

# Neil Gaiman and The Rare Phenomenon of Creative Autonomy for Fiction Writers

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In a 1999 interview, self-described “undisciplined writer” Neil Gaiman said: “I’m the kind of writer who, if a deadline is looming and I’m not there yet, will go off and take a room for a couple of weeks in a cheap hotel somewhere I don’t know anybody, and do nothing but put my head down and finish the book.”<sup>1</sup> Gaiman’s need for solitude to write continues to this day, but now he has a place of his own to escape to: a gazebo he built in the woods of upstate New York with nothing but a chair and a desk, and nothing to look at but rows of trees.<sup>2</sup> This second office is presumably where he is going in 2016 when he tells *Instagram*: “I am falling off the world to write. No cell service and almost no internet. Wish me well.”<sup>3</sup>

With his tall frame, stylishly disheveled hair, and wardrobe of weather-beaten black clothing, Neil Gaiman might just be the living embodiment of the literary genius in the Western

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<sup>1</sup> Claire E. White, “A Conversation with Neil Gaiman,” *The Internet Writing Journal* 3, no. 3 (1999), <https://www.writerswrite.com/journal/neil-gaiman-3991>.

<sup>2</sup> Danielle Turchiano, “Inside Neil Gaiman’s Rural Writing Retreat,” *Variety*, June 13, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/tv/features/neil-gaiman-american-gods-good-omens-writers-office-interview-1203238915/>.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Gaiman (@neilhimsel), *Instagram*, June 29, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BHPInC0jw4s/>.

cultural imagination: he who escapes the noise of everyday life to write what has never been written nor conceived and who re-emerges with the sacred texts. His prolific literary career spans across genres and even media; despite his many novels and their screen adaptations, he is most known in some circles for his DC Comics series *The Sandman*. Gaiman's public persona as a hermit-like literary genius fuels what Nick Levey calls our "fantasy that isolation is the engine of literary production and the serious artist remains shut off from market concerns."<sup>4</sup> The keyword, of course, is fantasy. It is impossible to disentangle Gaiman's ability to write in solitude from his massive success and wealth. Neil Gaiman is not just any writer, nor just any successful author – he is a member of an elite group of celebrity authors. His net worth is \$17.28US million, and his combined body of work brings in an average of \$2.88US million every year.<sup>5</sup> The ability to isolate oneself – literally and metaphorically – from the noise of the literary marketplace to write fiction is a privilege only available to those who no longer need to concern themselves with material survival.

This essay argues that sustaining oneself on the craft of fiction writing requires taking an interest in the very material concerns

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<sup>4</sup> Nick Levey, "Post-Press Literature: Self-Published Authors in the Literary Field," *Post45*, February 2016, <http://post45.org/2016/02/post-press-literature-self-published-authors-in-the-literary-field-3/>.

<sup>5</sup> "How Much Money Does Neil Gaiman Make? Latest Income Salary," *Latest Celebrity Net Worth*, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.celebworth.net/2018/07/how-much-money-does-neil-gaiman-make.html>.

which run counter to the cultural imagination of the Author as financially disinterested and creatively autonomous. The concept of creative autonomy implies creative restrictions. For writers, creative restrictions are material. This is the basis of Virginia Woolf's famous assertion that "a woman must have money and a room of one's own if she is to write fiction."<sup>6</sup> Woolf's argument, made in relation to women's literary production, touches upon something more universal about the craft of writing: that one's ability to engage freely with the creative, immaterial realm of fiction writing is contingent upon the stability of one's mundane, material conditions. The irony of making a living as a fiction writer is that to free one's literary production from material concerns, one must be financially secure, but to achieve financial security, a writer must align their desire to tell stories with the industry's demands to generate profits from sales.

That Virginia Woolf felt the need to draw attention to the material limitations imposed upon writers speaks to the way that the Author is perceived as being a special individual who has transcended the material and is solely preoccupied with art. Roland Barthes' portrait of the modern author in his essay "The Death of the Author" corroborates this idea. According to Barthes, modern literary culture, which is indebted to the rise of "the prestige of the individual," is "tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his

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<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1991), 4.

passions.”<sup>7</sup> From Barthes’ portrayal of the Author as the focus of literary culture and Woolf’s call to re-contextualize the Author within the material world emerges an image of the Author as an individual who embodies a standard of creative integrity as opposed to a worker who needs to eat. This notion is supported by the research of Ewan Mackenzie and Alan McKinlay into the psychic lives of artists or “cultural workers.” The working artist is perceived as “an individualised and competitive entrepreneurial subject” whose special talent, passion, and dedication will manifest in a successful career.<sup>8</sup> Through this lens, responsibility for the artist’s livelihood shifts from the institutions which support them to the artist themselves. An artist’s failure to make a living in their craft is perceived as the artist’s fault, not a failure of the industry.

