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Writing as a "Worthless Pursuit": An Interrogation of Writing under Capitalism

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Writing as a “Worthless Pursuit”: An Interrogation of Writing under Capitalism

Kathryn Lee

Deciding to Write & The Writing Process

- Writer invests in undefined project with potentially no returns
- Writing field is limited to only those who can support themselves with a secondary job

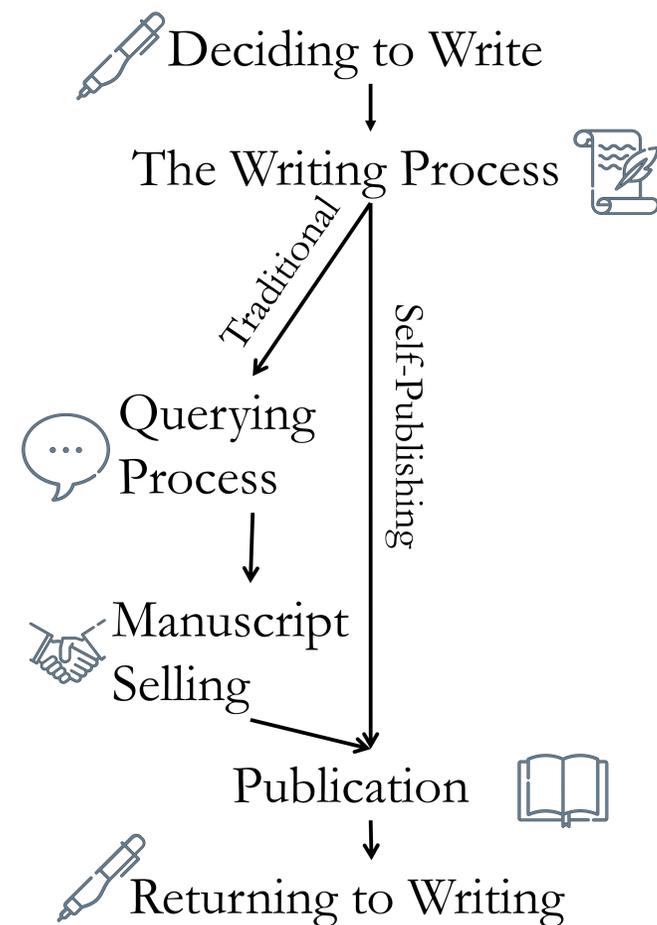
Publishing: Traditional

- Querying and agenting process forces writer to market their work in terms of monetary value
- Publishers are more inclined to pursue sensational manuscripts that promise economic returns rather than meriting books based on content

Publishing: Self-Publishing & Amazon

- Amazon locks self-published authors into low-royalty contracts
- Amazon’s growing share of the publishing market through their self-publishing efforts and through their own imprints have resulted in shrinking advances for authors under traditional publishers
 - Advances are traditionally used to fund the lacuna between writing projects, which may involve research and drafting

From Manuscript to Marketing



Non-Publishing Influences

- Capitalist influences outside of the publishing industry in fields such as education and public funding affect the size of the reading audience
 - Only 79% of American adults are literate
 - There was a \$250 million decrease in funding from 2000 to 2012 for state arts agencies, including public libraries

Marx’s $c + v + s = p [m]$

- The $c + v + s$ equation is the defining equation of capitalism
- c means constant capital, or “non-book” parts, such as marketing efforts
- v means variable capital, or the writer’s royalties and advances
- s means surplus value, or the publisher’s profit

Possible Solutions

- A universal basic income (UBI) may alleviate writers’ financial burdens
 - A UBI could also encourage writers to re-evaluate their projects outside of the profit motive
- Supporting independent publishers minimizes the pursuit of surplus value under larger publishers
- Increased arts funding would provide for the most implementable and direct assistance to writers

Implications

- Writers invariably submit to the profit-making motive out of a need to self-compensate for the time they have dedicated to their projects
- With monetary value as the sole arbiter of a writer’s opportunity for traditional publication, writing becomes more monolithic
- Amazon’s publishing efforts have prompted an overall increase in the number of writers but the increased saturation of the field has led to decreased earnings for all authors