

'It was a deflating experience': the novelists who nearly gave up

With earnings having dropped by 60%, it is harder than ever to keep going as a writer - even if your work gets rave reviews

5 Ellen Peirson-Hagger Mon 14 Oct 2024 Guardian

The 2022 publication of *A Hunger*, Ross Raisin's fourth novel, was his "lowest moment", the 45-year-old author says. "It was a deflating experience." (deflate = take the air out cf 'inflate')

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The book received positive reviews, but then Raisin found out it wouldn't be stocked in a large high-street book chain, and literary festivals claimed they "didn't have space" to programme him. "I had to work hard not to succumb to^x a negativity that in turn thwarts creativity," he says. It made him consider giving up writing altogether. (^xgive in to)

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Raisin received "a really sizable advance" for his 2008 debut *God's Own Country*, which won him the Sunday Times young writer of the year award in 2009 and earned him a spot on Granta magazine's 2013 list of best young British novelists. It was an "experience I'd normalised - and then the rest of my career has not been like that", Raisin says. "I think my books have got better, but the noise around anything I write has diminished." (d = become less)

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When he won the BBC national short story award earlier this month, Raisin had been "wondering whether writing is still a viable^x thing for me to continue doing". The £15,000 prize will "fill in some financial gaps, to hopefully see me through the next couple of years of writing a book", he says. But he has come to terms with the fact that succeeding in publishing is "a roll of the dice". Meanwhile, university teaching is his main source of income. (^x doable, possible)

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Raisin's situation is not unusual. A 2022 report from the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS) found that the median income of full-time authors had fallen by more than 60% since 2006, to £7,000 a year.

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Yara Rodrigues Fowler, the 31-year-old author of acclaimed novels *Stubborn Archivist* and *There Are More Things*, says that realising "how badly paid" writing is has led her to think: "what's the point of writing another one?"

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"My friends are civil servants and doctors; they have pensions and maternity pay. I am pursuing a profession I feel passionately about and is held in high esteem. It's very cool when you go to a party and say 'I'm a novelist'. But actually it's not very cool to be financially rewarded as if it's a hobby."

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Part of the problem is the gap between the public perception of what it is to be a "successful novelist" and what that means financially, says Tice Cin, the 29-year-old author of *Keeping the House*. She has found it difficult to find a day job because would-be employers "Google me, see that I'm a published author, and consider me a flight risk.

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Actually, I wrote a book I put my heart into, and it did well. It's changed my sense of pride and hope, not my material circumstances".

50 Money isn't the only reason writers think about quitting. Cin adds that this year she has considered giving up trying to sell her second novel because "it's really hard to know who you can trust to look after a story that's very raw". As the book is about her community, she doesn't want to publish it unless she can ensure that whoever she works with "respects [her] community and doesn't commodify it".

55 The comic novelist Dan Rhodes announced his retirement from writing in the mid-noughties. "I couldn't conceive of writing anything worth reading after I turned 30," the 52-year-old says now. "In the end 30 came and went and I kept on going - it turned out I was being a bit of an idiot."

60 Rhodes became "uncomfortable in the biz" after a financial fall-out with his first publisher. He now works as a postman and has found "a small patch of scorched earth out on the periphery, from where I can just about operate" - his most recent novel, *Sour Grapes*, was published in 2021 by the independent press Lightning Books.

65 For 49-year-old Tom Bullough, whose novels include *Addlands*, writing simply no longer became a priority when he became involved in the climate movement. Around 2017 he joined the protest group Extinction Rebellion (XR), and in the face of environmental collapse, "the idea of writing novels seemed futile," he says.

70 That's now changed. "One of the reasons I was able to write again was because of the time I spent in XR." He is now part of a community of writers exploring environmentalism. "No single book is going to make a great difference, but collectively we might." His activism has given his writing a "considered foundation" - a purpose -
75 that it didn't have before.

Meanwhile, Rodrigues Fowler has found the means to continue writing by actively changing her circumstances. She has left London for the north-east coast, and has begun a PhD with the hope of one day finding an academic job that will offer her "a pension,
80 sick pay, maternity leave" as well as the opportunity for writing time.

But writing is worth fighting for, she says. "I have been changed by novels." That she can't write full-time is a "sacrifice", "but it makes me want to claw the novel back all the more".

85 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/oct/14/it-was-a-deflating-experience-the-novelists-who-nearly-gave-up>