

STATUS OF THE WRITER SURVEY

SUMMARY

Saskatchewan writers are grossly underpaid.

This is the inescapable - and not surprising - conclusion drawn from the results of a survey done of its members by the Saskatchewan Writers Guild.

Their predicament is sort of a mirror image to that of that well paid comedian, Rodney Dangerfield, who used to complain he got "no respect." Saskatchewan writers get *plenty* of respect - from publishers, critics, awards judges, and readers in general - but not much money.

In fact, the average writing income for 1988 - for writers who had any income to report - was a measly \$5,040.

Deducting writing-related expenses left the average net income from writing at \$3,330!

These figures compare very unfavorably to those generated for Alberta writers in a 1988 study which showed average net writing income in that province of \$9,193 - more than two and a half times higher.

This despite the tremendous advances chalked up by Saskatchewan writers in recent years.

In the last half dozen years, Guy Vanderhaeghe, Robert Calder and Diana Wieler - a Saskatoon resident now living in Manitoba - have won Governor-General's Awards, Bonnie Burnard a Commonwealth Prize, Geoffrey Ursell a *Books in Canada* Best First Novel Award, Pat Lane and Bruce Rice Canadian Authors Association poetry prizes, Edna Alford a Marian Engel Award, Maggie Siggins an Arthur Ellis Award. Many others have made prize short lists or won less prestigious awards. And this is just the most visible tip of the iceberg.

This is a far cry from the situation of as little as twenty years ago, when Saskatchewan was best known for having produced W.O. Mitchell and Sinclair Ross - writing stars of a previous generation who had long since moved on to greener pastures.

Today, on a per capita basis, there may well be more writers in Saskatchewan than anywhere else in the country, and the province is very definitely on the Canadian literary map, writ large.

But the paycheque is still pitifully small.

SOME HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FINDINGS

* For Guild members who reported writing income (for 1988), that income ranged from almost nil to one lucky person with over \$40,000¹, producing an unweighted average of \$5,040. Writing expenses² averaged \$1,710, leaving a net income from writing of \$3,330.

* Over half of those who reported writing income were unable to even meet expenses.

* Men make, on average, almost twice as much as women.

* Writers over 65 make only about a third as much as those under 65.

* Those living in smaller cities make, on average, less than those in big centres and their country cousins.

* Full-time writers make about twice as much as part-time writers who, in turn, make twice as much as casual writers.

* Those who had their work published or produced in the previous year were more likely to have higher incomes than those who didn't.

* Ninety-five of the writers - about a fourth of all the Guild members who participated in the survey - were categorized as writing "full time."

* Of the full-timers who reported income, the average was only \$8,750 - and more than half of them reported writing income of \$5,000 or less. After expenses, the average net income for the full-timers was still only \$5,760.

* A small group of writers - about 30, and not necessarily full-timers - had gross writing incomes of over \$10,000.

* An even smaller group of writers - about two dozen - rely exclusively on writing for their income. For these writers, income is much higher although it is still well below the provincial average income. Average income for those who rely solely on writing is \$17,210, with a net of \$13,990.

THE SURVEY

Three hundred and ninety-nine Guild members - more than half of the provincewide organization's total membership - responded to the mail survey, sent out last fall by the Guild's Status of the Writer Committee. The questionnaire sought information on a variety of topics, not just income. The responses were analyzed by Douglas H. Elliott of QED Information Systems, Regina, who prepared detailed breakdowns of the answers.

According to Elliott, the 57% response rate is average for such a survey and will produce sampling errors of plus or minus 3%, 19 out of 20 times.

That makes the SWG survey, if not one hundred per cent reliable, the most accurate profile yet of the Saskatchewan writer. It shows this endangered species making gains, but still struggling.

A problem with the results is that less than half of those who returned the surveys answered the questions on income. As Elliott points out in his analysis, there is no way of knowing whether those 168 writers are the *only* SWG members who had any income from writing in 1988. Chances are, at least some of the writers who declined to answer the income questions had some writing income - as did some Guild members who declined to participate in the survey entirely.

If all respondents who did not answer the question were assumed to have zero writing income, the average income would decline to \$2,120. Because such an assumption cannot be ade-

quately justified, only those 168 members who reported writing income were used in calculating the average of \$5,040.

Consequently, Elliott emphasizes, the figures arrived at most likely overstate the average writing income for all Saskatchewan writers.

