

WHAT DRIVES WRITERS TO WRITE?

J.B. Drori

If an aspiring writer were crowned as an idol on a television show, or earned a screen writer's prized-contract from a major studio, or won a million dollars on the lottery, you probably wouldn't be reading this and I wouldn't be writing it. That would just be 'the luck of the draw' and have nothing to do with the art of writing.

A colleague I attended a three day writers' conference at Fort Bragg. At a long session on the last afternoon, two literary agents, a man and a woman, explained to a large group of writers the workings of the emerging milieu of publishing. The editorial assistance to a writer, the marketing and promotional contacts that used to be a part and parcel of the publisher's contractual arrangement with the writer have ceased to exist. Today, publishers expect a polished product, indeed, a best seller – if a novel, and invariably demand representation by a literary agent. As a result, agents have become the gate keepers to the new world of publishing and book sellers.

The two agents concluded their remarks by revealing that for them too, conditions have changed. The struggle to bring a book to the attention of an editor of a major publishing house has worsened exponentially, particularly if it is a novel. They wouldn't even bother unless the book carried the potential of a best seller.

The agent paused, looked around at the downcast faces before her and added, "Only a handful ever make it that far."

"The odds of winning a lottery are better," I grumbled.

"Actually, much better," the man-agent said, narrowing his eyes at me.

Following a long silence, the group of a hundred individuals stood and filed out of the hall.

My friend and I left the next morning. I leaned back in the front passenger seat and cast a farewell glance at the two story motel, abutting the edge of our conference site.

"What do you think of yesterday's meeting?" I asked.

"The agents gave us a dismal outlook," he said, starting the engine.

"Brutal but honest," I said. "That's the kind of an agent I'd want. That does, however, raise the question of why go on writing?"

“I doubt if many at this conference are going to be troubled by that,” my colleague said. “They’ll go on writing like they’ve been doing for years.”

“Why invest years in this enterprise – writing several hours every day, attending conferences, going to classes and critique groups, if the chances of getting published are worse than winning a lottery? Take me, I’ve been working on my novel, *Ancient Stones*, nearly six years. Where is the reward? What drives us?”

“I can tell you why I write,” my friend said. “I’m compelled to write every day. It grounds me. My head becomes clear, light. I feel centered.”

“That’s what most of the thirty or so individuals I quizzed at the conference said. They all expressed hope to get published but even if not they wouldn’t stop writing. They voiced things like: “‘I can’t live without it.’ ‘It gives my life meaning.’ ‘It has become my best friend’.”

“You keep asking this question a lot,” the driver said. “Why? What’s bothering you?”

“You’re right, it does bother me. I share your attitude about writing but I don’t understand it. If it isn’t getting published so that thousands can read our stuff, what’s the point? What is the motive? As an example, it puzzles me that most of the works of the brilliant writer Franz Kafka were published posthumously. What drove him and what drives us to write? Of course, he’s hardly a lone example. I dare say, there are and have been thousands in that predicament.”

“Why do you use the word drive – sounds like ‘the ‘sex drive’?”

“That’s true. Communication among members of a species is the norm. That’s a drive. It starts at the cellular stratum and develops into higher levels, assuming greater complexity at each rise. With the advent of the brain and the human neuronal matrix the system took a quantum leap into non-material based information. The data transmitted became more and more abstract, increasingly spiritual in character. From ancient times man has exhibited a spiritual need to communicate with other humans, both present and future. In essence, allowing us to live forever. That’s what we are doing, I think, with our writings. That’s what others do in other forms – music, art, mathematics, architecture, and so on.”

“It seems the human race needs to always stay connected,” my friend said.

“Yes,” I agreed.