

Experience Required

by Johanna Gohmann

Money? That's optional.



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I'm not entirely sure when I decided I was going to be a writer, but I know I never gave much thought to the financial reality of my choice. I grew up a very spoiled child, and when I turned 18 I peeled off to my private university in a new teal Mustang, blasting Ace of Base with the windows down.

My first ever writing gig was a college internship with an Indiana entertainment magazine. *News 4U* was a rather thin publication, and because this was the '90s, it was printed on actual newsprint—the kind that smells oddly delicious and turns your palms purple. My boss was the sole editor. A long-haired fellow in his late 20s, he was a sort of watered-down Goth. He eyed my pastel J.Crew sweaters like I'd shown up to work wrapped in expired lunchmeat.

Behind his back, I referred to him as Titty because of the many pictures of topless women he'd ripped from magazines and taped to the wall next to his desk. Titty was a man of few words, and we would sit opposite each other for our two-person pitch meetings in endless, painful silences. I'd stare at the collage of pert nipples behind his head, begging my brain to call forth an idea. *Any* idea. But I never had anything to pitch. I wasn't entirely sure what a pitch was. After 15 excruciating minutes, Titty would shake his head and send me to back to editing a feature on Kenny G's concert by the river.

The one time I did pitch something, it was to interview the performers at a local drag club—the closest thing to edgy I could think of. Titty rolled his eyes when I suggested it, but he let me do it anyway.

At the drag club, I was given free Corona and taken backstage, where a rather world-weary Cher showed me how he taped his penis back. Then I got to dance briefly onstage with Liza and Madonna. Later, when the magazine cut me a check for \$50.00, I could hardly believe it. Were they kidding? After the wonders of that night, I felt like I should be paying *them*. In hindsight, this should have been a red flag.

My biggest financial failing is that I have always valued experiences far more than my bank account. I'm aware that such an outlook on money could only come easily to someone with my Veruca Salt upbringing; I'm always so enchanted by novelty—by, say, seeing a Cher with a five o'clock shadow tuck her testicles between her thighs—that I forget that, oh yes, I also need money for the electric bill.

I did have a professor try to warn me that I perhaps might not be well suited to the financial anxiety-fest that is a writing career. He stopped me on campus one spring day, a grave look in his eyes, and suggested I do anything, *anything* but be a writer. "It's such a difficult business," he sighed at me. I just stared at him. It was a few weeks before graduation, and this was his send-off speech, O Captain my Captain? *Had I considered nursing?* Granted, at the time my writing focus was short fiction, so perhaps I should be grateful he didn't just hand me a length of rope and gently nudge me toward a nearby tree.

Once I graduated from college, I quickly realized the words *finances* and *reality* do actually have a significant link. The financial tether to my parents had been snipped, and when I drove

my Mustang to Chicago, I parked it outside my new home: an apartment in a converted funeral home on the south side of the city, which I would share with two roommates. The place still had an oddly shaped elevator that had been used to shuttle the caskets between floors.

I spent my Chicago days falling asleep at a receptionist job atop a copy of Nancy Milford's *Zelda*, while at night I donned a tuxedo and rode an elevator 95 floors to a restaurant in the (then) Sears Tower. There I carried trays of steak Diane to wealthy businessmen and used a small crumber to swipe bits of crab cake off the table away from their Ralph Lauren attire. The feel of the crumber sliding over the tablecloth sometimes triggered my gag reflex, and I never properly learned to flame the bananas Foster without fear of self-immolation. But I didn't care. I was busy gazing out at the skyline, jotting poems on my order pad.

I had decided I was a slam poet, and I even became an alternate on Chicago's National Poetry Slam team. Poems were shorter, and therefore far less laborious for me to write. (Which I believe was the motto of both Plath and Sexton.) I'd sit in my bedroom and write verse longhand whilst sweating angrily into my futon. For the first time in my privileged life, I knew what it meant to not have air conditioning. I'd leave my window stretched wide and be kept awake until dawn by the gangbangers hooting and arguing beneath my window. The sounds were so close, I felt as if the men were sitting at the end of my mattress, passing 40s over my feet.

Naturally, I decided to move to New York. As an aspiring writer, I needed to be near the heart of the publishing industry! I needed to experience the wild energy of the city! I needed to see what Whitman meant when he said, "Give me such shows—give me the streets of Manhattan!" Also, my rather pushy boyfriend had already leased a place in Queens (a perhaps lesser-known quote from Whitman).

In New York I got a job at a literary agency, where I spent the day dashing the hopes of aspiring children's book authors. I felt traitorous doing this, and rejecting books with titles like *Bobo Beaver Finds a Friend* felt doubly cruel ... at first. Then I grew numb to it and fired off rejections like I was slinging bacon at an IHOP.

When I received my first threatening letter from a rejectee, suggesting that she might come to New York to see the sights—oh, and also to cut me into small pieces—I was startled back into the reality that each letter I so casually tossed into my outbox was going to an actual person, someone who dreams and feels. And potentially punctures my internal organs with a butcher knife. As a safety precaution, I started signing my rejections "Sincerely, Joanna Goldman." There. Now she'd never find me.

