas, your enthusiasms? There is a market outside literature – it's hiding in the PR and Advertising sections of your *Yellow Pages*. So, put a leaflet or a brochure together, with a business card. Devise a mailing list, and set out your stall. Leave your card everywhere – especially in the Chamber of Commerce. You should also look at your local District or County Council's various departments. Since 2004 I've had regular work after successfully bidding for a series of *Neighbourhood Renewal Newsletters*. So check out your council's website and printed literature. None of this is easy and you may have to swallow some pride, but if it buys you time to do what you really want to do – write great books – then it's worth a try.

My initial self-promotion resulted in being asked to write some company sales brochures. This led to freelance work for local PR companies, usually on a day-rate. I think I reached a mind-numbing nadir in 2000 spending two days at £120 per day in a local advertising agency's office, writing glowing copy about corrugated roofing. I'll bet Hemingway and Orwell never scraped as deep a barrel. I receive a regular December commission from a company in Derbyshire – their 32-page garden furniture catalogue. The PR agency send me the made-up pages, and I come up with descriptive captions for the pictures. It brings in around £600, but takes the pecuniary pressure off Yuletide. In addition to being a proud member of the Society of Authors, I've retained my membership of the

National Union of Journalists, because each month the NUJ's house journal for freelancers has a column entitled 'The Rate for The Job'. This is usually my starting point for quoting a price for the diverse commercial work which comes my way. But it's not all corrugated roofing and garden gnomes. Some of it can be quite exhilarating.

In the mid-'70s I worked for the classical record label Deutsche Grammophon. I wrote much of my own sales promotional material. When I joined the pop label Polydor, punk broke onto the scene and suddenly I was involved with everyone from the Buzzcocks, the Jam and Sham 69 through to the Bee Gees and Eric Clapton. Every scrap of musical knowledge I absorbed then would keep me afloat decades later.

Today, my specialist subject, US rhythm and blues from the 1940s onwards, is being re-issued via a continuing stream of CD box sets usually accompanied by 8-page, 4,000 word booklets. And that's where I come in. The money isn't brilliant – it's hard to get more than £150 per 1,000 words – but the research is utterly fascinating, my work gets a by-line and a long shelf-life, and a handful of these jobs each year help to top up my income.

By this route I was initiated into the odd enterprise of writing rock'n'roll tour brochures. During the 1980s I wrote several of these colourful, glossy publications and eventually met Ed Bicknell, manager of Dire Straits, who commissioned me to write a programme for Mark Knopfler's offshoot band, the Notting Hillbillies. At £200 per 1,000 words, the price wasn't great – £800 for the finished job. But I'd been recognised. Today, as well as the fee, I also ask for several copies of the work and the best free tickets available for the show (providing it's someone we want to see. Needless to say, I can't be a fan of everyone I write so glowingly about). Over the past few years I've had the privilege of working on three occasions for B. B. King, twice with Andy Williams, several times with the Four Tops and the Temptations, as well as Sir George Martin and numerous acts such as Willie Nelson, Dr Hook, Neil Sedaka, Tony Christie and even Donny Osmond (!) – it's a long list. None of this will make you rich, but it has kept me solvent during some very lean times. In retrospect, being congratulated backstage by Smokey Robinson or B. B. King on my 'fine words' seems to have more kudos than sitting in an empty bookshop, pen in hand, hoping that someone might buy your latest poorly-promoted slab of historical non-fiction.

So this writer's life is nothing like I expected it to be. Naturally, when I look at the books I've managed to write over the past decade I'm proud. One has even sold an underwhelming 8,000 copies, and last year I completed my first novel. So will I ever shake off this 'jobbing writer' tag and be taken seriously?

As long as I'm making a living, I don't care.

ROY BAINTON's most recent non-fiction book is *A Brief History of 1917: Russia's Year of Revolution*, Constable & Robinson.