

Space For Rant

by Jan Atkinson-Grosjean

"Why are authors so often treated with disrespect and disregard?" asked Bill Kinsella recently ("The Quiet Scourge of the Invisible Author Syndrome," *Globe and Mail*). His comment was prompted by the film *Leiberman in Love* which won a 1996 Oscar in the Short Film Category. *Leiberman in Love* is based on Kinsella's 1987 book *Red Wolf*. *Red Wolf*, but Kinsella had no idea the film had been made, let alone nominated for an Academy Award; last he heard it was simply "optioned." Not only was he not informed a film sat in the can ready for distribution, he received no credit on Oscar night as author of the original material. Such bad manners are not confined to Hollywood. Kinsella experienced similar discourtesy from Canadian filmmakers: The producers of *Dance Me Outside*, from its book of the same name, "kept in such close touch...that I had to pay my own way into a theatre...to see it for the first time." Without the books the movies would not exist, yet in neither case was Kinsella's authorship

appropriately recognized. We should all have such problems.



The movie industry is notorious for chewing up writers and spitting out the bones, but it isn't alone. Chain stores, retail warehouses, and second-hand bookstores all make a buck from books with little or no return to writers. Powerful newspaper groups reuse freelance articles without acknowledgment or fee. Per-word rates in periodicals haven't increased in a decade or more. Publishers accept less and less risk, holding advances and royalties at poverty levels. Some literary magazines pay in copies not cash. Without writers, none would have a product to sell yet the writer's contribution earns little economic recognition. I spoke to one writer recently who, with 14 books published, still struggles to make a living. Why do writers accept such low assessments of their worth? Why do they tolerate pay and conditions which would send any self-respecting garment worker to the picket lines?

Then there's the insatiable maw of the Internet. More and more books go on-line every day; more and more magazines and newspapers proclaim an Internet presence but offer no additional compensation to writers. The Internet provides a huge audience with an enormous appetite for words, but we, the writers could starve amid the plenty. Why, one wonders, do we do it? Why continue to write when the rewards are apparently so very small? In a sense we are authors of our own misfortune. We crave an audience because, without one, the creative process is incomplete, the project unfinished. In order to find our audience, to achieve recognition, we often give our work away. Yet if we don't value it, who will?

Of course, the non-monetary rewards should be ignored. We work from home (the sweatshop of the '90s) and control our own schedules. When we're not chasing after hack work to pay the bills, fiction writers in particular know the satisfaction of creating something. One day, this three-inch pile of manuscript pages beside me might be published, give someone pleasure, and pay me the equivalent of minimum wage. But a few pros on

a long list of cons do not a rationale make. Nor do they justify the sheer lunacy of trying to write for a living.

The disempowerment is not only economic, it's intellectual as well. Writers, it seems, are not to be trusted to interpret their own words. For the past 20 years or so, postmodern philosophers—especially the incomprehensible French ones—have been touting the "death of the author." Roland Barthes states: "Writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin...the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes."

Writing, then, only begins when the author "dies" Jacques Derrida tells us "there is nothing outside the text"—that books all say something other than what they appear to say, regardless of the author's intentions. In fact, what writers think Derrida, emerges only deconstruction. Books are disemboweled to expose the viscera of internal contradictions; the politics, class and social context of the author; and inconsistencies between the text and what the author has said elsewhere. "Hidden meanings" are "discovered," or no meaning at all. Critics decide what a text "really" says. The author's motives are irrelevant; the author's voice ignored.

So why do otherwise intelligent, talented people keep writing? Why work long hours, for little reward, when just about anything else pays better and gets you out of the house now and again? Why write, when academics claim writers have nothing unique to say? I don't know. Nor, thanks to Derrida and friends, do I know if writing can still be defended in terms of social utility. All I know is writers would rather write than do anything else. That's why you do it, why I do it, and why, indignities aside, even Bill Kinsella does it. Ain't that so, Bill? In some indefinable way, writing strokes our pleasure centres. We're hooked, intoxicated with words; that's why we keep on doing it. In light of the evidence, I can't think of any other explanation. Writers' Anonymous, anyone? ☺

Arts Alive makes "Space for Rant" available for people to express their views concerning arts issues. Send your submission to Arts Alive by fax, e-mail or mail.

Arts Alive reserves the right to edit submissions for length and clarity.

This article, titled No Respect?, was first published in Wordworks: The Journal of the Federation of British Columbia Writers, summer 1996 issue—and is reprinted with the author's permission.

Jan Atkinson-Grosjean is a freelance writer/editor and writing consultant. She completed her first novel, *The 49th Paradox*, in 1994, and the second, *Waiting for Martha*, in 1996.