For the purpose of this essay, creative autonomy in the literary marketplace is defined as the alignment of widespread consumption of the author’s writing (economic value) with the author’s personal pride in their writing (artistic value). Without artistic value, the writer’s creative ambitions are unfulfilled, and without economic value, the writer cannot pursue a full-time career in fiction writing. The conditions for creative autonomy are that the writer can pursue work of artistic value because its economic value is

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Authorship: From Plato To Postmodern*, ed. Sean Burke (Edinburgh, University Press, 1995), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Ewan Mackenzie and Alan McKinlay, “Hope Labour and the Psychic Life of Cultural Work,” *Human Relations*, (July 15, 2020): 12.

nearly assured. Following this logic, obtaining creative autonomy is inextricably linked to popularity; the publishing industry is designed to compensate authors based on sales, and sales are increasingly concentrated among an elite group of celebrity authors of which Neil Gaiman is a member. A report commissioned by Arts Council England (ACE) reveals that in 2017, “the top 1% of authors accounted for 32.8% of all sales and within this, the top 0.1% accounted for 13% of total sales.”<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, only the sales of the top 1000 bestselling books provide enough income to support their authors’ livelihoods; since authors may have multiple books on this list, even fewer than 1000 authors in England can make a full-time career of writing every year.<sup>10</sup> A generous estimate suggests that the 1000<sup>th</sup> bestselling book will sell 4000 copies and make £24000 (\$32000US) in a year.<sup>11</sup> For reference, based on Gaiman’s annual income, this is still less than he might make in any given week. A writer does not need Gaiman’s surplus of income to make a living, but an author who makes a living is not necessarily an author who can forgo market interests to pursue unconventional or risky creative ambitions. The “serious bifurcation in the market between a few successful stars and a struggling mainstream” demonstrates how the

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<sup>9</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21st Century: Understanding Models of Support for Literary Fiction* (2017), 19, [https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Literature in the 21st Century report.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Literature%20in%20the%2021st%20Century%20report.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21st Century*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Arts Council England, 17.

publishing industry does not sufficiently support the majority of published authors, let alone aspiring writers.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, a career like Gaiman's is universally sought, if not in his sales and visibility, then in his freedom to be flippant towards sales and visibility in service of higher artistic callings. After all, the image of the Author as described by Barthes is expected to prize the freedom of creative expression and integrity above all things; otherwise, why would they bother to write fiction in the first place? However, the precarity of the publishing industry makes this an unrealistic expectation for most writers.

Since the inception of the literary marketplace in the eighteenth-century, when writers began making their living from sales instead of patronage, difficult economic conditions have made it hard for authors to retain their creative autonomy. As described by Martha Woodmansee, when a literate middle class began to emerge in the eighteenth-century, the "demand for reading material increased steadily, enticing writers to try and earn a livelihood from the sale of their writings to a buying public."<sup>13</sup> Most writers, however, found themselves struggling financially instead of earning a stable income as they had expected. Woodmansee attributes these conditions of struggle to the numerous interlocking institutions which were unprepared to "support the large number of artists who came

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<sup>12</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21st Century*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Woodmansee, "The Genius and the Copyright," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17, no. 4 (1984): 433.

forward.”<sup>14</sup> One would hope that three centuries and a dramatic increase in literacy later, the publishing industry would be more proficient in supporting writers; however, ACE’s report shows that the number of published authors who can earn a full-time living has dropped significantly between 2005 and 2013, from a mildly hopeful 40% to a devastating 11.5%.<sup>15</sup> To this day, the publishing industry is unable to sufficiently support as many full-time careers as there are published writers.

Woodmansee’s research on the eighteenth-century literary marketplace also highlights a lasting connection between financial strife and creative autonomy: “The vast majority of writers, many of them succumbing to...commercial pressures...churned out imitations and variations on proven popular themes with unprecedented rapidity. Those who did not...sold poorly.”<sup>16</sup> To make a living, most writers had to abandon their creative ambitions in favour of appealing to the masses. This shows that writers have been pressured to compromise their creative autonomy to turn a profit ever since the career of fiction writing entered the marketplace. More poignantly, this demonstrates that it was seen as the individual’s responsibility to adapt to the harsh realities of the marketplace, not the marketplace’s

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<sup>14</sup> Woodmansee, “The Genius and the Copyright,” 433.

<sup>15</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Woodmansee, “The Interests in Disinterestedness,” in *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (Columbia University Press, 1994), 27.

responsibility to adapt to strengthen the individual's creative autonomy.

