

Let me tell you a salutary story.

It was in 1935 that the young Alan Lane came to dinner at my grandfather's house in Hampstead. Actually it was more like Swiss Cottage, but Hampstead always had a certain cachet for writers. Evelyn Waugh, when young, lived the wrong side of the hill in Golders Green but he always described it as Hampstead. My mother, also a writer, met him in the Underground once but he pretended not to recognize her: he was ashamed of being seen on the underground. People one knew travelled by taxi.

Writers are seldom truly proper people. They are court jesters, and get treated as such. But they do have a good time.

Now my grandfather was a successful novelist in the twenties and thirties. His name was Edgar Jepson and he was a founder member of PEN and he wrote popular novels which sold very well at the time – he invented a child character called Lady Noggs, who was actually my mother as a child. But the war came along and people turned serious and nobody wanted Lady Noggs books and life became financially very difficult. Though his books, especially the novels of mystery and the occult, are now available through Tesco's, I see on Google. He has more than 13,000 mentions on Google which for a man who died in 1938 isn't bad. But mentions aren't money.

But while he was struggling with the bank his son, my uncle Selwyn Jepson was writing thrillers and screen plays and died a wealthy man because he struck it lucky with

Hitchcock's *Stage Fright*. To be rich and be a writer you have to strike it lucky. You have to be in the right place at the right time, which means going to as many parties as you can, because it is at parties that things happen. I expect even JK Rowling went to a party or two up in Edinburgh. Even in teashops things happen: you can meet the right people.

But because you strike it lucky once or twice does not mean that it will go like that. Wars happen, public tastes change, publishers go bankrupt. Life for writers is an up and down affair, and my advice is save, save, save, never spend. I do not follow this advice myself but it a case of do what I say, not what I do. There are good years and lean years for writers and what you do not want is seven lean years in succession.

But back to Alan Lane. Alan Lane was one of one of the sons of a respectable publishing family, and they despaired of him. In their eyes if he wasn't a layabout he was a tearaway. He came round to the house that evening in great excitement, according to my grandmother. He had been looking for something cheap and easy to read on a train journey and there wasn't anything, and he'd had this wonderful idea. He thought he'd start publishing cheap books with paper covers – the hard covers being the greatest expense – and the contents the greatest boredom. He would call them Penguins.

'Why Penguins?' asked my grandfather. Alan Lane couldn't say, other than because penguins were both loveable and sleek and anyway he liked the word. Pen-gwins.

Geddit? And then he said he'd worked out he could sell them at sixpence each. Two pence for the publisher, two pence for the printer, and two pence for the bookshops.

'But what about the writer?' asked Edgar.

Alan Lane looked puzzled. 'I hadn't thought about them,' he said. 'Oh dear.'

And so it has been to this day. The writer is the last concern. Lane finally conceded under pressure from Edgar that the writer could have a farthing per book - a farthing being a quarter of a penny and as small a coin as existed - that is to say one/twenty-fourth of the gross - and pretty good going - or would be: but whoever gets a royalty on a paperback today? All those people on all those trains reading all those paperbacks - but somehow - well, there you are... unless you're Dan Brown and it's the *Da Vinci Code* and then the critics will give you hell

It's a tough market out there and a buyer's market too. That said, I think we're all too ready to cringe and be grateful to our publishers. Oh thank you, thank you, dear publisher, for doing me the great honour of accepting my book. You've accepted it not because you think it's good, necessarily, but because you have a pretty good idea you can sell it, so what's all the patronizing about? That goes for women writers especially. I think we need lessons in ingratitude. The Society of Authors could run courses. Men writers are a rather different matter, I find. If the male writer finds his work rejected his instinct is to go round and hit the editor - the female writer identifies with her work: reject my work, reject me. It can't go on.

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[Flesch Reading Ease; 69.7%. Must be all right.]