Elliott also points out that statistical averages can disguise a situation with a wide variation in values. In the case of writing incomes, the average is kept high by the few writers (17%) with incomes over \$10,000. The median is another type of "average"; it is the point in the income distribution at which half the respondents are above and half below. The median writing income is \$1,000 - well below the "average" of \$5,040. (By comparison, the median for Alberta writers in the 1988 study mentioned above was \$4,200 - more than four times higher.)

Any way you look at them, the numbers are shockingly low.

WHERE DOES THE MONEY COME FROM?

Most Guild members who make money from their writing make it in a variety of ways.

Magazine sales are the most important source of income for most Saskatchewan writers - this in a province with relatively few publications of its own, and almost none with nationally comparable pay scales.

Public readings of their work was another important source of income for writers--cited almost as often as magazine sales as

the best *in-province* source. The SWG, which sponsors hundreds of readings around the province yearly, paid writers up to \$100 for a reading at the time of the survey - the ceiling has since been increased to \$150. The Canada Council, which sponsors readings nationally, pays \$200 - but only to writers who have published books and met other criteria.

Grants were the third most common largest *in-province* income source - but only sixth overall, behind royalties, newspaper sales and Public Lending Rights payments - PLR is the federally funded program to compensate writers for use of their books in libraries.

Some other observations on the source of writers' incomes:

ADVANCES - Few advances, and small ones when they occur, remain a problem for Saskatchewan writers. In 1988, only 24 writers - or about 6% of the total sample of 399 - had received an advance. The advance was typically received by a full-time writer, for a book. The average advance received was \$1,750.

GRANTS - About 17% of the 168 writers who reported writing income had received a grant, and 12% cited them as their primary source of income that year.

Almost one in ten of *all* respondents received a grant in 1988 - 37 in all. The majority of these were from the Saskatchewan Arts Board.

Full-time writers were more likely to receive a grant, and the grant was likely to be larger than those received by part-timers and casual writers. Still, there were some relatively large grants made to casual writers.

PUBLIC LENDING RIGHTS - The Public Lending Right program was mentioned as a source of income by 19% of writers who had some writing income but by only 4% of them as their primary source.

(The survey also revealed some areas where the Guild has been lax in promoting some sources of income to its members. Only 60% of the writers taking part in the survey had heard of PLR, although this varied by class of writer, with over 80% of full-time writers aware of it. Since only writers with published books are eligible for PLR, the program would likely be of less interest to writers without books. Still, the fact that so many writers were not aware of the program, now in its fourth year, is troubling.

(Similarly, fewer than half of the writers in the survey were familiar with CANCOPY, the writers collective established under the recently enacted Copyright Act to provide a means of negotiating fees with libraries, schools and other institutions that photocopy writers' works - and only 10% were members. CANCOPY, created less than two years ago, is yet to negotiate a major contract; membership is expected to increase dramatically when it becomes financially worthwhile. But the lack of knowledge among its members about it was eye-opening for the Guild.)

READINGS - About a third of the 206 writers who responded to the question on income sources (46% of full-time writers) gave at least one reading in the year prior to the survey, and, for 8%, it was the most important source of income.

Full-time writers and those with higher incomes from writing were more likely to do readings, and also more likely to do a

larger number of them. This is a good indication of one of the tangible rewards of writing success: writers whose work is published are in demand for readings, thus further increasing their writing-related income.

Readings by writers in these categories were more likely to be funded by the Canada Council and other national or provincial organizations, and less likely to be funded by the SWG. Consequently, it appears that the Guild is funding more casual and part-time writers--those with lower incomes from writing.

THE SURVEY POPULATION

The results of the survey provide a snapshot of the province's writers, circa 1988-'89. Some highlights from that snapshot:

* Guild members who participated in the survey range in age from 17 to 88. A substantial number (21%) are over 65 but there is also a relatively large number (53%) who are under 45.

* The majority started writing during their 30s but a large group started near or after retirement--for 14%, not until after age 60. This would seem to indicate that many elderly writers are using literary endeavors as a leisure activity.

* Women outnumber men by more than two to one.

* Perhaps not surprisingly, writers show, in general, a much higher level of formal education than does the general population - 84% have some education beyond the high school level. This

despite the fact that so many were women, and older - two groups that normally tend to have lower education levels.

* They live throughout the province, but are heavily concentrated in the larger centres - more so than the population at large - with about half in Regina or Saskatoon. A third live in rural Saskatchewan, with the remainder living in what are normally referred to as small cities, such as Moose Jaw, Estevan, Swift Current and Prince Albert.

