

The Florida Palm Magazine



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Writing For a Living: Sellout or Dream Come True?

An interview with “Ask The Book Doctor” columnist Bobbie Christmas



First let me brag about *A Cup of Comfort for Friends* (Adams Media Corporation). The first in the series, *A Cup of Comfort*, sold more than 100,000 copies, and although one of my stories is in it, too, I think the second book is even better. For each, writers across America and Canada submitted more than 2,000 stories, and Editor Colleen Sell selected only 50. My story, “I’ll Give You a Dime,” recounts the time I realized the value of my lifelong friendship with a cousin. Both books are available at all major bookstores.

I didn’t make a fortune with either of those stories or on any single project, but I’ve supported myself with writing and editing for more than 30 years.

Selling Out or Just Plain Selling?

Yes, you can make a living with words, if you’re willing to be flexible. Some people call it “selling out.” I call it “selling.” I don’t always write on subjects I select, but each one is a creative challenge. Three weeks ago, a magazine publisher e-mailed me, “Thanks for the article on financial planning. You made a dry subject interesting.” Hooray I did what I set out to do. Result: more and juicier assignments.

With a motto of “I’ll write anything for money,” I’ve composed advertising copy; résumés; radio commercials; press releases; scripts; articles for newspapers, magazines and newsletters; business profiles; personal essays; children’s books; and you name it. As my skills grew, I also became an editor and a manager. I reached the pinnacle of my corporate career in Greenville, S.C., managing a communications

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department for a huge international firm. I traveled and wrote stories about company projects. I got to see the Grand Canyon, Italy, the Netherlands, Australia and Germany, all as a "sellout."

When I tired of working for others, I moved to metro Atlanta in 1992 and opened Zebra Communications. I wrote brochure copy for clients and articles for trade magazines and newsletter companies, instantly able to support myself, without a corporate noose around my neck.

The Book Doctor is In

The book-editing side of my business evolved naturally. I had studied fiction for years as a personal interest. I already had editing skills, so I combined them with concept editing and typed up reports to clients that explained the elements that needed work and how to repair them. I didn't know what to call what I did, until an article in *Writer's Digest* explained that publishers were cutting back, and in-house editors had gone independent, calling themselves book doctors. Wow That's what I was.

At first I edited books for people I knew, then those clients recommended me to their friends. Soon I edited books for publishing houses, too. I still love to write, as well, so I write articles for a couple of newsletter companies and magazines. It may be too premature to discuss this matter, but just this week, I was also asked to write children's books for a foreign publisher. That project isn't completely settled, yet, though.

Children's Books

The project of English books for foreign children typifies how one project leads to another. I co-wrote a children's book, *The Legend of Codfish and Potatoes*, with a client in Bermuda. He found a publisher in Bermuda, and in 1999, I received a trip to the island for a five-day book tour. Together and separately he and I appeared on four radio shows, I spoke at the library, and a newspaper interviewed me and ran my photo. We signed books in about five stores and at one gala. At each signing, kids and parents lined up to buy books. I found myself well known on the small island. One night a jazz singer pointed me out to the audience and dedicated a song to me. While I walked into a bookstore for a signing, someone leaned out of his car and took a photo of

me.

Again, I didn't line my pockets with great amounts of silver, but I got paid in more than money, and that project led to my newest one for children learning to speak English. Very nice, for one who "sold out."

Hard Work and Determination

Years ago, when I declared that I wanted to write for a living, my father said it wasn't possible, so I set out to prove him wrong. My determination paid off. I've not only made a living, I've been successful, in the way that I define success.

I'm not living in a gothic mansion like Stephen King, but I do own a nice house, every penny for which was earned through words.

I haven't won a Pulitzer, but I do get recognition and appreciation.

I haven't written a bestseller, but I've contributed stories to two of them.

I haven't discovered an author who won the Pulitzer, but I've helped one who won Georgia Author of the Year for her first novel, as well as three other national awards for it (*Moonlight Bowl Manifesto*, by Barbara Jones, Russell Dean & Company).

I haven't edited a bestseller, but I've watched my clients' sales rates go up, after I edit their books, and their successes are my successes, too.

I'll never be nominated for Teacher of the Year, but I have taught many aspiring writers through my seminars, columns and books.

Writers generally write for more than money. Let's be honest and say that recognition is almost as important. I can't tell you how great it feels to hear a fellow writer say, "Bobbie Christmas? I've heard about you. It's a thrill to meet you."

Contact Bobbie Christmas at
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Have you signed up for the FWA 2002 Convention?

If not you'll find an application
tucked within these pages.
Pull it out, fill it out, and send it in!

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