Those who *did* demand more of the literary marketplace looked not to the institutions, but to their audience. In eighteenth-century Germany, authors who sold poorly became known as the *Aufklärer*. They were ideologues who turned against the very reading public on whom their livelihood depended, criticizing their would-be audience as only being interested in simple entertainment.<sup>17</sup> Because the creative ambitions of the *Aufklärer* did not fit into the commercial formula for success, many of them were forced to find other sources of income. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing swore that he would not turn his back on the marketplace, but after struggling as a writer for twelve years, he accepted “a position as court librarian.”<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Schiller “just barely succeeded in making ends meet,” suffered a severe health decline due to overwork, and re-embraced aristocratic patronage “with much the same enthusiasm that he had displayed in commending himself to the public less than a decade before.”<sup>19</sup> Karl Philipp Moritz persevered in his craft, but at a price. Moritz “sought to escape his humble beginnings” through the upward mobility that authorship offered, but was so burdened by financial strain that his writing suffered: he always had to work on several projects at once, his writing was never polished to his liking,

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<sup>17</sup> Woodmansee, “The Interests in Disinterestedness,” 29.

<sup>18</sup> Woodmansee, “The Genius and the Copyright,” 431.

<sup>19</sup> Woodmansee, “The Genius and the Copyright,” 432.



and he unintentionally became a frequent self-plagiarist.<sup>20</sup> All three examples speak to the challenges of making a living as a sales-based author without compromising the creative aspirations that fuel the urge to write in the first place.

It is ironic that fiction writing, a craft of the imagination, as a career has historically privileged writers who prioritize familiarity and popularity over originality and artistry. The challenge of choosing inspiration over a profitable formula, according to Romanticist poet William Wordsworth, is this: “every Author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.”<sup>21</sup> Like the *Aufklärer*, Wordsworth attributed the risk of pursuing his unconventional creative ambitions to the reader, who instinctively wished “to be pleased in that particular way in which we have been accustomed to be pleased.”<sup>22</sup> The question of who can afford to take on this risk reveals something insidious about the structure of the literary marketplace. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued, the writer who is most prepared to withstand the precarity of the publishing industry is the writer who *already has* money:

The propensity to move towards the economically most risky positions, and above all the capacity to persist in them...even when

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<sup>20</sup> Woodmansee, “The Interests in Disinterestedness,” 30.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Woodmansee, “The Genius and the Copyright,” 429.

<sup>22</sup> William Wordsworth, “Preface,” in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (Longman, 1992), 87.

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they secure no short-term economic profit, seem to depend to a large extent on possession of substantial economic and social capital. This is firstly because economic capital provides the conditions for freedom from economic necessity, a private income (*la rente*) being one of the best substitutes for sales (*la vente*).<sup>23</sup>

The material survival of the independently wealthy writer is guaranteed whether or not their writing sells to the masses, so they are not required to take an interest in the marketplace or mass popularity. They write with the reassurance that even if only a select few readers appreciate their creative risks and unconventional novelties, they have at least been true to their artistic vision, and there will still be food on the table. Writers who are not independently wealthy need to acquire financial security in order to pursue a full-time career as a writer, which is hard given the precarity which has been consistent throughout the history of the literary marketplace.

Neil Gaiman, like most of the *Aufklärer*, was not born into wealth, and had to rely on his writing to survive. Like most authors, writing fiction was not immediately fruitful for him, either. Reflecting on the beginning of his writing career, Gaiman said: “I was failing to sell stuff and I was getting lots of rejection slips back...I said Ok, either I have no talent – which I do not choose to believe for reasons

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<sup>23</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” *Poetics* 12, no. 4-5, trans. Richard Nice (1983): 349.

of personal pride – or I am going about this the wrong way.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike most authors, when asked if he has ever paid the bills with non-writing jobs, he can say, “no, my day jobs were writing too.”<sup>25</sup> Neil Gaiman attributes his early survival as a writer to the handsome pay attached to his years in freelance journalism which led to the publication of two high-profile non-fiction books: a biography of Duran Duran in 1984 and *Don't Panic: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion* in 1988. Gaiman admits to his great fortune of coming into the journalism scene when opportunities were plentiful and the value of his writing was high enough to sustain him:

I was very lucky because I made this decision at a time in England when lots and lots of magazines and newspapers were getting stuff done by freelancers. Coincidentally, around the time that I stopped, they stopped. There was no freelance work in England for around five years. These days there's lots and lots of freelance work, although they are still getting paid the same amount we were back in 1984. Remembering how hard it was to make a living back then, I wonder how do these people do it now?<sup>26</sup>

This analysis of the world of writing was accurate in 1999 and continues to be so. The data from a compendium of rates for

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<sup>24</sup> Claire White, “A Conversation with Neil Gaiman,” *The Internet Writing Journal* 3, no. 3 (1999) accessed December 13, 2020,

<https://www.writerswrite.com/journal/neil-gaiman-3991>.

<sup>25</sup> Neil Gaiman (@neilhimsel), *Twitter*, October 26, 2020,

<https://twitter.com/neilhimsel/status/1320675472469069825>.

