



THE PROFESSION OF AUTHOR IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Christine Larson Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Journalism
University of Colorado-Boulder

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	3
SECTION I: ABOUT THE SURVEY.....	10
SECTION II: AUTHOR INCOME SNAPSHOT 2017.....	16
SECTION III: CHANGE OVER TIME.....	23
SECTION IV: THE NEW ECONOMY OF PUBLISHING.....	33
SECTION V: THE NEW PROFESSION OF AUTHOR.....	45
SECTION VI: CONCLUSION.....	48

INTRODUCTION

The profession of author is changing. Technology, industry consolidation and other economic forces have transformed the way books are produced, distributed, sold and read. A shrinking number of retailers and major publishers are shifting the market into a “monopsony”—an imbalanced market with only one (or a few) buyer(s). Advances are lower and contracts terms are less favorable to authors. The introduction of e-books and other forces have disrupted the market and driven down book prices. To cut through the clutter, authors must spend more and more of their already-scarce writing time on marketing, promotion and social media.

As a result, the career of full-time professional author has become endangered. Without change, the current course of publishing is likely to yield an impoverished literary world. And while writers have always struggled to make a living, says Authors Guild president Douglas Preston, “In former days, a writer of talent, energy and ideas was fairly sure of making at least a small living; today those writers can’t make a living at all.” As a result of what Preston calls “censorship of the marketplace,” important books may never be written.

“If the writing life is under assault and advances are getting smaller for the books, we need the most, then the world of ideas is compromised,” says Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Richard Russo.

This report explores the state of authorship in America today. Drawing from the largest survey to date of U.S. authors, supplemented by data from other countries and sources, plus in-depth interviews with authors, publishers and industry experts, this paper explains how and why the median book-related income of authors overall has declined in recent years. Among its findings:

- In 2017, more than half (54%) of full-time authors surveyed earned less than the federal poverty threshold of \$12,488 from their writing.
- An alarming 23% of full-time authors reported earning zero income from books in 2017.
- Literary authors saw a 46% drop in their book-related income in just four years, from 2013 to 2017.

At risk, says Russo, are “those hard-won books that take years to research and write, and which are often important to democracy.”

To be sure, these numbers represent only a small portion of today’s authors. And, as with all disruptions, the changes described here offer both opportunities and threats. For instance, digital self-publishing has produced tens of thousands of new authors and books. The number of self-published books [increased 40% between 2017 and 2018](#) alone, to 1.6 million titles, according to Bowker, the agency that issues ISBN numbers. And that number only includes the self-published books that use ISBN numbers—many don’t—so the actual number is likely even higher.

Nevertheless, the figures presented here, combined with interviews and input from dozens of authors, editors and publishers, paint a bleak picture for authors today.

Nearly a century ago, Virginia Woolf explained that serious literary production requires “money and a room of one’s own.” For much of literary history, only those who already had money, as well as leisure and education, could hope to publish. The 20th century created laws and practices, however, that allowed many writers to earn a living, and as a result, an explosion of important books were published—by women, by authors of color and by others once shut out of authorship by financial need. But the changing economy of publishing today means that reliable

income and time—the metaphorical room for writing—are increasingly out of reach for many authors.

The “censorship of the marketplace” that Preston identified is well under way. However, there may still be ways to create a more robust version of authorship in the years ahead. Doing so will take a concerted effort by authors, publishers, legislators, philanthropists and technology companies to recognize and protect the value of books and their creators. Specifically, four parties need to work together to create a more sustainable economy of writing and publishing:

- **Publishers** should work to protect physical bookstores, and to make books available and publicize them through online channels other than Amazon. Such efforts, like Grove Atlantic’s and Electric Literature’s LitHub and the new Bookshop.org online bookstore launching in January 2020, will require ongoing investment on the part of publishers and booksellers. Publishers should also treat authors like true partners by adopting fair contracts and ensuring that authors receive a fair share of their books’ profits, using deep discount royalty reductions sparingly, fighting rampant book piracy and providing robust marketing and publicity support for authors.
- **Legislators** should reconsider how monopsonies are treated under today’s antitrust laws and how the laws are enforced. Reagan-era changes in antitrust law resulted in low prices to consumers, but prices may not be the only way to measure consumer interests. Rather, lawmakers should assess the implications of a single company dominating so many aspects of a significant cultural industry.

Legislators also need to realize that authors desperately need the ability to band together to protect themselves; today’s antitrust laws expose them—not retail monopsonies—to antitrust action for collusion. Authors are treated by law as independent, competing businesses rather than employees, when they are really neither. Congress should enact an exemption to antitrust that allows individual authors and other creators to negotiate collectively in certain situations.

Legislators must also address the fact that online book counterfeiting and online piracy are growing at exponential rates, devaluing authors’ intellectual property. Lawmakers must start treating criminal-level piracy as a real crime by amending the laws to hold service providers who profit from infringement accountable and by appropriating more money for federal criminal copyright enforcement.

- **Authors** should work together, to the extent allowed under antitrust laws, to assess the impact of pricing schemes like Kindle Unlimited, which accustoms readers to books being cheap or free, and thus devalues authors’ labor. They must also continue calling attention to unfair contract terms. For instance, many publishers have started paying royalties on “net proceeds” instead of the list retail price. And publishers increasingly sell books to retailers at deep discounts with dramatically reduced royalties. Recently, the Authors Guild legal team has seen authors’ royalty statements where royalties for more than half of the sales were paid at deep discount or special sales rates. The Authors Guild is working to change publishers’ boilerplate contracts that advance these and other unfair terms.

- **Foundations and philanthropists** must realize good books don't just happen. Literature, like public service journalism, is a public good, a category of product that free markets fail to support. Rethinking and reframing literature and serious nonfiction as a worthy and important cultural cause—akin to the performing or visual arts—would help ensure the continuation of a robust culture of ideas.

All these groups must work together to find solutions to structural inequalities within publishing. As authors earn less from their books, this may disproportionately affect authors of color and other groups that have historically had less access to income, editors and agents.

Making a Living as an Author: What the Numbers Tell Us

“I’m completely convinced I could not have the career I’ve had if I were starting out today,” says James Gleick, author of award-winning, bestselling science books, including *Chaos* and *The Information*. Gleick was one of many authors, publishers and agents interviewed for this report who expressed concern over the nature of authorship today.

Gleick and other authors cited widespread changes in the publishing ecosystem as the cause of authors’ distress. Today, a handful of publishers and retailers control retail book sales. Meanwhile, reader attention is harder to attract and maintain, which means many will read only bestsellers. With far more books published than ever, thanks to self-publishing, the marketplace is more crowded and “discovery”—finding the right book—has become increasingly difficult. In this environment, readers often default to buying only recognized titles or authors. Online buying exacerbates that effect; when readers look for books through an online word search, instead of visually scanning store shelves, only a limited number of choices appears on screen.

At the same time, the decline of local newspapers and other media, as well as the loss of brick-and-mortar booksellers, means there are fewer ways to get the word out—and fewer ways for writers to earn money to complement their book income.

“In the ’80s and ’90s, there was a category of writer who had a full-time job with a magazine and wrote books,” says literary agent Eric Simonoff. “It’s much harder to make a living like that now.”

In the past 15 years, [one in five American newspapers has disappeared](#), according to Penelope Abernathy, a professor at the University of North Carolina. Meanwhile, magazine revenues have plunged [by some 40% in the past decade](#) and writer rates have dropped.

“I don’t think the career of book author and magazine writer exists anymore, because many of the publications don’t exist anymore,” says Melinda Blau, a nonfiction author and journalist who made a living as a writer for more than 20 years.

