

The Truth About Writers and Writing

People Eager to Believe in Magic Formulas for Becoming Successful; a Few Needed but Neglected Truths About the "Pleasant and Profitable Profession"

By Lemuel L. DeBra

THE other day I received a letter from a dear old lady who had read several of my stories. At her age she should be content to darn stockings for her grandchildren; but she prefers, instead, to "make a fortune writing stories and photoplays." In other words, she is one of those millions who "can write stories and don't know it."

Here is her letter:

Dear Mr. de Bra—I seen your name in the magazines and thought you would help me. I sent to for a course how to write storys. It tells how to write storys but I don't understand how to begin. How much will you charge to tell me how to begin a story.

Yours truly,
Mrs.

Now if that had been the first letter of its kind I had ever received I wouldn't be writing this article; but during the past year I've had dozens like it.

It's pitiful! And yet, it isn't surprising. Almost every magazine carries advertisements telling what fortunes are made writings stories and photoplays and leading unknowing people to think that anyone, by paying money for a correspondence course, can quickly and easily become rich and famous. Something should be done about it.

At first I put all the blame on the correspondence school. Here was a poor old soul who couldn't even write a letter; and yet the school had led her to believe that she had only to buy their course and, suddenly, she would be making "big money." They had taken her money in exchange for something that they surely knew would be worthless to her.

Then it occurred to me that attacking the school would hardly solve the problem. The school could probably prove that their course is worth what they charge for it. As for their advertisements, they are so cleverly worded that it might be difficult to prove any actual misstatement. They could prove, for instance, that people have become rich and famous writing for magazines and the movies.

The trouble is that most people are too eager to

believe that there is some magic formula, some secret set of rules, by which anyone may become a successful writer. They hold an entirely wrong idea of writers and the business of writing; and it is because they have this erroneous idea that they squander their money for courses and criticisms that, to them, are worthless.

For this they are not entirely to blame. For years they have been fed on magazine articles and advertisements that throw a romantic glamour over the "pleasant and profitable profession of letters." And of course they hear only of the successful writers. Dazzled by the fortunes made by a few top-liners, the average person seems not to realize that for one writer who makes "big money" there are thousands who barely manage to make a decent living and other thousands who suffer complete and heartbreaking failure.

It's about time that someone should tell the truth about writers and writing!

With apologies to my fellow scribes, most of whom could do this job better than I can, I am going to undertake to tell a few needed but neglected things about us and our work. Writing *is* a pleasant and profitable profession—for those who like it; but so is the law, the ministry, ditch-digging, bootlegging. Therefore, what I have to say here will be disillusioning: but I entertain the fond hope that a few thousand of those "millions-who-can-write-and-don't-know-it" may find in this article something that will save them time, labor, money, and disappointment; while others may find something that will put them on the right road and inspire them with the determination to go on to success.

FIRST of all, let me say that I am a professional writer, more or less successful, although the chances are that you have never taken particular notice of my "stuff." I am neither a highbrow nor a writer of cheap thrillers. I have never been burdened with the thought that I am an undiscovered and neglected genius; but I like writing, have been at it four or five years, and intend to write it out on this line if it takes the rest

of my life. Meanwhile, I manage to earn a fair income, live where I please, and get a lot of fun out of life.

For I belong to that busy army of writers who look upon their work neither as an “aht” nor a disease but as an honorable and profitable business. We do not wear long hair, flowing ties, or dirty fingernails. If you were to meet one of us on the street you wouldn’t be the least bit thrilled. Neither would you ever mistake one of us for a preacher, a movie actor, or an undertaker.

Writers have been pictured as freaks, living queer lives, dashing off their stories in some old attic in a frenzy of inspiration induced by cocktails, cigarettes, and the jazzy strains of a phonograph. It may be that there are writers who live that way, just as you will find freaks in every line; but, believe me, the men and women whose names you see regularly in your favorite magazine are not that kind.

Indeed not! Like most of my fellow scribes, I own my home and rent an office. I pay my bills, am on good terms with my neighbors; and have breakfast with my own wife every morning. It’s the same wife, by the way, that I married fourteen years ago. In collaboration, this wife and I have produced “four editions in kid,” as a friend of ours insists on stating it. We believe, therefore, that we are good Americans.

SOMETIME between five and seven each morning I say good-by to the wife and children and walk to my office to work. Occasionally I smoke while doing a story, but I never permit my bootlegger to call during my office hours. I work from six to sixteen hours a day, Sundays and holidays included. When I don’t feel like working I go fishing or take a trip in my automobile, which, by the way, is neither a Ford nor a ten-thousand-dollar car.

In other words, we writers are normal hardworking human beings, no better and no worse than the men and women who read our stories.

Now it may be “artistic” to write a story in pale blue ink on creamy bond and hire a typist to put it in shape for the editor; but if we worked that way we couldn’t keep on speaking terms with our grocers, to say nothing of the gasoline barons. I frequently lend money to friends who are too artistic to do such a common thing as run a typewriter. As for me, I type everything. I keep

three typewriters handy (two standards and a portable) so that when I have put one out of commission I won’t have to close my factory for repairs. Neither do I use the Hunt & Pick system. I use the touch system, and I keep touching.