<sup>26</sup> White, “A Conversation with Neil Gaiman.”

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freelance writing in the UK shows that, between 1999 and 2020, the average magazine article pays £343,<sup>27</sup> while the average online article pays £221.<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that throughout the years, some rates were much higher, while some jobs, even in the past five years, offered the low rate of “exposure.” Disturbingly, these rates are on par with how much money Gaiman earned from his writing in 1984, which he shares on Twitter:

@sanneyman: Writing prompt: You will run out of money entirely in three months and your only skill is writing.

@neilhimsel: That was my original writing prompt. ‘You have no other skills and you have no money. But you have an old manual typewriter. If you sell an article you’ll get £300. And your rent is £25 a week. Go.’<sup>29</sup>

The value of writing may not have risen in the 40 years since Gaiman was living paycheck-to-paycheck, but the cost of rent has, significantly. Currently, the lowest cost of a one-bedroom apartment in London is £236 a month; however, on average, today’s renter pays £756 a month.<sup>30</sup> Gaiman’s freelance journalism survival guide, which

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<sup>27</sup> “Words, per 1000 / mags,” NUJ Rate for the Job, accessed December 13, 2020, <http://www.londonfreelance.org/rates/index.php?work=Words,+per+1000&sect=mags&arch=N>.

<sup>28</sup> “Words, per 1000 / online,” NUJ Rate for the Job.

<sup>29</sup> Sandra Newman (@sanneyman) and Neil Gaiman (@neilhimsel), Twitter, July 9, 2014, <https://twitter.com/neilhimsel/status/1074352067521769472>.

<sup>30</sup> Sam Bromley, “London rent prices: which areas have the highest and lowest average prices?,” Simply Business, accessed December 13, 2020.

worked despite “how hard it was to make a living back then,” would not be enough to sustain most writers today.

When comparing the beginning of Gaiman’s career to the economic conditions of today’s aspiring writers, some degree of his success might be attributed to fortunate timing. Some consider the period of time in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when Gaiman began his career as a Golden Age for writers. The business model for publishing fiction, which was relatively new for the time, according to Arts Council England, supported authors with generous advances that rendered sales “if not irrelevant, then not an immediate financial concern.”<sup>31</sup> This benefited Gaiman immensely as he secured non-fiction book deals and worked towards publishing his own stories. When asked why he wrote a Duran Duran biography, Gaiman’s response was: “I was 23 and the £2000 advance paid for an electric typewriter and covered my rent and food for several months.”<sup>32</sup> This business model evidently supported Gaiman while he worked to publish the unconventional fantasy fiction for which he is now known. One year after his second non-fiction book *Don’t Panic* was released, Gaiman began publishing *The Sandman*, which would run in DC Comics for 26 years. The year after, in 1990, he published

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<sup>31</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21st Century*, 38.

<sup>32</sup> Neil Gaiman (@neilhimsel), Twitter, October 10, 2018, <https://twitter.com/neilhimsel/status/1050108542483619840>.

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*Good Omens* with renowned fantasy author Terry Pratchett (though at the time they were, in their own words, “just a couple of guys”).<sup>33</sup>

This business model is still in place, but it no longer has the equalizing and livelihood-sustaining power it did for Neil Gaiman. The economic conditions of the publishing industry have been recently impacted by the 2008 recession. ACE’s report shows that sales of print fiction were showing positive growth until 2008 and have never recovered; this instability has only been compounded by the rise of digital sales and “perhaps most worryingly, a shift in consumer habits.”<sup>34</sup> The selling price for books has also gone down, even with inflation, resulting in the “double whammy” of “falling book sales overall, and falling dividends for the sales they are making.”<sup>35</sup> To make matters worse, ACE reveals that “no less than 98% of our respondents believed that advances were falling...advances for literary fiction in particular are going down.”<sup>36</sup> Advances no longer have the power to insulate writers from the whims of the marketplace. Under these conditions, even the author of a bestselling novel is not guaranteed to have lasting financial stability. The profit from a breakout hit is not what it used to be; once that book drops off bestseller lists, sales might slow to a stop, as would the author’s

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<sup>33</sup> Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, *Good Omens* (London: Corgi Books, 1990), 11.

<sup>34</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21st Century*, 10-12.

<sup>35</sup> Arts Council England, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Arts Council England, 38.

income.<sup>37</sup> The bestselling author will still have to fret about future income, save up in case sales suddenly drop, and strive to write the next book before money runs out, all the while marketing their book in an effort to keep sales up and building relationships with readers online in an effort to secure future sales. This report reveals a bleak reality for today's aspiring writers: publishing a novel does not guarantee a stable living and publishing a successful novel does not guarantee a stable future.