To be sure, many industries have undergone disruption since the 1990s, and consumer needs and tastes change along with the media—as new forms of media emerge, perhaps books will go the way of typewriters and buggy whips. “You have to take into context the role of the medium in society,” says Morgan Entrekin, president and publisher of Grove Atlantic Books, Inc. “There are probably not as many opera singers making money today. On the other hand, books have held up better than other cultural forms, like music.”

But books are not buggy whips; they remain the most powerful force for distributing influential ideas in our society. As the profession of author changes, so will the types of books that get written—or not.

“Emerging writers now are trying to succeed in a diminished literary world,” says Richard Russo. “There are fewer newspapers, fewer opportunities for book tours.” Even as one

of the most well-known authors in the country, he adds, “I’m not outside the framework of this discussion. Even though I’m one of the blessed, my income is down, too.”

Data from the Authors Guild’s most recent survey support Russo’s observation, as do income trends among authors in the U.K. and Canada.

The figures in this report offer a snapshot of the landscape of authorship today. Section I describes the 2018 survey’s methodology and limitations; Section II takes a deep dive into that survey, which examines respondents’ book and other writing-related incomes in 2017 and 2013.

Section III looks specifically at how book-related income has changed, first over a ten-year period, drawing on data from an earlier survey by the Authors Guild and Codex Group, then over the five-year period covered by the newer 2018 survey, from 2013 to 2017. This section shows that book-related income dropped precariously after the rise of e-books, with the biggest drop—a massive 45% decline in median book-related income—occurring between 2009 and 2014, immediately after the introduction of e-books. The more recent 2018 survey shows that number has continued to fall, dropping 24% between 2013 and 2017.

Section IV looks at the new economy of book publishing and Section V looks at the profession of authorship today. Finally, Section VI calls on legislators, authors, publishers and others to work together to ensure a healthier future for books and authors.

“If your work is so devalued that you turn to something else, it’s the reader, as well as the writer, who loses,” says Russo. “If the life of the artist continues to be diminished, it has broad implications for the role the arts play in the intellectual and cultural life of the nation.”

SECTION I

ABOUT THE SURVEY

It's never been easy to make a living as an author. Writers, like other creative and cultural producers, work in what economist Sherwin Rosen called a “superstar” industry, where a tiny fraction of creators make astronomical incomes and a small handful earn a living, but most can't support themselves and must work day jobs to make ends meet. Given the unique nature of cultural work, then, it's helpful to keep several points in mind when reading this report:

- **Median income is not average.** Because some authors earn vast sums, “average” income is meaningless; the earnings of even one bestselling author would radically distort the numbers. Instead, this report tracks median income—the point where half of respondents earned more, and half earned less.
- **Income is not evenly distributed.** Because authors' incomes vary in the extreme, it's useful to look at how well the top, bottom or middle are doing. For instance, the top 10% of authors had a median book-related income of \$167,500 in 2017 (ranging from \$84,200 to \$9.3 million), while the bottom 20% earned zero. This helps us understand the very different experiences of authors in different parts of the publishing ecosystem.
- **Book income differs from other writing income.** Authors' income might come from books or from other author-related sources, including talks, freelance writing and editing. For clarity, this report spells out which figures are “book-related income”—book

advances, royalties, subsidiary rights, etc.—and which are “writing-related” or “author-related” (we use these terms interchangeably). This includes books and other income related to writing, such as speaking fees. This report does not include other income that authors might earn through non-writing related jobs.

- **Authors are gig workers.** Authorship is not a conventional, salary-paying career with benefits. Few authors (at best, the top 20%) earn a living wage writing full-time; most patch together other forms of income, from teaching to full-time day jobs in a wide variety of fields. People who work in more conventional occupations often find author earnings so low as to be insignificant; but to authors, these earnings make up a personally meaningful part of their income mix. In this way, the profession of authorship is a harbinger of the larger gig economy, where more and more people juggle multiple part-time jobs and contract work and receive no employee benefits.

Methods and Limitations

In the summer of 2018, the Authors Guild worked with research firm Codex Group to conduct an online survey of authors, which they distributed to members of the Authors Guild and 17 other author organizations and publishing platforms. The survey asked 72 questions and included detailed sections on income, demographics, length of publishing career, date and number of books published, type of publishing (traditional, self-published or both) and marketing and other professional practices. As an incentive, participants could enter a drawing for 100 \$50 VISA gift cards. Of 9,288 people who started the survey, 5,067 completed it, although not all completers answered every question. 4,592 people provided income data. (Some questions, such

as income and basic demographic information about the author, had to be completed to proceed with the survey; others, including some income questions, could be skipped.)

In the income section of the survey, authors were asked to recall their earnings from two different years: 2013 and 2017. They were asked about income in 30 different categories, including book-related income, other writing-related income, overall individual income and household income. Not everyone reported book-related income for both years. All information was aggregated, and no personally identifiable data were made available to any organization. Nevertheless, many authors who received the survey expressed concern about providing income information and declined to participate.

Additional Benchmarks

For reference, we have provided figures from other surveys, including a 2008 survey of Authors Guild and PEN members conducted by Roper, a 2014 survey conducted by Codex Group of only Authors Guild members and findings from U.K and Canadian authors' groups. These figures are provided for general context and as evidence of overall trends, but they are not directly comparable to the 2018 survey, or to each other, due to differing methodologies and sample makeup. However, these benchmarks are all consistent with the overall story told by the most recent data, including the fact that authors are struggling, and have seen large declines in writing income since the rise of e-books.

Data Considerations

The figures presented in this report represent the largest and most thorough data ever collected on authors' incomes in the U.S. However, like all data, these are necessarily imperfect.

Specific limitations include:

- **Self-reported income.** When people are asked to recall and report their income, several issues may occur: the figures might be inflated (if people are embarrassed by how little they earned), deflated (if they're embarrassed by how much), or simply inaccurately recalled.
- **Variation among authors.** Not all authors are the same. The life, career and income prospects of literary fiction writers, nonfiction writers, academic writers, genre fiction writers and others vary a great deal. This is particularly true since the rise of self-publishing. The sections that follow tease out some of these differences, explain them and show implications for the book industry; however, it is important to remember that authorial careers and incomes vary widely.
- **Fat and lean years.** Authors may receive an advance for a book that will take them several years to write, or that pays them for more than one book. This means that having zero book-related income for a given year does not necessarily mean authors are receiving no pay for their writing.

- **Representativeness.** These figures represent only authors who responded to the survey, not all authors in the U.S. The survey targeted professional authors—those who depend on books and writing for most of their living over an extended period of time. Thus, respondents may be more likely than other authors to be published by traditional houses, to have longer publishing careers, and to be older or more established writers (the average age of respondent was 57). Because the survey was fielded by the Authors Guild and distributed primarily through author groups (although it was also distributed through some self-publishing platforms), the survey may overrepresent those who are likely to join professional associations (although 25% of respondents said they belonged to no writing organization). Among the total 5,067 respondents, a high percentage identified themselves as women (66%), and 86% of those reporting a racial identity self-described themselves as white (of other groups reporting race, the largest percentage was African American, at 2.7%). This may misrepresent the overall author landscape.

Despite these limitations, these are the best, most recent and most extensive data available about authors' incomes in America today. Further, the trend of declining income reflects similar trends in the U.K. and Canada, suggesting that despite differing methodologies, populations and categories of authors, there seems to be an overarching downward trend in income for authors.

Interviews

To add context to the survey data, input was solicited from the Authors Guild Council and Authors Guild Foundation board of directors before the survey. Afterward, 14 interviews

were conducted with editors, authors, publishers and agents. In the interest of space, this paper quotes only some of those sources; however, all contributed valuable insight to the report.

