

So You Wanted to Be a Writer

by Scott C. Reynolds

The first thing you remember writing was a five-page short story about a turtle that left his bale to try to understand life away from other turtles. It was second grade and you weren't as well read then so you drew upon the only two literary influences you knew: *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Stranger*. You entered your story in a school-wide contest. Some fifth-grader won the grand prize with a story about a unicorn that lost his horn and went to live with the horses. You learned a valuable lesson that day about marketability. People love unicorns.

Your whole childhood was reading and writing. On summer vacations to Boston you wrote historical fiction and opinion pieces about how bad the Red Sox were doing that year. On camping trips to the mountains you wrote nature essays, alternating between channeling Thoreau and Muir. You joined poetry clubs and literature clubs and book clubs and getting-picked-on-by-football-players clubs. You couldn't stop writing.

But then you did. You never seriously considered writing as a viable career option. It might be more fair to say that parents, teachers and guidance counselors didn't consider it viable but ultimately you made the choice to set it aside. Without that part of your identity you struggled to figure out what to do with your life. You considered politics, law, even marine biology, but none of it really spoke to you. What little college you attended you did so as a history major with a vague idea about becoming an archaeologist, but you eventually dropped out and began a long, painful career in software development.

You couldn't keep your inner writer down. Even as a software developer you always found a way to be a writer. You relished the times when you had to create documentation, specifications, memos, and emails. Even contributing to web marketing copy, anathema to most of the programmers you knew, was a welcome break from the daily drudgery of typing "beep beep boop one one zero boop" at a machine that could never appreciate a finely turned phrase.

You grew more restless with each passing year. You were stuck between the safety and sanity of having a good job in a bad economy and being terrified that this really was what you were going to do for the rest of your life. You began looking for outs.

On a whim you entered a writing contest and won a spot as a regular columnist for a popular website. After the elation of winning passed, the panic set in. You cursed yourself for entering. You didn't think what you wrote was any good. The winning entry must have been a fluke. There was no way you could keep up the charade for a year of regular columns. Hell, you didn't even have a year's worth of ideas. You thought about dropping out and saving yourself the embarrassment.

But then the first email came. And another. And another. And then the tweets. Complete strangers were talking about your writing. They were talking about how good it was. They were telling you how funny it was. This might be something you could do after all, you realized. When the first offers to write for other publications came in, you were convinced. This was your calling.

The confidence you gained from the early responses to your column led you to quit your job as your New Year's resolution. You were going to become a writer. You had a newfound ability to believe in yourself. You could do this. You could make the switch to the life you only recently

realized you were meant to be living all along. The life of a writer. You had ideas for stories, novels, articles, movies and essays, and now you had the time to write them all.

You spent the next three months sitting on the couch eating cookies and watching reruns of *How I Met Your Mother*.

It wasn't that you didn't have good intentions. You sat down with your laptop, ready to write that novel you've had in your head for years. Then someone sent you a YouTube video. Then you started thinking about how hard it was going to be to get published. Then you stopped waking up at normal times. Then you stopped getting dressed. It turned out that as self-motivated and self-directed as you always thought you were, working without the structure of having a job and a schedule and people besides yourself to answer to took a lot more willpower than you had available.

You did manage to motivate yourself to write a feature-length romantic comedy screenplay. It was about a girl who broke your heart. Well, broke is too soft a word, but you're the writer, not me, you come up with a better one. You leveraged the complete lack of responsibility that comes with being unemployed into a marathon 20-day writing spree to get it done. Your friends told you it was funny. You entered it into a contest.

Weeks later, while reviewing your screenplay, you hated yourself and every line you wrote. None of it was funny. The plot was full of holes. You were an idiot for even thinking you could do this. You had barely made a penny in all these months of "being a professional writer" and your savings account was fading fast. You considered going back to software development. You could do it in your sleep. You'd be back to making six figures and not worrying about how much a cup of ramen was going to set you back. You'd have an external impetus to wake up and shave and shower and go somewhere five mornings a week. You'd have people to talk about the ballgame and the new fall sitcoms with. You started browsing the want ads.

You landed a one-month contract to do some web development. It was easy, it brought in some money, but after even the first week you were desperate to be done. Software definitely wasn't a part of who you were anymore. It was nice to know it was there, standing between you and being homeless, but you also weren't completely sure that you'd choose it over being homeless. A homeless writer has an angle publishers would love.

You took a long look at yourself in the mirror. Then you shaved. Your beard was ridiculous even by NHL playoffs standards. Then you looked again. You saw nothing but clean-shaven hubris staring back. When you were honest with yourself you knew that somewhere deep in your wildly egotistical psyche you hoped that someone was going to hand you a writing career on a silver platter. You thought that maybe you would be the exception, that maybe you'd be the one to become a famous novelist or screenwriter in just six months. The balls on you!

In that moment you realized that you felt entitled to success in this career because of how hard you worked in the last one. You hadn't respected the amount of work it would take to make the switch. It finally sank in that there's a reason every writer's advice to every wannabe is some variation of "write until your ---ing hands fall off, then put the pen in your mouth and write some more." Because the fantasy you were living, "write once a week when you're inspired because you're an

artistic genius that only puts pen to paper when the muse appears and gives you a dance,” is not a viable strategy.

Finally having hit a level of acceptance that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross could be proud of, you resolved to have a real go at your dream. Your screenplay ended up placing better than expected in the competition and the judges’ feedback gave you hope for the future. You did a major rewrite and submitted it to another contest, and then began writing another. You finally understood that nobody makes it just writing one thing. You finally understood it was *work*. You started writing every day, rain or shine, manic or depressed, fat or slightly less fat. You started proactively looking for writing income instead of hoping it found its way to you.

One day, as if by magic, someone asked: “what do you do?” and you responded, naturally, as if it had always been so, “I’m a writer.”

As you penned your final column, the bookend to the one that started the whole chain of events, you couldn’t help but reflect on the year that had passed. Rather than curse yourself for wasting time, you applauded yourself for making the journey. You were going to forge ahead, one eye on your bank account, the other on your word processor, and whatever happened in the end you were going to make sure that you could look yourself in the mirror and say you gave it all you had.