It is not unreasonable to consider that Neil Gaiman, writing in another era, might have remained a nameless writer who, unable to pay rent with his early publications or sustain himself on his advances, was forced to abandon his creative ambitions and find a “real job” (a fate he often jokes with relief he has avoided). It is also not unreasonable to consider that had many writers today made their debut at the same time as Gaiman, their respective bodies of work would have earned them more financial stability, and thus more creative autonomy – or that writers with day jobs today may have sustained full-time careers in writing 40 years ago. ACE cautions against this kind of speculation, however; after all, their report begins with the bolded words: “It’s easy to believe there was once a Golden Age for literary fiction, but the history of publishing tells us otherwise. It has rarely, if ever, been easy to support literary

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<sup>37</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21st Century*, 19.

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writing.”<sup>38</sup> Another lens through which to view the beginning of Neil Gaiman’s career is this: no writer (barring the independently wealthy) can enter the literary marketplace exerting complete creative autonomy.

A writer cannot afford to be disinterested in profit until they have made enough profit to pursue creative projects with unconventional artistic value that might put its economic value at risk. Creative risks require financial security, and the gap between the financially secure and insecure author is only widening as the publishing industry offers its dwindling funds to celebrity authors whose books reliably accumulate massive sales. Book advances are going down across the board, but with the glaring exception of the 1% for whom advances are spiraling upwards.<sup>39</sup> Speaking events provide wonderful opportunities for exposure, but many writers appear for nothing more, while appearances by celebrity authors are generously compensated.<sup>40</sup> The publishing industry’s unequal distribution of its resources makes it much more difficult for most authors to be disinterested in the economic value of their writing.

To emphasize the publishing industry’s inability to support its writers, a common turning point for an author’s financial situation is the first time they are approached about having their writing adapted for the screen. Screen adaptations supplement an author’s

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<sup>38</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21st Century*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Arts Council England, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Arts Council England, 45-46.



income, and therefore their creative autonomy. In a 2001 interview, Gaiman drew a direct connection between his Hollywood income and his freedom to work on esoteric creative projects:

I still find it very difficult to treat anything that happens in Hollywood seriously. The money is always nice though...I was asked to contribute a poem to this anthology. I wrote a poem, which at one point was five pages long. By the time it was finished, I had cut it down to about sixteen lines. I was very proud of it, and it had gone through several transformations...Finally it ended up as a weird little iambic thing that worked and had a really haunting little ending. It was about three days' work to produce this one little poem, for which I will probably be paid about \$15. If it's picked up as a best of the year, I might get another \$20 out of it. I look at Hollywood as the entity which subsidizes my being able to spend three days working on this one little poem...Which is really a puzzling and bemusing kind of thing.<sup>41</sup>

The length of this quote in relation to the little poem in question indicates how much time and attention Gaiman paid to a poem of ultimately very little monetary value. This example illustrates the discrepancy between the thoughtfulness of the creative process (artistic value) and the economic value of the finished product. More importantly, Gaiman admits that he was only able to devote three days' time to a weird little haunting poem because he had Hollywood

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<sup>41</sup> Claire E. White, "Interview with Neil Gaiman," *The Internet Writing Journal* 5, no. 6 (2001), <https://www.writerswrite.com/journal/neil-gaiman-7011>.

as a source of income. Most writers do not have three days to dedicate to one little poem worth \$15 – not without working on other projects or attending to a day job between drafts – because most full-time writers do not experience the windfall which Hollywood provides.

A screen adaptation of a novel – or better yet, a series – is a rare (albeit increasing) opportunity that is difficult for an author to turn down. This is how one author describes how she felt when she was approached about turning her debut novel into a movie: “I really wanted my writing to reach a new audience. Actually, I really wanted to be able to afford furniture.”<sup>42</sup> Both of these comments imply that the author was drawn to the material benefits of a screen adaptation: the chance to attract new readers and sales to her books, and the money to furnish her home. Adaptations of books are beneficial to studios as well, as studios can manage risks by taking on a fully-developed story that usually comes with its own fanbase.<sup>43</sup> The risk, however, gets shifted over to the author who must relinquish control over their creative vision at the risk of their story being, as Neil Gaiman phrases it, “unnecessarily screwed up by other people.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Caren Lissner, “How My First Novel Became A Movie,” *The Atlantic*, September 17, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/09/how-my-first-novel-became-a-movie/539430/>.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Liptak, “Why Hollywood is turning to books for its biggest productions,” *The Verge*, January 26, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/1/26/14326356/hollywood-movie-book-adaptations-2017-expanse-game-of-thrones>.