SECTION II

AUTHOR INCOME SNAPSHOT 2017: BOOKS AND OTHER WRITING-RELATED INCOME

4,592 authors reported writing-related income for 2017; among them, 25% reported zero income from either books or other author-related sources. Alarming, about 18% of authors who identify as “full-time” also reported zero author-related income, and 23% of those full-time authors reported zero book-income. Those who did report *any* income—even \$1—from books or other writing-related activities, such as public speaking or editing, showed the following income trends:

- For all authors who earned income, including full and part-time, the median “writing-related” income (which includes book income and other income related to writing, such as freelancing or editing) was \$6,080 (including only authors who reported income); of that, just \$2,560 came from books.
- For “full-time authors” who earned any income (excluding those who earned zero income), the median writing-related income was \$20,300, of which book-related income was \$11,900. These full-time authors contributed 48% of their household’s total income in 2017.
- For reference, a similar survey sponsored by the Authors Guild and PEN in 2008 showed that respondents earned a median writing-related income of \$15,307, adjusted to 2017

dollars (\$11,073 for book-related income, and \$4,234 for other writing-related income). See section V for more details.

- A survey conducted by the Authors Guild in 2015 showed a 45% drop in book-related income between 2009 and 2014. The two surveys mentioned here used different author samples than the current survey, and are not statistically comparable to each other or the current survey: However, taken together, these studies show that authors are struggling, and that income has been declining for the past decade.

Authors Contribute Significantly to Their Household

To those outside the writing community, these numbers may sound shockingly small, even bearing in mind that half of authors earn more than these median sums. Nevertheless, this money contributed significantly to authors' individual and household income. Even in self-publishing, with its very low median income, earning anything at all can be helpful to a writer's bottom line—and, perhaps even more importantly, to his or her sense of professional identity.

For all participating published authors with some writing income in 2017, books brought in roughly 15% of their personal income, while other author-related work brought in 21%. Overall, 64% of authors' income came from other, non-writing related work. Clearly, few authors can support themselves on their writing.

Perhaps most disturbingly, however, even those who call themselves “full-time” authors are not depending on writing for their income in many cases:

- In 2017, 54% of full-time authors earned less than the federal poverty level.

- In 2017, 23% of full-time published authors had no book income and 18% had no author-related income.
- Only 57% of full-time published authors derived 100% of their *individual* income from their writing-related work, including books, in 2017.
- Only 20% of full-time published authors derived 100% of *their total household* income from their writing-related work in 2017.

Who Did Best?

Publishing is a “winner take all” game, where a handful of bestselling authors earn outsized sums. In 2017, the top 10% of all authors in the survey who reported income (including zero income) earned a median of \$167,500 (within that top tier, income ranged from \$83,400 to \$9.3 million). The second highest 10% earned a median of \$50,000 (ranging from about \$32,715 to \$84,200). The remaining 80% of authors earned less than what most people would consider a viable income.

In important ways, writing income today resembles the current economy, where the rich are getting richer and all others are earning less. In fact, those authors in our survey who self-identified as full-time published authors saw an increase in median book-related income of 15%. Almost all others experienced a drop in income, particularly literary authors, whose median book-related income drop 46% between 2013 and 2017.

Unfortunately, this state of affairs leaves little scope for developing authors or those writing important books that have less market appeal than popular entertainment fiction.

Authors' Writing Time Is Shrinking

As authors' income has fallen, so has their time available for writing. More than 90% of authors reported spending time marketing their books—whether they were traditionally or self-published. On average, authors spent 25% of their working time on marketing, or an average of 7.5 hours—one full workday—per week promoting their books. That was up nearly an hour from 6.6 hours in 2013. Perhaps not surprisingly, self-published authors spent nearly twice as much time promoting their books as did traditionally published authors.

In one way, the internet has been a huge boon to authors, opening up opportunities to promote their own books—something traditional publishers often fall short on. “One thing I’m constantly surprised by is how entrenched publishers are in the way they’ve always done things,” says C.J. Lyons, author of 44 books. But authors’ newfound ability to promote themselves comes at a cost, she adds. “The author should be spending her time and energy writing the next book and making it so wonderful the reader jumps for joy.”

Writing is a zero-sum game when it comes to time. Every hour spent on other income-earning activities, or on book marketing and promotion, is an hour not spent writing. And the pressure to promote online is high.

“When my book *Consequential Strangers* came out in 2009, I was convinced, in part because of my agent’s and publisher’s urging, that I could make it a bestseller if I just put enough time in with social media,” says Melinda Blau, author, journalist and co-writer of *Secrets of the Baby Whisperer*, a bestselling parenting book. “But it’s like an addiction. You can spend your whole life doing this. I was driving myself crazy.”

As early 20th-century journalist and author Mary Heaton Vorse put it, writing is the art of “applying the seat of one’s pants to the seat of one’s chair.” For most writers, the more time

spent writing, the more books get written. Thus, the loss of writers' time, whether to social media or day jobs, represents fewer stories being told, especially those stories requiring intense research, writing and rewriting.

“There are really good books still being published,” Gleick says. “But not the kind of books that require years of full-time work. When people have to support themselves in other ways, they don't have as much time to write. That's profoundly regrettable for the culture, because those kinds of books have a tremendous value.”

The Plight of the Midlist Author

Those who suffer most from changes in the industry are those in the middle. Bestselling authors may see their income decline, but they're still earning a living. Those at the very bottom don't earn enough for even large variations percentage-wise to make much difference. But life has changed dramatically for those in the middle, who often include literary authors.

Katharine Weber, a literary novelist, for instance, has yet to write a blockbuster bestseller. But her seven novels have sometimes brought six-figure advances, and many have won rave reviews from major publications. For more than two decades, she'd been able to create a comfortable writing life, supplemented by her teaching jobs at prestigious universities. Then came her last book—which brought an advance of just \$2,000 from a small publisher.

“There I was, a midlist literary novelist with reviews in *The New York Times* and shortlisted for major awards, but I could not find a home for my new book to save my life,” she says.

Of course, Weber wouldn't be the first established author to be dropped by publishers or have difficulty selling something new. But this was no ordinary manuscript. When the book

finally came out, it won stellar reviews. *The Washington Post* called the book “beautifully wrought” and “luminous” and *The New York Times* called it “profoundly humane.” Based on her own experiences, Weber believes that midlist writers may be an endangered species.

“I feel I’m at the end of a tradition, the last of my kind,” she says.

To be fair, writers and publishers have been bemoaning the decline of the midlist author since the 1980s and perhaps earlier. But with only the top 20% of authors earning a living wage from their writing, that loss seems to have accelerated. Many Authors Guild members have shared similar stories of shrinking advances and disappearing loyalty—as well as royalties—from their publishers.

“I started in this business in 1977 and there was a very lively market for a kind of midlist fiction, a commercial writer writing historical novels or women’s fiction,” says Morgan Entrekin of Grove Atlantic. “You could probably make a decent living and sell 20–60,000 copies, in a combination of hardcover and paperback. You could write a book every year and a half. That’s the part of the business that’s most eroded.”

As a result of this change, promising writers may not have the time they need to incubate their careers, says Entrekin. In part, that’s because the pressure for big bestsellers has increased as the book market has been consumed by just five multi-national publishing companies.

“In the old days, if you were Ann Beattie or John Irving or Richard Ford, no one expected your first book to sell 100,000 copies. Today, it’s harder to publish serious midlist books at corporate imprints,” says Entrekin. “A book that is going to sell 8–10,000 copies in hardcover and maybe 1,500 digitally generates maybe \$125,000. That’s not enough revenue to crank up the publicity machine.”

Successful authors today still need time to incubate their books and need ways to support

themselves as they learn their craft. “I never made much money from my first three books,” says Tayari Jones, acclaimed author of *An American Marriage*, in an interview with [The Cut](#). For years, she supported herself through university teaching—and intends to continue, despite her enormous success. “I’m keeping my day job forever,” Jones says.

