



## How did I get here?

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### Rosie Garland aka Rosie Lugosi: How to have your cake and eat it

Rosie Garland aka Rosie Lugosi has an eclectic writing and performance history, ranging from singing in 80s Goth band The March Violets, to her current incarnation as Rosie Lugosi the Vampire Queen, electrifying performance poet. As well as three solo collections of poetry (*Hell and Eden*, *Coming Out At Night* and *Creatures of the Night*), her award-winning short stories, poems and essays have been widely anthologised. *Mapping the Interior*, her first novel, is currently with an agent. She has won both the Erotic Oscar for Performance Artist of the Year and the Diva Award for Solo Performer.

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#### Why keeping the day job works for me

I'm passionate about writing. I'm also passionate about putting bread on my table and a rent cheque in the post.

I describe myself as a writer and a performer, yet I have consciously chosen to keep a part-time (two and a half days a week) job with a charity. It's shift-based rather than 9-5, which provides a lot of flexibility. There are a number of reasons why this works for me. Very importantly, it clears most of the week for writing and performing - but not the entire week. So it forces me to be focussed. I could drift otherwise; I know the truth of the cliché that 'work expands to fill the time allotted to it'.

The job also grounds me in the real world. It gets me out of the house and rubbing up against the rest of the human race. All this is good for my mental well-being. I like the grounded ordinariness of sitting on Manchester buses with their surly drivers and surlier customers. I don't want to be a writer who lives in an ivory tower,

distanced from the rest of the world. I believe the quality of my writing would suffer.

My 'day-job' pays the rent. I'm realistic: I don't have reserves of inherited wealth, neither do I want to be so poor that my housing options are restricted to crummy. Each month I know I will have just enough to cover the rent and utility bills. Everything else is up to me. This includes those months when performance work dries up, or hey, I get ill. I like the security of knowing that if I come down with measles, I won't starve. Call me old-fashioned.

I respect writers who live by the sweat of their pens, but I can't count the times I have listened to them stress about where the next mortgage payment is coming from; or how they feel constrained to take on exhausting work they don't enjoy 'because of the money'. They're desperate: chasing work. Any work. I know myself well enough to realise that level of daily anxiety would stomp on my creativity.

However, my decision to combine writing with a job that is not directly connected to the creative process goes against the pervading myth of the

'correct' course in a writer's life. This seems to proceed as follows: one, discover a passion for writing. Two, as soon as possible give up work and progress to being a 'serious' (i.e. full-time) writer. Three, move to Majorca and live on the side of a hill in the middle of nowhere. Maybe not the last one, but you get the drift. The message I have received is that being a 'part-time' writer is a cop-out reserved for those too cowardly to hurl themselves into the deep end. Refusing to commit. But I *am* a full-time writer. I just don't do it all of the time.

My approach to marketing myself is equally diverse. I do not have a performance agent (I have a literary agent, see below), but I have a website which is updated regularly (vital). I target specific events. I use word-of-mouth. Most radically, I link up with trusted comrades and, gasp, *we get each other gigs*. Sadly, I have found some poets to be very possessive of their contacts, and loath to recommend other writers. As though they fear someone taking a light from their candle will dim their brightness... my attitude is that it serves to fill the world with poetic candle power.

Another great thing I've done for my peace of mind has been to get a damn good accountant, recommended by a friend whose judgement I respect. She is worth every penny. She whisks away my receipts and invoices and transforms them alchemically into the gold that the Inland Revenue will accept. It's hard to overstate the sense of relief I felt the day I received my first tax return and *they owed me* £1.48 (Mr McCawber moment, please). We poets do not earn a lot, and we deserve to keep every groat we are entitled to. A decent accountant ensures it.

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## Describing myself as a 'survivor'

I've referred to the importance of good mental health. I don't have a problem describing myself as a 'survivor'. I have received insight and encouragement from Survivors' Poetry, an

organisation which supports writers who are survivors of mental distress, however they might wish to define it. But a stigma is firmly attached to the word. Survivors continue to be dismissed as self-obsessed, untalented, uninteresting, lacking in validity, decidedly unsexy; heck, all the way down the list to smelly. I've heard 'Survivor Poetry' described infelicitously as 'vomit poetry'. How charming. Another prejudice is that survivors are only capable of writing about being mentally ill. Which is as untrue as saying that black writers only write about being black, or that queer writers only write about being queer.

My own take on being a survivor is that it's part of the human condition to have fluctuating health, mental and physical (show me the human who never caught a cold). It's just that people with flu don't endure judgements about their value as artists. So, part of me developing my assertive, ass-kicking, loud, proud and gobby performance persona of *Rosie Lugosi the Lesbian Vampire Queen* was to challenge prevailing notions of what a survivor looks and sounds like. Or, indeed, what a lesbian looks/sounds like. I also challenge preconceptions of the quality of art produced by survivors.

I enjoy playing Rosie Lugosi. She brings to my performance a unique synthesis of High Gothic and vampiric imagery, darkly humorous poetry with a dark underbelly, song, sharp-edged comedy, and queer sensibility. Rosie Lugosi embodies the defiant and transgressive power of unconventional female sexuality – the predatory villainess who never gets staked. Six foot tall in six-inch stilletos, clad in pvc catsuit, towering wig, fangs and hoisted cleavage, she transforms previous notions of what constitutes both gothic and queer performance.