Screen adaptations risk being unfaithful to their source material because of budget and time constraints, as well as creative complications, such as losing the emotional core that initially drew readers to the book.<sup>45</sup> The latter often happens because authors are unlikely to be formally included in their book’s screen adaptation; once again, this privilege tends to be reserved for a small percentage of successful authors.<sup>46</sup> Though the repeated adage of “the book is better than the movie” is intended as a compliment to the author, it also highlights the powerlessness of the author to retain the integrity of their story in a screen adaptation. Nonetheless, for the majority of authors, it is *worth* the risk of disappointing loyal readers with an adaptation that feels disjointed from the novel if they can receive enough money to work on another book. In other words, screen adaptations are frequently an exchange of creative autonomy in the present for the increased likelihood of creative autonomy in the future.

Neil Gaiman is one of a few fortunate authors whose screen adaptations span beyond one movie, trilogy, or TV series. More importantly, he has exerted an uncommon and rather remarkable amount of creative control over these adaptations. Gaiman’s very first

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<sup>44</sup> Lidija Haas, “Neil Gaiman: ‘Good Omens feels more apt now than it did 30 years ago,’” *The Guardian*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/24/neil-gaiman-interview-good-omens>.

<sup>45</sup> Liptak, “Why Hollywood is turning to books for its biggest productions.”

<sup>46</sup> Lissner, “How My First Novel Became A Movie.”

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solo novel *Neverwhere* was technically an adaptation of the 1996 TV series for which Gaiman wrote the script. As scenes were cut and creative compromises were made in the show, Gaiman was in a unique position to reassert control by writing every loss into the book.<sup>47</sup> Since then, the only screen adaptation of his writing for which he has had no involvement is the stop-motion animated film *Coraline*. Warner Bros. spent twenty years trying to convince Gaiman to sign on to a film adaptation of *The Sandman*, but Gaiman insisted it was impossible to condense his comic series into a movie without horribly disfiguring the story; he rejected unsatisfying film scripts until he finally made a deal with Netflix to adapt *The Sandman* into a TV series which began filming in 2020.<sup>48</sup> Gaiman's formal involvement in the TV adaptation of *American Gods*, meant he had the power to replace its showrunners when he was unhappy with the direction they had in mind for its second season.<sup>49</sup> Because his livelihood does not depend on the adaptation of his stories, he is in a rare position to decline screen adaptations of his work and demand creative control from Hollywood. While most authors are forced to forfeit creative autonomy for a screen adaptation of their writing, screen adaptations only *enhance* Neil Gaiman's creative autonomy.

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<sup>47</sup> White, "A Conversation with Neil Gaiman."

<sup>48</sup> Seth Meyers, "Neil Gaiman Compares Quarantine to Being Locked in a Cellar with a Bomb," *Late Night With Seth Meyers*, January 13, 2021, Video, 5:00, <https://youtu.be/8GrQFZ5IDVg>.

<sup>49</sup> Lesley Goldberg, "American Gods' Hires New Showrunner for Season 2," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 2, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/american-gods-hires-new-showrunner-season-2-1080813>.

Neil Gaiman's uncommon creative autonomy in Hollywood is no more evident than in the 2019 limited series *Good Omens*. Bringing *Good Omens* to the screen was precious to Gaiman because it was the dying wish of his co-author, Terry Pratchett, that an adaptation was done right. Gaiman has said "All I wanted to do was to make something Terry would have liked...That was the only rule."<sup>50</sup> This is undeniably heartwarming; it is also bittersweet when one considers the rarity of a situation in which an author is signed onto a screen adaptation as writer, producer, and showrunner. Although Gaiman says the studio was relatively flexible when the show went beyond budget early on, he was very blunt about the challenges of being a showrunner.<sup>51</sup> By the time *Good Omens* was ready for release, he stated he would likely never be a showrunner again because "I was not put on this planet to have to argue with someone about fucking budgets."<sup>52</sup> This bold claim surely struck a chord with those who want to write for a living precisely because their creative aspirations run in opposition to concerns of budget and profit. It also gives the impression that the Author is always in a position to prioritize artistic value over economic value, when in reality, creative autonomy is limited to those few celebrity authors

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<sup>50</sup> Liz Shannon Miller, "Neil Gaiman had one rule for the *Good Omens* adaptation: Making Terry Pratchett happy," *The Verge*, May 30, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/30/18645935/neil-gaiman-interview-good-omens-amazon-adaptation-terry-pratchett-michael-sheen-david-tennant>.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, "Neil Gaiman had one rule for the *Good Omens* adaptation."

<sup>52</sup> Miller.

who shape the overall cultural imagination of the Author. In the cultural imagination, the Author is successful because they exert creative autonomy, even though the reverse is true: the Author can exert creative autonomy because they are successful.