To some extent, literary authors like Jones, whose bestseller deals with the impact of racism and mass incarceration, have been protected from the worst of this midlist decline, because an explosion in the number of creative writing and MFA programs in the past few decades created a demand for literary writing teachers. The best of those jobs allow writers time for their creative work. And yet, teaching still leaves authors less time to do what they need to do—put words on the page.

Brighter Spots

Of course, not all sectors are suffering equally. In fact, advances and income seem to be up for authors of romance or romantic suspense, in part because self-publishing has allowed romance writers to reach their voracious readers more quickly and to break out of conventions imposed by the publishing industry. And authors who have broken through—those who still write full-time and earned some income in both 2013 and 2017—have seen an increase of 15% in book-related income in that period (this followed a large drop between 2009 and 2014). But while their income is up, many of these full-time, income-earning authors say their job feels more precarious, and includes more publicity and social media than in the past. This all indicates that the new economy of publishing favors certain kinds of skills and certain kinds of authors over others—with serious implications for the kinds of stories our culture will read in the future.

SECTION III

CHANGE OVER TIME

The data highlighted in this report show how difficult it is for most writers to make a living under current conditions. But is it any worse than in the past? Most of the data say yes.

The Authors Guild has conducted author income studies since 2008. However, due to a change in methodology in 2015, the current figures are not statistically comparable to earlier findings. Nevertheless, the earlier figures represent the best data available for even a ballpark assessment of the long-term change in writers' income. In order to balance the need to assess income changes over time, and the need for statistical rigor, this report analyzes the numbers in two ways.

First, the following section provides statistics from Authors Guild studies in 2008 and 2015, as general, common-sense indicators of overall trends, along with caveats about how the data differ from the 2018 study.

Next, the section that follows provides a statistically rigorous analysis from 2013 to 2017, looking only at authors who had already published books by 2013, and who furnished non-zero income data for either 2013 or 2017 or both (a group that included 2,369 authors). This gives us snapshot of how income-earning, published authors fared over a five-year period, from 2013 to 2017.

PEN/Authors Guild 2008 Survey

In 2008, Roper conducted a poll of Authors Guild and PEN members. 1,085 authors responded, providing detailed income figures for their 2007 income. This survey differed from

the most recent 2018 survey in that it surveyed members of only two author groups (PEN and the Authors Guild), rather than the 18 groups included in the 2018 Authors Guild survey. Both surveys asked about respondents' net individual and household income, and their income from books and from other writing-related income, such as editing, speaking, freelance writing, etc.

Disparities in respondent demographics, as well as changes in the publishing industry, may account for differences in reported income across these surveys. Although respondents to both surveys had an average age of 57, they differed in gender, race and educational attainment. In 2008, 60% of respondents were women (compared to 66% in 2018), 93% were white (compared to 90% in 2018) and 55% had an advanced degree (compared with 61% in 2018).

Despite these caveats, the 2008 survey offers a useful common-sense benchmark for a ten-year time frame. In that survey (which reports 2007 income), respondents had a median book-related income of \$11,940 (adjusted to 2017 dollars); the 2018 survey (which reports 2017 income) found a much lower median book related income of \$2,560 ten years later. Other writing-related income in the two surveys did not differ; in the 2008 survey, respondents reported a median writing-related, non-book income of \$4,233 (adjusted to 2017 dollars), compared to \$4,000 in the 2018 survey.

Authors Guild 2015 Survey

In 2015, the Authors Guild conducted another study using a new methodology, in which respondents were asked to report income for two years—2009 and 2014, the five-year period when e-book adoption accelerated. That study found that for all authors, book-related income was down 45%. Full-time authors saw a 36% drop in their income, while part-time authors experienced a 58% decline (2009 figures adjusted to 2014 dollars).

Other Author Organization Surveys

The Writers' Union of Canada found that Canadian authors' net income dropped 43% between 1998 and 2017; likewise, the U.K.'s Authors Licensing and Collecting Society showed a 42% drop in authors' median income from writing and books between 2005 and 2017.

So, while the 2008 and 2015 Authors Guild surveys provide only a ballpark range of what authors made, taken in context with other research, the long-term trend of declining income seems clear. Authors Guild data indicate the steepest decline occurred in the immediate wake of e-books, from 2009 to 2014, with shallower, but still significant, drops in the past few years.

Change in Author Income, 2013–2017

For a deeper analysis of the trends indicated by other research, the following section presents a statistically rigorous comparison of a group of 2,369 authors from the 2018 survey. To judge how “established authors” did during this period of time, the set includes only authors who were already published by 2013, and they reported at least \$1 of book income for either 2013 or 2017 or both (in other words, those reporting zero income for both years were excluded). Including only authors who were published and earning income by 2013 allowed us to identify long-term authors who had some success and longevity in publishing; excluding those who earned no income in either 2013 or 2017 restricted the group to actively publishing authors.

This methodology, however, leaves out a substantial portion of respondents, because 43% of respondents who had published in or before 2013 reported zero income in 2017, and 33% did so for 2013. This comparison, then, looks at 2,369 fairly successful writers over four years; the change over time would be even more stark for a larger set of less established authors.

Median Income Down 24% Overall Since 2013, but Up for Full-Time Authors

Authors who reported book-related earnings in 2017 saw a 24% decrease in median income compared to income-earning authors in 2013, with a drop from \$4,104 to \$3,100. But the opposite was true for full-time authors (roughly half the 2017 sample); their median book-related income grew to \$15,700, up 15% from 2013.

Table 1: Median Book-Related Income, 2013–2017

Type of Author	2013 Median	2017 Median	Percent Change
All respondents reporting income for either 2013 or 2017 or both years (n=2,369)	\$4,104	\$3,100	-24%
Full-time published authors (n=1,099)	\$13,679	\$15,700	+15%
Traditionally published only (both full-time and part-time) (n=1,077)	\$5,208	\$3,360	-35%
Self-published only (both full-time and part-time) (n=513)	\$1,052	\$1,951	+85%
Hybrid (both traditionally and self-published, both full-time and part-time) (n=779)	\$5,051	\$3,961	-22%

These may seem like negligible sums; however, most authors do not depend on writing for their entire income. Even many respondents who identify as “full-time” authors of necessity work additional hours at more lucrative and stable jobs, such as teaching. These figures include

only book-related income, excluding income from public speaking, editing, teaching or other writing-related activities. They also exclude those who earned no writing-related income in those years, indicating that some authors may have been forced to find other work.

What is clear is that *only* those whose full-time occupation is writing (presumably, the most successful and established of authors) have seen their book-related income grow since 2013; those earning too little to quit their day jobs are finding their authorial efforts paying less. This raises concern about the ability of aspiring writers to stick with the craft long enough to see their efforts pay off. Without a pipeline of developing writers with the time and space to mature their work, many stories may never be told.

“When I started out, the world was open to me,” says Sylvia Day, author of more than 20 novels, including top bestsellers in 28 countries. “A lot of my writing friends, when we were starting out, knew if we just stayed with the writing long enough, and wrote a good enough book, and got enough publisher support, that we could make a living. Looking at the industry now, it’s a very different and more difficult proposition.”

Income Down Most for Literary Writers

Income decreased for most types of writer in our survey, but literary authors and commercial nonfiction authors saw double digit declines; trade fiction dropped just 5%. This trend raises enormous cultural concerns because literary fiction and deeply researched nonfiction may take many years to write and often make a lasting impression on society.

Table 2: 2017 Median Book-Related Income by Genre

Authors (2017)	2013 Median	2017 Median	Percent Change
Literary fiction (n=364)	\$2,780	\$1,500	-46%
Commercial nonfiction (n=442)	\$4,682	\$2,950	-37%
Trade fiction (n=1,385)	\$5,159	\$4,912	-5%

Income Down for Traditionally Published Authors; Up for Self-Published Authors, but They Don't Earn Much

Traditionally published authors earned a higher median income (\$3,360) than self-published authors (\$1,951) or hybrid authors (who do both). But traditionally published authors' income declined 35%, down from \$5,208 in 2013, while self-published income climbed 85%, albeit from a much lower median income of \$1,052.