I have been performing in the character of *Rosie Lugosi the Lesbian Vampire Queen* for about five years now. I enjoy the persona and the performance opportunities she has given me, but she does not represent all that I am capable of.

Although the lack of awareness and the prejudice towards both queers and survivors prevalent in our society today plays a part in what I write about, neither my work nor my identity as a person are constrained by either 'label'. They inform, but do not limit my creativity. I'm currently half-way through my second novel – and it has nothing to do with vampires or being gay.

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## Working with a mentor

My literary agent is looking forward to receiving the first draft. I count myself very lucky to have an agent, especially one who offers me honest feedback and encouragement (editors seem to be fast approaching extinction). However, an agent is not an automatic ticket to publication. True, he picked me up through a competition, where entrants submitted a first chapter and last paragraph. But I still have to produce a novel that a publisher wants to publish, in a market that has changed a lot in the past ten years. Now, if I was a 'Da Vinci' clone, or a celebrity with a ghost-writer...

I keep plugging on. A novel is not produced through inspiration alone. It involves hours of hard, unromantic slog.

Something that has helped massively is my successful bid for a Grant for the Arts from Arts Council England while I am writing it. The grant supports me financially, giving me the opportunity to focus on the craft of writing rather than performance for a while. It is also paying for a professional writing mentor.

My mentor gets me writing well. His input nourishes my development as a writer. We are already discussing co-mentoring each other when this grant runs out, having realised how much we both benefit from our creative exchanges. Writing can be such a solitary and isolated activity. I want to build mutually enriching and stabilising relationships with other writers. Working with a mentor is enabling me to do just that.

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## Making a living from writing

Another way I have learnt about the craft of writing is through workshops. I have found myself encouraged and energised by a variety of inspirational facilitators, and believe that writers deserve that input – this motivated me to seek funding from Awards for All to pay for a series of workshops for Manchester Survivors' Poetry. The facilitators were paid at Arts Council England rates, and participants could attend for free.

I relish the opportunity to pass on ideas through sessions I facilitate myself. Some are great. Some are ghastly. It's easy to work out which are which: the positive experiences are the workshops where the participants enjoy creative writing and want to be there. This might seem like stating the obvious; but you'd be surprised at the strange reasons some people attend creative writing workshops. Writing can appear to be a long way down the list; and this can discourage and drain the most eager facilitator.

I've developed my workshop skills in a number of ways. For seven years I worked as a Language Support Teacher, which focused on the importance of how we communicate rather than what we communicate. Part of my current 'day job' is to train adults in listening skills. This has all contributed to my hosting welcoming workshops, and Manchester Survivors' Poetry gave me the first opportunity to adapt these skills to creative writing workshops, with its peer-feedback system. We 'skill each other up', and pass on tips. I'm continually open to learning from what works – and what doesn't.

So, I choose various routes to making a living through writing; including performance, grants, running workshops, part-time work and getting short stories published. This diversity keeps me lively.

There is no right or wrong way to go about making a living from writing. This is not 'the'

answer. It's one answer, and the one which works for me.

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## Useful links

Rosie Lugosi

[www.rosielugosi.com](http://www.rosielugosi.com)

Apples & Snakes

England's leading organisation for performance poetry – stretching the boundaries of poetry in performance and education.

[www.applesandsnakes.org](http://www.applesandsnakes.org)

Arts Council England

The national development agency for the arts in England. Funding for writers and literature professionals is available through the Grants for the arts programme.

[www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

FYI

A free mailing list run by poet Jacob Sam-La Rose packed with news and opportunities of interest to writers, poets and performers. To subscribe, email [fyi-subscribe@metaroar.com](mailto:fyi-subscribe@metaroar.com)

HM Revenue and Customs

Information and advice on tax and national insurance available on an individual basis from local Business Support Teams. Website has downloadable leaflets on self-employment, self-assessment etc.

[www.hmrc.gov.uk](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk)

Lapidus

Membership organisation promoting the benefits of the literary arts for personal development, health and wellbeing.

[www.lapidus.org.uk](http://www.lapidus.org.uk)

Mentoring

A guide for creative writers by Sara Maitland and Martin Goodman, designed for the writer who

wants to know more about mentoring and whether it's for them (literaturetraining).

Available as free download from [www.literaturetraining.com](http://www.literaturetraining.com) and in print format.

This guide draws on research for the accompanying New Writing North publication *The Write Guide: Mentoring* ([www.newwritingnorth.com/mentoring](http://www.newwritingnorth.com/mentoring)).

NAWE (The National Association of Writers in Education)

The one organisation supporting the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK.

[www.nawe.co.uk](http://www.nawe.co.uk)

The Poetry Society

Offers advice and information for all, including the critical appraisal service *Poetry Prescription*.

[www.poetrysociety.org.uk](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk)

Renaissance One

A leading organisation for the curation and production of literature and spoken word tours and events.

[www.renaissanceone.com](http://www.renaissanceone.com)

Story

Information, tips and advice for short story writers including details of magazines that will accept short stories, competitions and workshops.

[www.theshortstory.org.uk](http://www.theshortstory.org.uk)

Survivors' Poetry

Promotes the poetry of survivors of mental distress.

[www.survivorspoetry.com](http://www.survivorspoetry.com)