



The Writer's Compass

Turning the Next Page

Day jobs – to do or not to do?: Sustaining Your Writing While Making a Living Liz Niven

About the author

Liz Niven has published seven poetry collections and participated in literary and language events in Britain, Eastern Europe and the Far East. She has collaborated with artists in various public art programmes. She has been a teacher of English and Learning Support, a Scots Language Development Officer and a Schools' Cultural Co-ordinator. She facilitates workshops and residencies for a range of bodies such as the Scottish Poetry Library, National Galleries, London Poetry Society and most Scottish local authorities.

People talk about trying to achieve a satisfactory work/play balance. This at first seems a neat, easy problem to solve. Almost mathematical. 50 -50. That sounds like a good balance? But what happens if your work and play overlap? What happens if you can't quite neatly separate them out? And, further, what happens if you consider your writing life as separate from your 'work' job? Then, do you need a sort of work/writing work/play balance? It could all get out of hand, I suppose.

I'm trying, as part of this commission, to take stock of whether I have achieved a satisfactory work/writing work/play balance. And alongside this, am I 'sustaining my writing while earning a living'? For several years, I was a teacher. I started writing, mainly because I listened to radio short stories and felt a strong urge to try writing them. (*Note 1: Listen and read. A genre or medium or voice or style will attract you and make you want to write too.*) I also moved from Glasgow, to Dumbarton, to Easter Ross, to Galloway. All the people I encountered spoke in different accents and dialects. (*Note 2: Listen and emulate. The idiosyncrasies of speech forms are brilliant for creating characters and making them sound different from each other.*)

For a while I was a Teacher-Who-Wrote. After a few publications and a few forays into playwriting for the local community, I discovered gradually that I was a Writer-Who-Taught. And after a few years of that, it was time to go. 'Give up the day job' is the cliché. A Scots Language secondment followed by a three-year writer's residency severed the ties with the chalk face. I thought. But, oddly enough, across the decades, I've continued to enter classrooms on a regular basis as a creative writer. I write, edit and compile poetry packs for educational use and work with Scottish Qualifications Authority to write and mark the Advanced Higher Language Examination paper and Advanced Higher Creative Writing, respectively.

One major reason, of course, is financial. Poetry doesn't pay. We don't usually have an agent to help find or place work either. But unless you're in the best-selling 'three-for-two' novelist bracket, you're going to need to earn a living somehow. For me, keeping it wordy is my choice. The situation won't suit all writers. It'll vary with writers across forms and genres. Some will want nothing to do with literature in their 'earning' world while some enjoy mixing their personal writing world with projects and commissions in the 'public' world. I see all the writing-related pursuits as part of my life as a professional writer.

The main risk in being extremely busy with residencies and facilitating other writers' work is that you think you're busy writing but actually you're not producing your own work. Can helping others to write become a diversionary tactic? An enormous version of sharpening your pencils? Making a 'quick' coffee? Walking that dog?

(Note 3: Stop fretting about it). Recognizing what sort of writer's hat feels comfy seems useful. Are you a solitary writer? Are you a prolific writer? Most of us feel we don't produce enough new work. I like doing other things. I enjoy the community work, the school work, the editing of poetry books for schools or adult bodies. I count myself lucky that my paying job is still all about words. The very same material I use when I write my own poems. How lucky is that? And yes there's an opposite stance taken by many writers that they'd rather have a day job outwith literary fields. Every writer has to work out for themselves what suits best.

(Note 4: These 'paying jobs' needn't cancel out writing new work simultaneously.) If I have a residency, or a series of workshops, I'll usually write new poems related to that particular project. For example, I've often found myself involved in a project where my job is to help the participants to write poetry in response to art works. In advance, I'd write new poems in response, then share these with the participants, adults or young people as a first introduction. This means my writing is sustained, new work is prompted, while I'm still earning a living. To further analyse this example, it's great to listen in to students' and teachers' reactions to a painting, jot them down as we go round the art work, often with an art specialist, then add to and refashion their phrases into lines of poetry, communal poems.

These approaches, writing new work as part of a new project, or creating group and joint poems, can be applied in many fields, many sorts of residencies. I suppose that's how it works for me. I'd imagine writers working in an entirely different, non-words world as their 'better-paying-job' can still use all their daily experiences as writing fodder. Looking back at the last sentence, a phrase strikes me as redundant. There is surely no such thing as a 'non-words world'. The challenge we all share as writers is to find material and make our own selected use of it. We're all in that one together. Every job will have words and experiences which can nourish and sustain their own new writing.

Issues of time and place are other preoccupations affecting a writer earning a living. Where and when to write in the busy day job. It reminds me of attempting to write when you're a full time mother. But at least a 'worker' has a lunch hour, maybe a journey home where some writing can be done (a packed commuter train still leaves brain-space). I look back and recognize that when I started out writing, I had a full time teaching job and three young children. Walking the floor with a baby in the wee small hours can provide unexpected extra ideas. As can the 'day job' whether it's working in Domino's Pizza or managing a busy bank. Somehow, if we want to that much, we make the time to write.

There's no doubt that writer friends and colleagues, retreats, deadlines, public readings where new work is expected, encourage and force us to write, find the time and space. But it does seem to be about finding out what works best for you. I know for me, whether it's working with adults or young people, in art galleries or schools, airports or community centres, it's while earning a living that my writing is often sustained.

© Liz Niven
August 2012

<http://www.lizniven.com/>

Turning the Next Page is a programme of work being undertaken by literature organisations in Scotland with investment from Creative Scotland to support writers living and working in Scotland, especially those who are at an early stage of their careers.