In other words, self-publishing is a rapidly growing, but still small, source of income for most writers—although some authors, particularly romance writers, have done extremely well in this area.

“For the most part, I make ten times more a month on my self-published books than my traditionally published books,” says C.J. Lyons. “Basically, one month of self-publishing is worth a year of traditional publishing.” Unlike Lyons, most authors in this survey weren't making much from self-publishing, but more than half of survey respondents were trying it in addition to their traditional publishing ventures.

The fact that traditionally published authors earned decreasing incomes where self-published authors saw increases might simply be interpreted as a shift in the market. However, the fact that self-publishing pays a far lower median income than traditional publishing indicates

some of the problems with this assumption. Self-publishing represents a different business model where writers sell directly to readers and take on most or all of the tasks of publishers—from editing and proofreading to cover design to marketing. A market where authors depend more on self-publishing for their income would favor non-writing skills and investing in non-writing time, which could diminish the quality of some books. Amazon has been quoted saying that in 2018 “thousands” of authors earned more than \$50,000 through self-publishing on Amazon, and more than 1,000 authors earned more than \$100,000.

Who Makes a Living? Distribution of Income

The book business depends on blockbuster bestsellers to make a profit. Not surprisingly, then, authors at the top earn vastly more than those in the middle or bottom. This raises important questions about income distribution for authors in the digital era. Are the rich getting richer? Or are they suffering too?

In 2017, the top 10% of authors in our comparison group of 2,369 authors reported a median income of \$213,000. The second 10% earned a median of \$59,672. Only the top two tiers earned anything approaching a living wage; the bottom 10% had a median income of \$35.

But what happened to these slices between 2013 and 2017? The median income of the top tier dropped about 15%, while those in the middle saw a 24% decline and those at the bottom a 46% drop. Everyone declined, but those at the top saw less change.

Authors of Color Earn Less

The publishing industry has a race problem. According to a survey of 153 U.S.

companies involved in publishing, including all of the Big 5, conducted by publisher [Lee and Low](#), some 85% of editors are white. Publishing houses are aware of the problem and working to bring in more editors of color, but change has been slow. “We can’t have a business as white as this. It’s not sustainable,” says Michael Pietsch, CEO of Hachette Book Group. “We need to speak to a multiplicity of Americans. It’s an ethical imperative.”

Mirroring much of the industry, survey respondents were overwhelmingly white. Among all 5,067 survey respondents, 86% of survey respondents who provided a racial identity were white. That lack of diversity was even more stark within the income-comparison set (those 2,369 established authors who provided income data for one or both years). Within that group, 1,948 respondents provided a racial identity; of that, just 5% were authors of color (including black/African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American or mixed).

For all respondents in the income-comparison group who provided a racial identity, median income dropped 29% between 2013 and 2017. Within that group, a large racial wage gap existed. In 2017, the median income of authors of color (\$1,500) was just 51% of that of white authors (\$2,950). That was an even larger gap than in 2013, when authors of color earned a median income of \$2,418, which was 58% of white authors’ median income of \$4,172. Between 2013 and 2017, authors of color saw a 38% drop in median income, while white authors saw a smaller, 29% drop.

The gap in income between authors of color and white authors represents not only a social injustice, but a threat to a robust and diverse culture of ideas, a racialized censorship of the marketplace. “Sometimes the voices that struggle the most to get heard are trying to tell us something we very badly need to hear. Those are the voices that often get stilled first,” says Russo. “If those books don’t get written, we are less for it.”

Table 3: Median Book-Related Income by Race

Authors Published in or Prior to 2013 Reporting Non-Zero Income in One or Both Years	2013*	2017	Percent Change
All racial identity respondents (n=1,948)**	\$4,172	\$2,950	-29%
White (n=1,846)	\$4,172	\$2,950	-29%
Black/African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American or mixed (n=102)	\$2,418	\$1,500	-38%

**2013 dollars adjusted for inflation.*

***The two groups “declared categorized racial identity” and “declared white” happened to have identical median book-related incomes for both years due to the combined facts that “white” authors made up 95% of the total sub-sample, and groups of respondents in both populations clustered (n=25) at these identical income points in the two respective years.*

Other Data Support These Trends

The data in this survey are necessarily imperfect. As noted, all self-reported income is questionable; the survey likely overrepresents older, female and white authors; and the comparison data set excludes authors who started publishing after 2013 or who earned no income in 2013 and 2017.

Nevertheless, these are the most thorough data existing on author incomes in the U.S. “What this survey was able to discover, for all its limitations, is the tip of the iceberg,” says James Gleick. “There is a serious problem for authorship in this country.”

That problem seems to extend beyond the U.S, and beyond the time period considered here. Other recent surveys mentioned here, including the last Authors Guild survey in 2015, support these findings. Specifically:

- The 2015 Authors Guild survey showed that respondents' median book-related income plunged 45% between 2009 and 2014, from \$6,250 to \$3,750 (adjusted for inflation).
- In Canada, authors' overall income (not just from books) dropped 30%, from \$13,390 in 2014 to \$9,380 in 2017.
- During the longer period from 1998 to 2014, Canadian authors' income fell 43%.
- In the U.K., authors' income dropped 15% from 2013 to 2017, from the equivalent of \$16,028 to \$13,591.

While these studies all used different methodologies, and so are not statistically comparable to each other, they all indicate a significant drop in authors' income, except for specific types of authors or kinds of publishing. There is no disputing the fact that the profession of authorship is changing, favoring new skills and devaluing others, with implications for the kinds of books our culture supports.

SECTION IV

THE NEW ECONOMY OF PUBLISHING

Authors in 2019 must navigate an industry full of contradictions. Writers have more ways to publish than ever, but many find it harder to earn a living. It's often easier for agents to sell a first novel by a brand-new author than a third or fourth book by a well-reviewed writer. The large publishers no longer spread the pool of money available for advances among many promising midlist authors but provide massive advances to a few celebrity “sure thing” books and minimal advances to most others. (For a vivid first-person account of the contradictions of publishing, see [Heather Demetrios' essay, “How to Lose a Third of a Million Dollars Without Really Trying”](#).)

At the same time, many smaller and scholarly publishers are paying royalties as a percentage of net proceeds instead of list price. This results in effectively half the royalty the author would receive on a list-price basis since retailers generally pay the publisher half or less of the list price. As noted, the Authors Guild legal services team has seen an increase in the use of special low rates (a half or so of the normal rate) for deeply discounted sales and “special sales,” resulting in drastically reduced overall royalties. In short, the rules of the game are less clear than ever, and they're changing all the time.

It's easy to blame the digitization of books and the role of tech companies for authors' increasingly uncertain fortunes. And indeed, technology has played a large and visible role in the difficulties authors face now. However, the current plight of authors did not develop overnight, with the arrival of a digital disruption. Rather, it rose from decades of change in the book industry, starting with the consolidation and globalization of publishing, continuing with the

decline of local media, and culminating with the direct intervention of technology companies in book publishing, especially the 2007 introduction of the Kindle. These three forces have all changed the profession of author in the digital age.

The Old Economy of Publishing

Throughout the 20th century, the business chain of publishing remained surprisingly consistent. Manuscripts went from author to literary agent, to publisher, to printer, to book distributors, to retailers, and, finally, to readers. In fact, book historian Robert Darnton writes that much of this chain (minus the agents) held true throughout all of book publishing history. Most authors had, and have, essentially no influence on how their books are marketed and sold, or anything else that happens to their book once the manuscript is approved. Traditional publishing today remains a business-to-business industry; big publishers are in the business of selling books to major book retailers, not readers. For authors, this reality has always been disheartening, which is one reason why self-publishing has proven attractive.