* They belong to a variety of ethnic groups, but a large majority said they "identified" with a British cultural background.

* Virtually all write in English.

* Over half (58%) write less than 10 hours per week. Another 7% are at the typewriter more than 30 hours a week--the normal statistical definition of "full-time" employment activity.

* About 20% identify themselves as a "writer." About 12% say they write "full time." The percentage was somewhat higher among men (16%) and those living in Regina or Saskatoon (17%), but much lower for those over 65 (3%).

The "average" Guild member, then, is a woman in her late 40s or early 50s who lives in either Regina and Saskatoon, has a Bachelor's degree and works as a teacher. She writes in English. She started writing in her 30s and has been at it for about 15 years. She writes less than ten hours a week, but means to do more.

THE THREE WRITERS

Elliott, in analyzing the survey results, also created three other "average" Guild members - average "full-time," "part-time" and "casual" writers. (A detailed description of the criteria for the three categories appears in the survey report.)

The average casual writer is a woman aged 46 who lives in Regina or Saskatoon. She has a Bachelor's degree and has been writing for 13 years. Most likely, she earns her living as a teacher. She was writing less in 1989 than in other years because of time constraints related to her job.

The imaginary average casual writer did not report any income from writing on the questionnaire. But of those casual writers who *did*, the average was \$2,080 in 1988 and they expected it to be the same in 1989. Magazine sales were the primary source of this income although readings and newspaper sales were also important. Expenses were \$750, leaving an average net income of \$1,330.

The average part-time writer is also a woman aged 46 who lives in Regina or Saskatoon. She also has a Bachelor's degree and has been writing a year longer than her "casual" counterpart - 14 years. She is probably also a teacher. In 1989, she was devoting 10 to 19 hours per week writing, more than in other years because she was "on a roll."

The average part-timer also did not report any income from writing. But of those part-time writers who did, the average

income was \$4,250 in 1988 and they expected it to increase in 1989. Magazine sales were the primary source of this income although readings, technical work, advertising/promotional work and grants were also important. Expenses were \$2,140, leaving a net average income of \$2,110.

The average part-timer was not eligible for PLR, but, for those who were, and had registered, the average payment in 1988 was \$1,137.

The average full-time writer is a woman aged 48 living in Regina or Saskatoon. She has been writing for 17 years and has a Bachelor's degree. Although she was writing more than 20 hours a week in 1989 and lists her occupation as "writer," she considers herself a "part-time" writer. If she has another job, it is probably in the art or literary field. She is writing more than in other years because of general enthusiasm or commitment.

FULL-TIME WRITERS

The analysis of the survey paid particular attention to full-time writers. According to the definition, there were 95 of them - 25% of all the Guild members who participated.

* More than half have a university degree.

* In the previous year, 25% of them had a book published, 13% had a script produced, and 5% had a play produced. As well, 36% had work accepted for the coming year and 20% had received an advance.

* The average full-time writer was eligible for the PLR but had not registered. Nor was she a member of CANCOPY. Among the writers in this group who had registered for PLR, the average amount received was \$880.

* Half of the full-time writers had done a reading in 1988.

* About a third of the full-time writers did not report 1988 writing income and it is impossible to determine if their income was zero or if they simply did not respond to the question. Of the 62 full-time writers who did report a writing income, the average was \$8,750 (\$3,710 more than the overall average writing income), but more than half of them reported writing income of \$5,000 or less.

* Average writing-related expenses were \$2,990 (considerably more than the \$1,710 overall average), to yield an average net income of \$5,760 - \$2,430 more than the overall average.

The primary source of income for this group was grants, although readings, royalties, magazine sales, and the PLR were also important. Among the 25% of full-time writers who had received a grant, the average amount was \$8,800.

GENRES, PUBLICATIONS, AWARDS

The survey revealed some interesting facts about the lives and habits of Saskatchewan writers:

GENRES

Most (91%) write in four or more genres.

Not very surprisingly, short fiction and poetry were the most popular forms, written by 68% and 59% respectively. Interestingly, short nonfiction was a strong third, written by 40%, although only 10% were working in *long* nonfiction. (The Saskatchewan Arts Board awards very few grants to nonfiction writers, and only for writing projects directly related to "the arts.") Thirty-one per cent were writing material for children. Only 10% were writing stage plays and even fewer - 8% - were trying drama for radio, television and film.

