[00:00:00]

NB: Welcome to this edition of the Being a Writer podcast—a podcast that explores writers’ creativity and resilience. This series is part of The Literary Consultancy’s new programme of support for writers that focuses on cultivating and safeguarding literary creativity. With a range of special guests, we explore what it means to be a writer today.

The following was recorded at Free Word, on the 23rd of October 2019, for Being a Writer: an Interactive Forum—a TLC event in association with the Royal Society of Literature. In this podcast, UK Comics Laureate Hannah Berry speaks to the theme, Show Me the Money, on how she manages her finances and income as a professional writer. It is now available here, on Being a Writer.

HB [00:00:59]: Hello. Comics laureate? I didn’t know we had a comics laureate! You do, and if the Queen wants any comics done, I’m here to do them for her.

So, I’ve got the grubby job of talking about money. And I’m going to talk about money using actual figures, so, if anyone’s wearing pearls, feel free to clutch them. Specifically, this is the period [when] I was working on my third graphic novel, *Livestock*, so this is about 10 years into my career, more or less. It was published by Jonathan Cape, so, you know, a big publisher.

I’m not sure how many people in the room are involved with comics, [but] there are two main ways that you can work. There’s either work for hire comics, where you’re the inker or the penciller or the editor, or whatever, for a big name, you know, for Marvel or DC. Or, you’re working on your project that you own. There tends to be, from what I can see, money in the other side, not necessarily in this side here. It’s also quite rare to be published in the UK as a comics person. A lot of people do self-publish, and it’s not got the same concern around it that it has in regular prose literature. If you self-publish making comics, that’s the norm, that’s the standard. And if anybody is interested in learning more, I urge you to go to any of the small zine or comic festivals, like ELCAF, or Catford Comic Festival I think is coming up. Just have a Google.

Anyway, this is my graphic novel. It’s somewhere between *Zoolander* and *The Thick of It*, that space you didn’t know needed filling until this book (available in the foyer), and my style is elaborate. It is very, very elaborate, because I’m an idiot, because I’m a moron. And the book itself is something like, it’s around 100 pages. And they’re very slow to make, because of my elaborate style, and because it takes so long to write it, to plan it and to sketch it, to ink it, to Photoshop out mistakes if I made any mistakes (I don’t make any mistakes—if I did, I’d Photoshop them out). Actually, I got into a really odd conversation once where I was with a regular writer, [and] I was trying to pitch an article for a magazine about the length of time it takes to work on graphic novels. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘books take a long time.’

‘But comics take a long time to write because you need to write them and then draw them.’

‘But books take a long time. You need to research them.’

‘You need to research the comics and then write them.’

It sort of devolved into a, I’m trying to find another phrase that’s not dick-swinging, but this big competition.

Anyway, I’m establishing my career, this is my third book, I’ve been doing it about 10 years. So I signed the contract with Jonathan Cape for £10,000, which is very big in the comics world. That’s a big advance, but obviously you don’t get the full advance on signature, you get the first chunk. My editor, Dan Franklin, was very kind and said I could take more than a third upfront. So, I started with £5,000 on signature of the contract. I also applied for funding from the Arts Council, because they’ve now started to do, through their old Grants for the Arts scheme, they’ve started to fund graphic novels. The word is starting to filter out on the grape vine, they’ll give you money!

I applied, and I didn’t get it. And I applied again, and I didn’t get it. And I applied again, and I didn’t get it. But then I applied again, and I got it. It was up to £15,000, but every time I was sort of incrementally reducing the amount that I was applying for, thinking this would make me more appealing to them. So, in the end I applied for around £10,000, so it was 10,000 and change, to make it look like I’d really worked it out. There’s no one here from the Arts Council, is there? Good. All the money was wisely spent.

The book took me three years to write, three years to create. The whole project took three years to do, [and] in that time I was finding bits of work around that to fill in the blanks, to earn extra cash. I was lucky enough to get a regular cartoon strip for the New Statesman magazine. They’re very hard to come by, the regular cartoon jobs, I was quite a lucky girl.

Around that, because I was at a certain stage in my career, [and] I was doing comics for so long, I was invited to speak at various festivals, I was invited to run various workshops, I was invited to talk to people, [and would] get a few hundred quid here or there to do some extra work. So, altogether, over those three years, I earned something like… £24,000 over three years, which is £8,000 per year, which is not amazing. National Minimum Wage in 2015, when I signed this contract, was £6.70 for a 35-hour week, which comes to, roughly, for an annual wage, if you’re working 52 weeks a year, is £12,194—somewhere above my £8,000.

[This was] a bit galling, but okay, all right. But then you think, that’s minimum wage for a 35-hour week. I was not working a 35-hour week. I was working 60 hours a week, in order to try and complete this stupid book (it’s very good, you should all buy it). But I was just working crazy hours, and I… genuinely burnt out at the end of it. If I had been earning minimum wage at 60 hours a week, I would have earned £20,904, which is quite a way ahead of £8,000, [and] which is depressing.

So, I got to the end, and I decided that I wasn’t going to do another graphic novel. This is my third and final graphic novel, because I just can’t, financially, make it work. I don’t have the time or the energy. I’ve got a small child, now, to look after. I don’t have the time or the energy to throw into making something else this size, and be able to work around that to make a living. I should say, as well, all figures are gross, not net, which is more upsetting.

But the thing is, I was able to do this because my partner is an adult and has an adult job and doesn’t work in comics, and was able to help me with the shortfall, was able to help pay the bills that I couldn’t quite make. And I am very painfully aware that I am extremely privileged. I’ve have a publishing contract with a very big publisher that pays a lot more than the average graphic novel publisher, I got an Arts Council grant that’s very hard to get, and I was [doing] these bits and pieces of work around it, which somebody at the start of their career would not necessarily be able to do.

I still could not make it work, and it just made me realise, how many people would like to work on graphic novels, or just comics, that are not able to do so? That don’t have the means, the funds, the time, the place to do it? How many things are out there that are just unwritten, due to the figures not adding up? It’s just not a sustainable system.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot, about where the shortfall could possibly come from. The problem with comics is that it’s quite a small industry, so there’s not a huge readership, which means that you don’t get the economies of scale that you’d get in other books regularly, books that don’t have crazy massive pictures in. I don’t know if publishers are able to pay more—I get the impression they’re not? My agent pushed pretty hard I think he got the best that he could get.

I’ve been thinking that, maybe, the way to get extra funds would be from arts funding. I just feel, maybe, they could share a little, you know? Maybe that’s not such a ridiculous proposition. So, last year, it was announced that I have become the UK Comics Laureate. My role, as well as using comics to promote literacy, or using literacy to promote comics, is to try to make the lot of people making comics, better. To try to find ways to find it, and make it more sustainable, because it’s currently not. I don’t know if anyone has any ideas or suggestions or thoughts… but if anybody wants to reach me, or if anybody wants to see what I try to do, to try to help get more money into this world (and please buy the books).

Anyway, thank you for not clutching your pearls too loudly, and that is it.