“It’s quite disappointing to understand that New York has this business-to-business attitude,” says C.J. Lyons. Her publisher cancelled her first book shortly before its release because big retailers didn’t like the cover art (neither did Lyons—she and her agent had been lobbying against it for months).

The business-to-business emphasis of modern publishing increased as publishing changed from a genteel and sleepy trade in the early 20th century, where a large number of small publishing houses each focused on a small stable of authors, to an industry of multinational conglomerates. Between 1985 and 2019, the number of major U.S. commercial (or “trade”)

publishers dropped from 12 to just five multinational corporations (Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster).

The domination of the book industry by corporate conglomerates increased pressure on publishers to turn faster profits—which meant a greater emphasis on promoting new titles, and less attention to the slower-selling backlist of books already in print. In 1998, 198,000 new titles were published; by 2010, that number was 316,000, writes media scholar John B. Thompson in his book *Merchants of Culture*. In 2015, there were 339,000 new titles published in the U.S., according to the [International Publishers Association](#). That doesn't include the millions of self-published books now produced every year in the U.S.

More Books, but Not Readers

At first blush, the increase in books published sounds like an ideal situation for authors. Unfortunately, consumers aren't reading more books. In 2017, only about 53% of Americans read a book that wasn't for work or school, down from about 57% in 2002; only about 42% of Americans read a novel, according to the National Endowment for the Arts. More books without more readers means lower sales for most authors.

“When I started out, a midlist title was moving 100,000 copies. That was not unrealistic to aspire to,” says Sylvia Day, speaking of romance and other popular titles. “Today, when you say a book has a 100,000-print run, that's a bestseller.”

“The bottom has gotten a lot lower,” agrees literary agent Eric Simonoff. That's true for serious literary fiction, as well as popular commercial fiction. “When I started in 1989, if you published a good, serious novel from a reputable house, the baseline for hardcovers was 5–7,000 copies. Now you can get a six-figure advance and sell just 500 hardcovers.”

Playing Monopsony

Another factor affecting author income is the publisher/bookseller relationship.

Publishers claim they have less power now to negotiate good deals with booksellers, because they have fewer and fewer customers—that is, booksellers and wholesalers—for their wares.

“In retailing, we’re entering an age of monopsony, where the buyer has all the leverage,” says Dominique Raccah, CEO and publisher of Sourcebooks, one of the top ten publishers in the U.S. “Each of our sales channels is essentially a monopoly to that particular channel, which creates a lack of competition in every sales category.”

Today, about half of publishers’ sales come from Amazon, and another 30% from a handful of other customers, including Barnes and Noble and two large book wholesalers, Ingram and Readerlink Distribution, which distribute to Costco and Walmart. While the retail market as a whole isn’t controlled by a single dominant player and so is not technically a monopsony, particular book marketplaces (e.g., online buying, bookstore chains) are. Publishers say these few customers exercise outsized power in their given marketplaces, holding de facto monopsony power within those markets.

In 2014, for instance, when Hachette tried to get a better deal from Amazon, the online bookseller delayed orders of Hachette titles, causing many titles published in that period to lose their markets right out of the gate. Publishers say they can’t negotiate good deals and reasonable profit margins, a reality which translates into smaller advances for many authors.

“The simplest way to say this is that Amazon is mercilessly squeezing publishers’ margins,” says author James Gleick. “A part of our culture that is important to preserve is being unnecessarily pressured by the tech industry.”

Richard Russo observes that in journalism, music and other forms of media, profits have largely shifted from people and companies who create content to those who deliver it, including Google, Facebook and social media companies as well as Amazon. “First these companies devalue the content, then get a monopoly on it, then take more than their fair share,” he says.

With lower profit margins, a more crowded market and no additional readers, book publishing revenues have stalled. “Business has been flat for five years,” says Michael Pietsch, CEO of Hachette Book Group. In 2003, the industry generated \$27 billion; In 2017, revenues were 3% lower, at \$26.2 billion, according to the Association of American Publishers.

In this environment, publishers are competing harder than ever for that elusive product, the sure-fire bestseller, paying multi-million-dollar advances to celebrities from Michelle Obama to Amy Schumer. They’re also paying top dollar for hot, first-time novelists with no track record to hold against them. With sales data more readily available than in the past, says Morgan Entrekin of Grove Atlantic, “It’s easier in some ways to sell a new book, instead of the fourth book by this author.” The outcome for authors: a shorter runway for success, and fewer chances for a long, steady career with a traditional publisher.

Despite high profile, but rare, bidding wars for first-time authors, most writers report very modest advances and royalties—which have declined since 2013. The Authors Guild survey found that median royalties for authors overall had dropped about 11%, from \$2,997 to \$2,670.

“The model for an author’s career used to be that you’d establish yourself with two or three books, then have a breakout novel. Today that model has been turned on its head,” says Entrekin.

Books and the Attention Economy

None of these forces—industry consolidation, the decline of bookstores, the plight of the midlist author—are new. But combined with the rise of new technologies in the last decade, these long-term trends suddenly accelerated. Even before e-books took off between 2007 and 2010, the internet and changing advertising models had radically altered the ways that Americans learn about new books. The gutting of local American newspapers, which once supported local book reviewers around the country, has made book marketing and publicity significantly more difficult, at the same time that many more media vie for consumer attention.

“One of the impacts of the rise of digital culture is the loss of a lot of local media—newspapers, magazines, places that employed people to read books and talk about them,” says Pietsch. “These were especially important for books that sell through enthusiasm. There are fewer places for that to manifest.”

Many local outlets still run reviews, but rather than writing their own accounts, they simply reprint reviews from other media, says author Katharine Weber. “You can’t quote the same review four times” in publicity materials, she notes. As a result, it’s harder for books to generate a grassroots swell of enthusiasm.

This new world, of fewer media outlets, and fewer bookstores where enthusiastic clerks talk up books to customers, has only increased the pressure to find and promote blockbusters. “The only place that retail has grown is bestsellers,” says Pietsch. “Books that manage to catch the nation’s attention sell more copies now. But it’s harder to catch attention.” The surge in new media competing for consumers’ attention has also made it more difficult to break through the clutter and promote titles. “This situation is difficult for what we call the ‘quiet book,’” says Eric Simonoff.

This reality has exacerbated a long-term trend plaguing midlist authors—the fact that many books receive only tiny marketing budgets from their publishers.

“I once asked a publisher why the bottom third of the list is utterly ignored by publishers,” says Simonoff. “He said that when a publisher acquires a book, only a small number of people have read it. Over the next long, slow 12 months, many more people within the publisher will read it, and there’s a process where some people get excited, and certain titles rise.” To a multinational corporation, the cost of acquiring a non-blockbuster manuscript, which might sell for a few thousand up to \$100–200,000, is a negligible investment, he says. That means the publisher can place many inexpensive “bets” early in the process, acquiring books, then only supporting those that generate in-house excitement. “The stakes of greenlighting a project are very low,” says Simonoff.

The Rise of E-Books

Amidst this landscape of multinational conglomeration, growing pressure for profits, fewer retailers and fragmented reader attention, e-books suddenly burst on the scene, fundamentally disrupting the long-standing publishing chain.

In 2007, when Amazon introduced the Kindle, e-book sales represented less than 1% of the book market. Today e-book sales make up about 35% of unit sales, according to the latest ongoing survey of book buyers conducted by Codex Group (May 2019)—and Amazon sells the vast majority of those e-books. In May 2019, a Codex Group survey of some 4,000 book buyers showed that 77% of all new books purchased online (whether print or e-book) were sold at Amazon (and 80% of all e-books were purchased there).