PUBLICATIONS

About 30% of those in the survey - 120 writers - had published books to their credit. (By coincidence, *Saskatchewan Books!*, the bibliography of works by Saskatchewan writers just published by the Guild, lists books by 120 writers - exactly the same number!) While many of them were published by Saskatchewan's own presses, about 20% - 80 writers - have had books brought out by publishers elsewhere in the country, and 7% - almost 30 writers - have had books published in other countries as well.

For many of the writers, at least some of their success had been recent. About 10% had a book published in the year preceding the survey, 7% had a radio/film/television script produced and 2% had a stage play produced by a professional company.

Full-time writers are much more successful in getting published. About a third (36%) had their work published last year.

AWARDS

About 30% of the writers in the survey have received an award or prize for their writing. The majority of these awards are provincial or local, but there are also a significant number of national and international awards.

Not surprisingly, there is a relationship between publishing and awards. About a third of the writers who have received an award or prize had some of their work published last year, compared to only 10% of those writers who hadn't.

WORD FOR WORD

Inevitably, the SWG survey will be compared to *Word for Word*, the controversial study of writing and publishing done in Alberta in 1988.

While a survey was at the heart of *Word for Word*, that study, commissioned by the Writers Guild of Alberta, with assistance from the Alberta Department of Culture and Multiculturalism and the Alberta Foundation for the Literary Arts, was much broader, encompassing a historical overview and examinations of all aspects of the writing-publishing industry, based on document research and a large number of interviews. The study also included a lengthy series of recommendations.

A comparison of the Guild's survey with the survey contained within *Word for Word* is instructive, however.

The Guild surveyed only its own membership, sending copies to 700 paid-up members. Since the Guild is an open organization, the survey, consequently, included writers of all stripes, at all stages of their careers, all levels of talent and skill. Three hundred and ninety-nine writers returned the questionnaire - a 57% response.

The Alberta survey was both narrower and broader. It included only writers who had some publications, thus eliminating about a third of the WGA membership and tilting it toward the professional end of the spectrum. On the other hand, members of other,

professional, writing organizations were also included in the survey: Alberta branches of the Canadian Authors' Association, Periodical Writers Association of Canada (PWAC), Playwrights Canada and the Association of Canadian Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA). This produced a total survey population of 635 writers, out of whom only 216 returned the questionnaire - a return rate of 34%.

Despite the differences in the surveys, however, it's startlingly evident that Saskatchewan writers are in considerably worse financial straits than their Alberta cousins.

Some comparisons:

	<u>Saskatchewan</u>	<u>Alberta</u> ³
Average gross writing income:	\$5,040	\$13,626
Average net writing income:	\$3,330	\$9,193
Median writing income:	\$1,000	\$4,200
Number of writers making more than \$10,000 a year:	30	68
Number of writers making a living solely from writing:	25	65 (est.) ⁴

A CONSIDERATION

In case anyone is wondering who should care about the plight of writers, other than the writers themselves and their families, it's useful to consider the economic impact of the work they do, even if not the artistic.

The average gross income of \$5,040, multiplied by the 168 writers who reported income - and there are assuredly more - produces a total of almost \$850,000. Multiplied by the standard figure of 2.5, this "writing wealth" produces a total economic impact of \$2,125,000. Not very much by megaproject standards, but not chickenfeed, either.

Unfortunately, that economic impact is produced by writers who, for the most part, subsidize their art themselves, through their own time and effort. The public (through government and lotteries) does some "pump-priming," in the form of grants to writers, publishers and the SWG. It goes without saying that *more* "pump priming," no matter how it might be achieved, would increase the economic impact of writers' labours, not to mention the artistic impact.

NOTES

(1) It must be stressed that writers' incomes fluctuate widely from year to year. Often a writer will work on a book for several years with no income, then reap a reward in the year of publication. Calculated over the life of the project, these earnings seem considerably less lucrative.

(2) Revenue Canada permits writers who have a "reasonable expectation of profit" to deduct from their taxable income a wide range of writing-related expenses, ranging from small items like paper, pencils and stamps to larger items like office rent, travel and depreciable capital assets, such as computers.

(3) Income figures for Saskatchewan are for 1988; those for Alberta are for 1987.

(4) Forty-six Alberta writers said yes to this question in the *Word for Word* survey. The authors used interviews with other writers not participating to arrive at their estimate.