As a rule, when I sit down to my typewriter I have only a vague idea as to what I am going to write. This may seem strange to you. Probably, you have read Sunday magazine articles on how writers spend years on their files, how they keep elaborate notebooks, how they engage clever stenographers to help them assemble their material, and how they then sweat blood trying to weave that material into a story.

Some writers do work that way; but most of us who are putting our work over regularly have *absorbed* our material through actual experience, supplemented by wide reading. We touch this material with the wand of *Imagination*—and there’s the story!

Imagination! There’s the power behind the typewriter! We once heard a lot about the “artistic temperament”; but today psychologists are junking that nonsense and are delving into the mysteries and wonderful possibilities of the imagination. The time has passed when imagination is supposed to be the exclusive property of dreamy-eyed inventors and long-haired novelists. Today psychologists are telling us that no one can attain a full measure of success without a “trained imagination.” They are preaching a truth that writers have long suspected—that no matter what line of work you are in, ministry or mining, doctoring or ditch-digging, if you lack imagination, vision, *the ability to think ahead of your work*, you won’t get far.

Let me add to that: if you try to write fiction and lack imagination, you won’t get anywhere!

Therefore, having absorbed our fiction material, having whole troupes of good fiction types stored away in our memories—to which supply we keep adding between stories—we sit down before our trusty typewriter and with the help of a good imagination we industriously rattle out those millions of words of fiction that editors accept in exchange for real money.

For instance, here’s an old newspaper clipping telling about a young chap who fell out of a two-story window. He wasn’t hurt, but he refused to tell the police anything about it. Interesting; but really nothing. Suppose, however, that the young chap—let’s call him Jimmie—works in a bank. Suppose

he is in love with Agnes, the beautiful and spoiled daughter of the banker. And that she loves Jimmie—perhaps. Jimmie’s work gives him information that certain powerful but unscrupulous interests want for their own purposes. A man and a woman are sent to Jimmie’s room to try to get this information by bribery or threat or any method necessary. There’s a “scene,” and Jimmie, to save himself, jumps out the window and lands on his feet in a flowerbed just as Agnes happens to be passing. “Jimmie!” she gasps; “you fell—” “Sure,” he says, recovering quickly; “I’d fall for you any time!” And then Agnes looks up; and suppose that black-eyed vamp in his room has rushed to the window and is looking down—and Agnes sees that woman—in Jimmie’s room—and then—

Well, that’ll give you an idea of how we do it. You may believe it or not, when I started the foregoing paragraph about this chap Jimmie I hadn’t the remotest idea of what I was going to write. Imagination!

SOMETIMES we start with a theme. Loyalty, for instance. Everything that happens comes about because, through thick and thin, Jimmie is loyal to his bank. Or we may start with interesting characters and put them in interesting situations. That isn’t easy; and it isn’t difficult. If you have enough imagination you can do it. If you take pains to make your characters lifelike and your situations logical, your characters will work out an interesting story without your worrying your poor head over the plot.

“But see here!” you object at once; “don’t you have your story all worked out in every detail before you start writing?”

Indeed not! I know that certain teachers declare that to be the only way; but I venture to suggest that they confuse creative writing with carpentry. It is quite necessary to have a plan to follow when you build a house. Sometimes, especially in detective and mystery stories, it is well to lay out the plot in advance. But the story written to blueprint specifications is usually dead. The characters have been shoved around like a lot of chessmen. A fiction story, to be really good, must have life; and one of the most interesting things about life is that we never know what’s going to happen.

“How long does it take to write a story?” is a question frequently asked, and I often wonder why.

Isn’t it about as foolish as to ask, “How long does it take to build a house?” It depends on the house, doesn’t it? Certainly. And on other things. Some stories are easily written; others have to be worked out slowly. I have written a short story in a day; I have spent a week on shorter ones. I have written fifty thousand words in three weeks; a story half the length usually takes me a month. However, I am not a rapid writer. I never write with the check in mind. I spare no pains to make each story my very best.

“Is a college education necessary?”

Helpful, but not necessary. You must have, however, a good working knowledge of English. It is not true that editors read every manuscript that comes to their office. If a glance shows that you are ignorant of the use of your own language, the editor quite properly assumes that you must be equally ignorant of what makes a good fiction story, and he’ll return your manuscript unread. This does not mean, however, that you must use fancy words and phrases that no one can understand. Editors want *ideas* expressed in plain, terse, old-fashioned American. Therefore, forget fine writing and strive to get an idea; when you have it, clothe it in simple, forceful language and it will go. If, in addition to that, you can put a little haunting music into your words, you’ll have ‘em at your feet. But a fine style without the idea—is junk.

“Must I have a pull with an editor to get my story accepted?”