The emphasis in the cultural imagination on the Author as a special, self-empowered individual partially explains why the literary marketplace continues to overflow with aspiring writers despite the precarity of the industry. Writers are encouraged to see themselves as the Author, an individual who succeeds through sheer talent, dedication, and disinterest in profit. This narrative prioritizes the importance of creative integrity over the reality of the need for financial compensation. As Levey warns, “the positioning of creative writing as a special domain, detached from business considerations, allows for writers’ exploitation by pressuring them to be disinterested in their economic situation.”<sup>53</sup> Mackenzie and McKinlay find this to be true across creative and cultural work; notions of fulfilment and empowerment through one’s craft is a Trojan Horse which sneaks in “deteriorating funding and support, employment conditions and pay.”<sup>54</sup> The literary production of the creative writer may be perceived as valuable and important, but barring a select few writers, their contributions to literary culture do not follow through to consistent financial security.

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<sup>53</sup> Levey, “Post-Press Literature.”

<sup>54</sup> Mackenzie and McKinlay, “Hope labour,” 2.

Because the Author occupies a special position in the cultural imagination, writers knowingly consent to navigating the precarity of the literary marketplace for the opportunity to make a living on the written word. According to Mackenzie and McKinlay, the struggle of making a living in the arts is valorized for its liberation from “the bounds of waged labour”, and artists are likely to take pride in their ability to withstand financial insecurity for the sake of pursuing their passion.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the world of fiction writing is dominated by “hope labour”, a term Mackenzie and McKinlay use to describe the phenomenon of artists being under-compensated for their work while they persevere in hopes that talent and dedication will open up higher-paying work opportunities to them in the future.<sup>56</sup> Hope labour also encapsulates free labour, which is a way “for those able to afford it” to demonstrate their artistic value in order to prove their economic value.<sup>57</sup> This links back to Bourdieu’s claim that the independently wealthy are more likely to withstand the precarity of the publishing industry, and to Woolf’s observation that the writer is expected to surmount material needs to pursue their craft.

Hope labour thrives in the world of fiction writing today through the rise of independent presses, self-publishing, and online literary magazines. The traditional publishing industry can only take on so many writers, but an aspiring writer is never left without a place

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<sup>55</sup> Mackenzie and McKinlay, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Mackenzie and McKinlay, 12.

to submit their work. Online literary magazines and journals accept a wide array of unconventional written works, but many cannot afford to pay their contributors. Submitting manuscripts to independent presses could be construed as a form of hope labour since, according to ACE, “it is questionable” whether or not independent presses “can afford to fully support writers”; it is not unreasonable to suggest that many independently-published writers are holding out hopes of being noticed by a better-funded traditional publishing house.<sup>58</sup> Self-publishing can be seen as hope labour for similar reasons, as Levey finds “many post-pressers are...working only transitionally within this domain, while holding out for traditional validation.”<sup>59</sup> There are more than enough spaces for writers to submit their unpublished work, but fair compensation is another thing. Adequate compensation that frees up time and energy for creative autonomy is, increasingly, in another world. One could even argue that a writer with unconventional creative ambitions working within a popular genre – the kind of writer the *Aufklärer* sneered at – is also engaging in hope labour. The publishing industry today, by design, does not offer a pathway to creative autonomy for many writers at all, but hope labour encourages aspiring writers to work hard while obfuscating their chances at success.

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<sup>58</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21st Century*, 23.

<sup>59</sup> Levey, “Post-Press Literature.”



Insidiously, the *labour* of hope labour is not the creative kind that Gaiman experiences – that is, locking himself in a room to meet a deadline or fighting valiantly for his artistic vision. For most writers, time they would spend on the labours of creative life is frequently stolen by time spent on survival. To ensure their material survival, writers must exert time and energy engaging with the literary marketplace. As previously established, even a writer with a bestselling novel needs to be mindful of their sales, which can taper off dramatically once their novels drop off bestseller lists. Self-publishing platforms give authors the opportunity to monitor algorithms and maneuver prices to maximize the profit from their sales but, according to Timothy Lacquintano, “the activity and the perceived need to constantly keep abreast of changes also [induces] anxiety and exhaustion.”<sup>60</sup> The rare writer like Gaiman, meanwhile, does not need to spend time monitoring his sales because they are all but guaranteed:

It’s important to the publishers that the books make the bestseller lists, of course. But in terms of how my sales patterns work, *Neverwhere* didn’t hit any bestseller lists. But I’ve probably sold more copies of *Neverwhere* than the average New York Times bestseller. They come out and they sell all their books in the first few weeks and

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<sup>60</sup> Timothy Lacquintano, “Amazon as a New Intermediary: Experimental Self-Publishing and Popular Fiction Writing,” in *Mass Authorship and the Rise of Self-Publishing* (University of Iowa Press, 2016), 113.