For authors, e-books presented tremendous new opportunities, such as self-publishing and new markets, but the introduction of the Kindle, along with online physical book buying, also precipitated a devaluing of books overall. From its earliest days, Amazon sold physical books at deep discounts to attract consumers. When it launched the Kindle in 2007, it set e-book prices artificially low, at \$9.99, training consumers to expect that price. By the time e-books shifted to the “agency model,” where publishers set prices, rather than Amazon, it was too late; readers were not prepared to pay higher prices for e-books. According to Codex Group, today, Amazon seems committed to pushing prices for self-published books to \$4.99.

Along the way, publishers themselves dropped e-book royalty rates to authors, from an initial 35–50%, down to 25% of net receipts. As a result, authors earn far less on e-books than on hardcovers, unless they’re self-published.

“Amazon has aided and transformed the business in amazing ways. It’s made books immediately available that no physical bookstore stocked. It built an e-book business that didn’t exist before. They’ve taken a lot of inefficiency out of the business and should be appreciated for that,” says Pietsch. “They’ve also created a vast, parallel market of very low-cost self-published books, many of them of very low quality.”

At the same time, Amazon has put its unprecedented marketing power behind its own books, competing with major publishers. Amazon now operates 16 book imprints, and has recently started luring big name authors like Dean Koontz to publish with them. “To some in the industry, it is an inherently conflicted structure, in which the most powerful retailer has a competing incentive to favor books it publishes,” explained *The Wall Street Journal*’s Jeffrey Trachtenberg in January 2019.

Digital Self-Publishing

For publishers, e-books brought lower production costs (by eliminating printing) and created new models of pricing and distribution. But for many authors, the most significant change has been the rise of digital self-publishing. Suddenly, authors no longer needed a gatekeeper to greenlight a book. They could do it all themselves—provided they were willing to put in the hard work of editing, cover design, marketing and promotion. Starting in 2010, both Amazon and Apple began paying authors 70% of each sale for self-published books—dramatically more than what authors might get from a traditional publisher. (Amazon, however, provides the 70% royalty—as opposed to a 35% royalty—only if certain conditions are met, most notably keeping the price between \$2.99 and \$9.99.) Many traditional authors have since gone “hybrid”—publishing some books with traditional New York publishers, and releasing one or more books on their own. Indeed, over half the respondents in the study had self-published at least one book, and 77% of those self-published through Amazon.

“Most of us become writers because we want to share stories with an audience, and this is a time when everyone can do that,” says C.J. Lyons, who has published both with traditional houses and through self-publishing. When her publisher would only release one new title a year in her bestselling, award-winning series, Lyons began self-publishing. Today, she makes much more off her self-published books than her traditionally published titles.

Lyons is in the minority, of course; most authors make little to nothing from self-publishing. Nevertheless, a few have built flourishing careers that would have been impossible in the past.

It’s not just the money that self-published authors find attractive; many appreciate having control over editing, pricing, timing, design and marketing—areas where traditional publishers

often fall short. “I’ve published 14 books with New York City, and not a single editor ever met their contractual deadline to get me notes,” says Lyons. Many authors complain about inattention from editors and marketers, and a lack of interest in research and digital promotion on the part of publishers. Meanwhile, some genre series writers find they can keep their readers engaged by releasing new books in a series every couple of months, a schedule few publishers are equipped or willing to handle.

With self-publishing, authors are essentially pursuing a new business model, selling straight to the public. This has substantially altered what it means to be an author, and has inarguably allowed some authors, mainly in the genre fields, to make a living they couldn’t before. “The author today is in control of his or her livelihood,” says Lyons.

The Devaluing of Books

But while Amazon has enabled anyone to publish books, its tight grip on the publishing industry has raised new concerns for authors. Specifically, the company’s pricing practices have driven down book prices. Early on, the company priced books far below other bookstores, even selling them at a loss, to gain market share. When publishers attempted to stop this practice and exert more control over book pricing, the U.S. Justice Department sued them for price-fixing.

Amazon’s pricing policies for self-published books also drive down book prices. Authors are free to sell their books for more than \$9.99 (or less than \$2.99)—but if they do so, they receive only 35% of each sale. This presents a powerful incentive for authors to keep their book prices low. Furthermore, if these authors want to take part in Kindle Unlimited, the company’s subscription service allowing readers access to ten e-books a month, they must publish exclusively with Amazon.

While many authors resent their captive status, they say the publicity and marketing value they receive from Kindle Unlimited makes it worthwhile. But Kindle Unlimited is a very different business model, which can hurt authors, says Sylvia Day.

“There is no ownership conveyed to Kindle Unlimited subscribers, no actual ‘sale’ of the book. The books are borrowed for what amounts to one dollar, while the author is paid based on pages read,” Day says. She has tried to explain to other authors how the system devalues books and limits readership. However, she says, “many authors who’ve attempted to leave the KU system find that the subscribers who borrowed their books in KU will not go on to follow them outside of KU with actual book purchases. And since readers entrenched in other platforms, such as Apple Books and Kobo, have oftentimes never heard of KU authors due to KU’s exclusivity requirement, it’s an uphill battle out of obscurity for KU authors to break free and actually sell books.”

Many authors hope that by selling their book for less, through Kindle Unlimited, they’ll attract many more readers (most receive about \$.0004–.0005 per page read, or about \$1.20 per book if the reader completes it). But authors in the 2018 survey who distributed through Kindle Unlimited reported a lower median book-related income than others, with a median income of \$1,280.

Lower costs seem like a clear benefit for consumers—at least that’s what the Justice Department has considered when anti-trust advocates and other interested parties have questioned Amazon’s domination of the book industry. But as prices plunge and subscription book reading grows through Kindle Unlimited, Prime Reading (a service for Amazon Prime members), Scribd and others, fears rise that books are being increasingly “commoditized”—where one book might be so easily substituted for another that price becomes the deciding factor

for consumers, rather than content and quality. “People can refuse to pay more than \$3, \$4, \$5 per book, and know they can find a million books at that price,” says Pietsch. He points out that some bad actors are gaming the system, creating quick, cheap titles based on popular topics in search engines or social media. Further, some scammers have figured out how to sell books filled with previously published content, plagiarized text or even sheer nonsense to increase pages read.

While low-cost books or those available through Kindle Unlimited and Prime Reading may or may not be as well-written, satisfying or enlightening as traditionally priced books, their mere availability starts to change the way readers see books—just the way Spotify and streaming music services devalued music. Until recently, the book industry was protected from the digital decimation that undermined the music and journalism industries, largely because consumers long viewed books (unlike music or news) as something you paid for. Kindle Unlimited seems to be shifting that perception.

“By self-publishing at a very low price point, we’ve trained readers to expect books to be worth a minimal amount of money,” says Sylvia Day. “How do you fix that?”

In the eyes of many authors, then, changes in the publishing industry, while beneficial for some, signal trouble ahead. “In the 1980s, the entire industry was so much healthier,” says Russo. “Publishing houses published books. They weren’t part of a conglomerate with other expectations. For younger writers, the policies, the assumptions, everything about the industry has changed, most of it not for the better. They won’t have the same advantages I had.”

SECTION V

THE NEW PROFESSION OF AUTHOR

In the midst of these disruptions, one thing is clear: Authors now need skills they didn't need before, and must invest substantial time and money outside of their writing. For most survey respondents, the profession of author today requires substantial marketing efforts, even when working with traditional publishers.

“You can't just sit back and let someone else run your career for you,” says C.J. Lyons. “It's really up to the author to decide the best way to reach readers and what the definition of success is.”