Heavens, no! There’s nothing snobbish about an editor. The fact that you are a second cousin of the seventh son of the famous Ivan Montmorency de Scribbler is nothing in the editor’s young life. He has to publish stories that will make people buy his magazine. There’s only one kind that will make permanent friends for the editor and his magazine. They are—*good stories*. Therefore, when you’re satisfied that you’ve done your best on your story, have it neatly typed on paper eight and one-half by eleven, and *mail* it in with a self-addressed, stamped envelope for return. Unless the editor requests it, never call personally with a story. The editor will have it read, and perhaps look at it himself, no matter what name is on it. If it’s good, and fits his magazine, and he isn’t overcrowded with stuff just then, he’ll buy your story. If it isn’t good, you don’t want it printed, do you? Well, then, forget that talk of pull!

“Isn’t it better to deal with the editor through an

agent?”

That depends. As a rule, an agent can do nothing for you that you cannot do just as well, or better, yourself. He cannot sell a poor story for you, and you don't need an agent to sell a good story. In the beginning you need that personal touch with editors. Unless you are out of connection with the mails, I think it best to deal direct. After you have become successful, a good agent can handle your business affairs and perhaps make money for you by haggling with editors over rates.

“What is the most common mistake made by beginners?”

Failure to study the market. It's a matter of record that beginners frequently send sex stories to such publications as *Geographic*, dainty little love stories to magazines specializing in red-blooded adventure stories for men, fact articles to all-fiction magazines, etc. Be as artistic as you please while you're writing your story; but when you try to sell it, for heaven's sake—be businesslike!

“What does it cost you to have your stories illustrated?”

Nothing. The publisher pays the illustrator.

“Is fiction-writing overcrowded?”

That's a difficult question to answer. It is true that editors receive several thousand manuscripts each month from which to choose the ten or fifteen they have room to publish. If you view it from that angle, it may truthfully be said that the profession of fiction-writing is discouragingly overcrowded! Some of the most successful writers hold that view.

On the other hand, if you can give the editor just what he wants you'll find prices going up and your work constantly in demand. The writers who are unable to keep their markets filled do not seem to worry much over their “thousands of competitors.”

IBELIEVE, however, that writers and editors agree that in no other profession will you find such fierce competition as exists in the manuscript market. There are thousands and thousands of writers, and, comparatively speaking, only a mere handful of magazines to use their wares. Therefore, editors do not have to waste their time looking over carelessly written, ignorantly amateurish stuff. From the deluge that pours on their desks they are able to pick hundreds of stories that show careful and sincere workmanship; and from those hundreds they select a dozen or so for publication.

The situation is not discouraging to the man or

woman who is determined to succeed as a writer; but it should serve as a warning to the uneducated and untrained who think they see in writing an easy way to make money.

“Why don't you write for the movies? It would be easier, and it would pay you more money.”

Ah! I knew you were working around to that! Everyone asks that question sooner or later. It's a common belief among outsiders that the writer could make more money by turning his back on his old friends, the magazine editors, and devoting all his time to writing “brief scenarios.”

The truth of the matter is simply this: The experienced writer has learned by bitter experience that there is no satisfactory market for scenarios, and that writing for the screen not only calls for a special study of screen requirements but also for a close contact with moving-picture studios.

Moreover, he has learned that if a plot has any screen value that value will show up to better advantage in a magazine story than in a brief scenario. It will sell more quickly, and it will bring more money.

So the magazine writer writes his plot as a magazine story. It is published. If it has any screen value, all the scenario editors and directors who are looking for that type of story make a scramble to bid for it. Thus the writer comes out ahead by sticking to his own line and leaving “originals” to those on the inside.

“What is the best rule you ever heard for writing?”

A rule given some years ago by an editor whose name, unfortunately, I cannot recall. It's a rule that embraces all the other rules for writing fiction or fact. Jot it down and don't forget it: “*Be interesting, and be damned quick about it!*”

“How can I tell if I can succeed as a writer?”

That question calls for self-analysis. Others may help you, but no one can answer that question for you. Why do you wish to write? I know it is frequently claimed that the desire to write proves the existence of the ability to write; but don't you believe it. It goes deeper than that. *Why* do you desire to write? Is it because you have an almost uncontrollable urge to express yourself in words? Have you a love for writing that will enable you to overcome all obstacles and disappointments? Or is it merely that you have been led to believe that writing is an easy way to make money?

LOOK AT it this way: There are fortunes made in the practice of law, medicine, etc. Any intelligent person can take a course of study and qualify as a lawyer or doctor. Every year thousands pass the examinations; but of that multitude those who succeed, who make the “big money,” or become famous, are those who have a natural bent for the work and love it! In that respect the profession of writing is not different. Any intelligent person can master a course in story-writing. Colleges and correspondence schools are turning out thousands of “trained writers” every year, but of those thousands, the ones who succeed are those who have a natural inclination for writing and who love the darned business more than anything else in the world.

Therefore be honest with yourself in your

analysis of your desire to write—and be patient. Consistent study of *THE AUTHOR & JOURNALIST* will help. Also read one or more books on the subject. You’ll find several good ones advertised in the columns of this magazine.

As for taking a course in story-writing, if it is a good course and you take it with the right mental attitude you’ll get your money’s worth, and more, even if you never succeed as a writer. The point, however, is this: Success lies entirely within you. It calls for industry, perseverance, and at least a little natural inclination for the work.

Remember that the next time you see an advertisement offering to sell you the “secret of how to make big money writing stories and movies”!