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Performing Femininity

Storytelling and gender

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Hard times: Are authors worth as much as athletes?

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Writing brings little financial return for most authors. Drew Coffman/Flickr

As an undergraduate student in English literature, I took one subject in creative writing. At the beginning of the course, the lecturer explained to the class that the Australian writers many of us sought to emulate probably earned less from writing than we did on Youth Allowance or Austudy.

A well-known and respected author of literary fiction, we were told, might sell 5,000 copies of a book. Royalties at the time were around a dollar or two. And, to dull the glamour even further, we were reminded that authors of literary fiction don't usually publish a novel every year.

J.K. Rowling may well be richer than the Queen thanks to the Harry Potter series, but a recent survey commissioned by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society suggests that the percentage of professional writers in the UK able to earn their income from writing has fallen dramatically.

The What Are Words Worth Now? survey shows that only 11.5% of the almost 2,500 writers surveyed were able to survive on their writing alone, which compares with a more encouraging figure of 40% in 2005.

The median income of professional authors in 2013 was £11,000, putting a large number below the basic living wage of £16,850.

While writing has only ever been a path to wealth for a select few, royalty cheques are apparently becoming leaner, even for established authors.

Musicians affected by illegal downloads have been forced to tour more frequently and agree to lucrative backstage meet-and-greet sessions to compensate for declining royalties.

For writers, public talks, writers' festivals, and school appearances are similarly becoming income supplements, rather than simply promotional activities. Some writers find security as lecturers in universities, which attract a continual stream of students who are not dissuaded by the financial reality.

As with other creative arts, there is usually little public sympathy for the writer who struggles to pay the bills. When people undertake pleasurable and artistically rewarding work, these benefits are often seen as compensation for minimal income or even lack of payment altogether.

During the past few years, Australian websites including Mamamia and Crikey's The Daily Review have been criticised for failing to pay contributors even a token amount for articles. While businesses need to be profitable, not paying writers at all exploits the fact that there will always be another aspiring writer hoping to build a career who will work for free.

Nevertheless, even the small payments made by literary magazines and some websites will not support a household. For every Bryce Courtenay or Matthew Reilly with huge international sales, there are many more professional Australian authors who rely on their spouse or a second job in order to continue writing.

The increasing piracy of e-books could potentially increase that number. More people are becoming accustomed to reading recent novels for free, as they already are with torrenting film and television.

Sporadic grants from the Australia Council and literary prizes provide assistance to a small number of

authors. Yet there is no systematic, ongoing support available for authors in the same way as there is for athletes at the Australian Institute of Sport, for example.

An equivalent national programme to support and mentor promising and outstanding writers might sound indulgent. We see the development of sporting talent as a national priority, but not our literature.

Apart from moments of shared pride when Australians stand atop the dais at the Olympics or Commonwealth Games, public investment in sportspeople largely benefits each individual's brief athletic career. Writing, for a range of media, contributes to our shared culture, and can leave an enduring legacy.

Some would suggest that if a writer is "good enough" that the market will reward them. We don't expect the same of most of the athletes we fund at the AIS, however. We know only a limited number of sports have significant earning potential and only a small proportion of elite athletes will secure major endorsements.

But you can't produce an Ian Thorpe without a squad of talented swimmers alongside him. A runner like Cathy Freeman would have been hard pressed to become a world champion training on her own, with no local meets to attend.

Henry James remarked that "the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep". Literary cultures, like sporting ones, also need depth to be healthy. So why don't we do as much to support our writers as we do for our athletes?