Authors Spending More Time on Marketing

84% of survey respondents said they spent time marketing, up notably since 2013. The average full-time traditionally published author spent nearly one full workday a week—seven hours—marketing their books via social media, newsletters, book promotions and other efforts. Self-published authors spent 12.4 hours a week on marketing (and that is in addition to the many hours spent formatting, copyediting and performing other publishing-related tasks). Those figures are up some 24% for traditionally published authors from 2013, and up some 60% for self-published authors. Although many authors would prefer to spend that time writing, promotion has become a critical part of the writing life. “If this is what pays the bills, you have to take it seriously and learn about it,” says Lyons. “As a doctor, I didn't enjoy certain aspects of medicine, but I still learned about them.”

Authors spend not just time, but money on marketing. Half of survey respondents spent at least \$1,000 and 24% spent more than \$5,000 on marketing efforts. All this suggests that publishers are shifting the risk and investment of publishing to authors, who now need to spend time promoting their books rather than writing them.

As a result, authors' writing time, already curtailed by the need to earn outside income, is dwindling. Even published authors who said they worked full-time on writing earned 64% of their income, on average, from non-writing sources. For part-time authors, 81% of their income came from other sources.

Authors Need Health Benefits

Authors often workday jobs for the health benefits. Only 22% of respondents purchased their own health insurance. 23% relied on their partner, and 17% on an employer. More than a quarter said they feel financial pressure as the result of healthcare costs, and about 30% said the health insurance they had was less than adequate.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the number of authors applying for emergency relief has grown, says Isabel Howe, executive director of the Authors League Fund, which offers financial assistance to authors in distress. "Our applications for aid were up 20% in 2018," she says. "Professional writers don't tend to have a safety net the way other professions do. They don't have a guaranteed job or income." Often, she says, a health issue will drive them into a financial crisis, forcing them to seek help. She is careful to point out that applications may be up for reasons other than changes in the book industry—perhaps search algorithms have changed, making the organization easier to find, or perhaps economic or health insurance changes have led

the increase. But the increase certainly supports the case that today's professional writers are in distress.

Overall, the profession of author seems to have become more complex and challenging since the rise of e-books and other market shifts, even for those who are flourishing through self-publishing or other innovations.

“I would hate to be starting out right now,” says Sylvia Day. “When I started out, you had the issue of finding an agent and publishers, but once you did, you had a huge support system behind you. You had advertising and marketing dollars, a considerably larger number of retailers and much wider distribution. It's a very difficult prospect for writers now.”

SECTION VI

CONCLUSION

Assessing the state of authorship in the digital age offers a particular challenge: The widespread, romanticized image of the starving artist brings with it the assumption that authors never really could aspire to a comfortable, middle-class life. This stereotype of struggling authors, then, makes it easy to underestimate the dangers that literary life now faces, and to dismiss the changing plight of the author and the threat to books in general.

It's undeniable that the book industry is changing and so is the nature of authorship. The new profession of writer, with lower income prospects and far more competition, offers less time for the painstaking task of developing ideas, pursuing research and honing the craft. The books most at risk are literary fiction and nonfiction—books that require years of concentrated research and writing. And although some authors who write full-time are earning more now than in 2013, even their incomes appear to be down significantly since 2009; and all are threatened as technology companies, big box stores and other buyers continue to exert downward pressure on book prices. If books continue to lose value, to become streaming content, where royalties are paid out of pools, those who create them will find it more and more difficult to produce quality content.

“In my opinion, authors need to come together and agree that our hard work is worth a certain amount of money,” says Sylvia Day.

It's not too late to preserve the value of books. Doing so will require a concerted effort by numerous parties. Most importantly, legislators need to reassess their approach to large tech companies, particularly Amazon, and find ways to value the health and infrastructure of the

publishing industry and its workers, not just the price of books. Amazon now accounts for over 35% of all unit sales of books, some 77% of online sales of new print or e-books, and 80% of e-books overall, according to Codex Group; Amazon publishes its own books that compete with products it retails for other publishers; Amazon controls what may be the most effective publicity platforms in book publishing, including its newsletters and Amazon's book review platform, Goodreads; and it advances new models (Kindle Unlimited and Prime First Read) which make books cheaper or free. Alarming little stands in the way of the company controlling the entire book industry—which is tiny, with overall revenues of \$26 billion, compared to Amazon's overall worth, currently valued at \$1 trillion.

Congress should consider regulating Amazon and other major internet platforms that act as monopsonies in their respective markets as common carriers; and the government should carefully scrutinize any further acquisitions of related businesses. Such action is critical, given that there is little publishers or authors can do at this point to stop Amazon's march toward controlling all of publishing.

Meanwhile, readers and publishers must do what they can to support alternatives—most importantly, supporting brick-and-mortar bookstores. Readers can help by buying through physical outlets or buying online through outlets besides Amazon, such as Indiebound.org or the new Bookshop.org (set to launch in January 2020). Such actions can help support what little competition remains in the industry.

Publishers can help by limiting the number of cheap books that get dumped into the third-party seller markets on Amazon and eBay by shredding rather than selling overstock at remainder prices, for instance, and marking review copies, as well as those intended for foreign markets. Meanwhile, authors and publishers should search for new ways to publicize and market

books, diminishing Amazon's stranglehold on reader attention and reader data. And publishers must work together to end structural inequalities that limit income and opportunities for marginalized authors.

Additional measures should be taken to address e-book piracy and physical book counterfeiting and the many scams that have arisen in the self-publishing and third-party seller markets. Lawmakers and federal agencies must commit to reducing e-book piracy and counterfeit books, which have skyrocketed in recent years. Criminal-level copyright piracy and counterfeiting are now rampant in the book market. The law that allows internet service providers to profit from infringing activities on their platforms, while doing virtually nothing to stop it, must be amended. The DMCA's Section 512 of the Copyright Act provides immunity to internet platforms if they comply with certain requirements—reduced by the courts to a never-ending notice-and-takedown regime, where the platforms have no responsibility to actually keep known infringing content off of their sites. Congress must fix this and require real cooperation from those who profit from piracy. Copyright infringement over a certain threshold is a federal crime, and the federal government must take seriously its obligation to prosecute these crimes.

Finally, it is deeply important that foundations and philanthropists invest new efforts on supporting serious literature, much as nonprofits are now funding journalism. If the free market fails the book industry, public funding and support must intervene to ensure important works continue to be produced, enriching our culture, expanding our ideas and advancing our democracy. In short, the entire industry, and those who love and support books, must work together to ensure a cultural and financial ecosystem to support authors.

“There’s a kind of author and book that is disappearing, and that loss has an enormous cultural impact,” says Gleick. “If we value new ideas, if we value thoughtful writing, we need to create a society that values books and supports authors.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abernathy, P. *The expanding news desert*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Bowker. 2019. [*Self-Publishing in the United States, 2013-2018: Print and Ebooks*](#).

Coser, L. A., Kadushin, C., & Powell, W. W. (1982). *Books: The culture and commerce of publishing*. New York: Basic Books.

International Publishers Association (2015). [*International Publishers Association Annual Report, 2015–2016*](#).

Larson, C. (2019). Open networks, open Books: Gender, precarity and solidarity in digital publishing. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–17.

Lee and Low (2016). *Where is the diversity in publishing? The 2015 diversity baseline survey results*.

Menza, Kaitlin. [*“What I Bought with My Oprah’s Book Club Money.”*](#) *The Cut*. March 14, 2019.

Rose, S. (1981). The economics of superstars. *The American Economic Review*, 845–858.

Thompson, J. B. (2005). *Books in the digital age: The transformation of academic and higher education publishing in Britain and the United States*. Cambridge, U.K.; Malden, MA: Polity.

Trachtenberg, J. “They own the system: Amazon rewrites book history by marching into publishing.” *The Wall Street Journal*. January 16, 2019.

Christine Larson, Ph.D., teaches journalism at the University of Colorado, where she researches the impact of digital technology on media workers. She was a John S. Knight Fellow in journalism at Stanford. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and several leading academic journals. She is writing a book on the history of romance writers and their business models.