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that's it. Whereas, *Neverwhere* sells the same number of copies every month. My sales patterns tend to be perennial sellers.<sup>61</sup>

The certainty of Gaiman's book sales gives him the freedom to distance himself from the interests of his publishers, which reinforces the cultural perception of the Author as being interested in their craft over their sales. Unfortunately the consistency of his sales, which enhances his autonomy, is inherently rare; he is referred to by his editors as "that unicorn" whose works sell routinely years after their release just "by word of mouth."<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, most authors are forced to take an interest in their sales and marketing if they are to make a living, even if it means they are left with less time and energy for their craft.

More concerning than the energy diverted from writing to selling is the way in which the marketplace infiltrates the writing process itself. It is common for writers to use social media to market their work and cultivate intimate fanbases, but Lacquintano finds that increased proximity to readers can put pressure for writers to increase the speed of their literary production:

The interaction with fans led to constant requests for new writing. The writers knew they had to keep feeding the beast, and they worried that this would dilute the quality of their work. Those

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<sup>61</sup> Mia Funk, "Other Worlds Inches Away: An Interview with Neil Gaiman," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, July 16, 2018, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2018/07/other-worlds-inches-away-an-interview-with-neil-gaiman/>.

<sup>62</sup> Haas, "Neil Gaiman: 'Good Omens' feels more apt now than it did 30 years ago."

who took time to craft their stories lamented the missed opportunities to exploit audience interest in their work.<sup>63</sup>

Being directly exposed to reader interest in one's work can be motivating for a writer, but it can be a double-edged sword in the world of self-publishing. When an author's livelihood is dependent on the continued (financial) support of their readers, it is tempting to foreground the interests of the reader over the best interests of their work. This tension between expectations of creative integrity and literary output has been ingrained in the publishing industry since its inception; recall the career of Karl Philipp Moritz, who was frequently forced to publish his work before it could be polished to his satisfaction in order to break even.<sup>64</sup> The publishing industry has been structured so that the demands of material survival place the career of the writer at odds with the creative autonomy and integrity of the writer.

Today's writers also continue to be constrained by the burden of expectation that Wordsworth, along with the *Aufklärer*, resented. Wordsworth argued that the common reader's preference to enjoy the kind of books "which have long continued to please them" made it difficult for writers who wished to experiment with their work to succeed in the marketplace.<sup>65</sup> Today, Lacquintano's research finds that it is not uncommon for writers who frequently market their

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<sup>63</sup> Lacquintano, "Experimental Self-Publishing," 113.

<sup>64</sup> Woodmansee, "The Interests in Disinterestedness," 30.

<sup>65</sup> Wordsworth, "Preface," 87.

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writing on social media to feel stifled by an awareness of what is expected of their writing, sometimes finding it difficult “to write the kinds of texts that mattered to them.”<sup>66</sup> According to Neil Gaiman, this pressure can even be amplified among bestselling authors. Gaiman says he intentionally wrote across genres early in his career because he realized that “‘bestselling authors had a weirdly limited power’ as show ponies rewarded only ‘as long as they did the same thing.’”<sup>67</sup> This statement carries the worrying implication that even successful authors have restricted creative autonomy because they are held to the standards of their earlier writing. An author’s obedience to the marketplace often works in opposition to the artistic drive which draws them to a career in fiction writing in the first place.

In conclusion, the creative autonomy of the writer and the means of making a living as an author are often incompatible with one another. It is increasingly difficult for an author to forge a career guided by creative autonomy, freed of the pressures of the marketplace, without the kind of financial security which is only attainable by a small minority of authors. Because the publishing industry cannot sufficiently support the majority of authors, it is only possible for a small group of celebrity authors to exert creative autonomy in their careers. Nonetheless, masses of aspiring writers are sold the narrative that pursuing a career in the craft they are passionate

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<sup>66</sup> Lacquintano, “Experimental Self-Publishing,” 113.

<sup>67</sup> Haas, “Neil Gaiman: ‘Good Omens feels more apt now than it did 30 years ago.’”

about is, in itself, creative autonomy, and the publishing industry is never short of new authors to publish. These authors find themselves compromising their creative autonomy to tend to material concerns because their writing needs to make them money if they are to continue writing for a living at all. The Author is not some special individual who can sustain themselves on the integrity of their art; storytelling, on the other hand, *is* special. The publishing industry might inhibit the creative autonomy of most writers, but it can never destroy the fundamental human impulse to tell stories, which existed before it became a career, and would persevere even if there was not a single cent to be made from it.

Meanwhile, a month into the explosion of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Neil Gaiman found another space of solitude to write in his temporary New Zealand lodging: “Today I have gone to the cave to write. Literally. The house we are renting has a small cave, with a table in it, at the top of the hill the house is on. I feel very hobby.”<sup>68</sup> In a safe country, surrounded by his family, whom he has always been able to financially support with the written word, Neil Gaiman gets to write—to live—as most writers will only ever dream of.

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<sup>68</sup> Neil Gaiman (@neilhimsel), Instagram, April 15, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-OrGVHjXP/>.

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