It was a full-time job, and perhaps if I'd had a time machine and could have cashed my checks in 1972, it would have been livable. But, as it was, I could barely make my rent. I would sneak away at lunch to sell remainder copies of *The Baby-sitters Club* at the Strand, then go buy myself a BLT. When I'd return, I'd send out royalties to writers—some of whom were insanely successful romance novelists—whose checks had lines of zeros dancing across the paper like fat little Rockettes. I once mailed a check for \$2 million. I could still smell the bacon on my fingers as

I licked the seal.

I left the agency to be an editorial assistant at a women's fashion magazine. I knew about as much about fashion as I did aeronautics. In other words, I would learn the hard way that it wasn't pronounced "Guh-vin-chee." It was all very *Devil Wears Prada*, where I raced around a Manhattan high-rise in a wild panic, delivering Chanel samples like they were Styrofoam coolers full of still-beating hearts. I once had to sprint to FedEx a senior editor's dirty underwear to Milan. (I would explain, but it still wouldn't make sense.) And I once spent a whole day urgently trying to get a portable air conditioner delivered to Natasha Lyonne's apartment so that someone might photograph her closet.

I knew there were women who would have fought for the honor of cooling Lyonne's vintage sandal collection. But I merely felt exhausted and depleted of both creativity and cash. I was still selling books at the Strand, though now they were review copies. After three years, I packed up my cubicle at the fashion mag and walked out with two pairs of hot pink boxing gloves, some designer roller skates, and the collected works of Richard Yates. I was going to try the freelance life. Which meant sometimes buying Pringles at the bodega "on credit," and occasionally eating PowerBars for dinner.

I got a gig editing book reviews for a sex website. The editor in chief was a tiny, furious young woman, and the only thing she seemed to hate more than her job was sex. One evening, instead of a paycheck, she handed me a giant cardboard box and told me to just take whatever I wanted. I lifted the lid and the box was spilling over with porn DVDs and a rainbow array of sex toys. Not wanting to appear greedy, I politely took four vibrators and four films. At least if I starved to death, I would do so while climaxing.

I was briefly a reporter for the *Western Queens Gazette*, where my biggest journalistic scoop was attending a meeting of the Queens Mineral Society, a club that met at a dilapidated grade school. Pale, forlorn-looking people sat under fluorescent lighting and quietly discussed their favorite rocks. To my surprise, the evening did not end with everyone holding hands and breaking cyanide caplets between their teeth.

As a blurb writer for Scholastic Book Club, I wrote countless summaries of children's books. I got in trouble for using the word *enchanted* too often. At a gig writing countless summaries of romance novels, I got in trouble for using the word *sizzling* too often. In my downtime, I made a list of all the books with *heels* in the title:

Hot Wheels and High Heels

High Heels and Holidays

Balancing in High Heels

Undercover in High Heels

Spying in High Heels

Trouble in High Heels

Killer in High Heels

Death in High Heels
Hell in High Heels
Do They Wear High Heels in Heaven?

For about six years, I wrote and edited epic streams of words, most of which I found as creatively stimulating as eating drywall, all in search of a paycheck. I also took temp jobs in search of the Holy Grail: health insurance. At my office gigs I'd write snatches of disjointed short fiction in between logging figures into spreadsheets. These stories all went unfinished, and all seemed to feature unhappy people trapped in cubicles. The characters eventually either sprouted wings or turned into vines. Sometimes both. No doubt it would have made a riveting collection: *Sum(A1:B1)*.

My half-assed attempt at becoming the next Lorrie Moore while also updating an org chart seemed reasonable at the time, for I knew many writers—some mere floors above me—who were attempting the same thing. Really, office buildings like the American Express Company were kind of like the Iowa Writers' Workshop, if the end goal was to never complete a single piece, but to own a great deal of business casual slacks.

Meanwhile, at parties, people would ask me what I did for a living, and I'd want to throw my own drink in my face. For a while I actually croaked out "writer," but this felt about as accurate as announcing I was a unicorn groomer. Eventually, I started calling myself a surface distractor, an equally nonsense title I coined for the sole purpose of confusing the conversation. And confuse it I did.

It wasn't until I left the publishing capital of the world that I finally began to write and sell work that excited me. In my early 30s, I decided to migrate to Ireland. I'd like to say it was to fulfill a lifelong yearning to stroll the cliffs of Moher and sing famine songs with my ancestors, but in reality I had just fallen for a really hot Irish guy whose visa had expired.

Once I settled in Ireland, I quickly learned that nothing spurs on a freelance career quite like living in a country where you are illegal for full-time work and where your biggest social interaction is with the Tesco checkout clerk. I couldn't get some mindless temp job. Nor could I meet a rotating roster of friends for drinks, as I had no friends. What I had was a small desk that faced a window, through which I could stare at God's most sarcastic joke: the Irish weather. I spent my days alone in a silent old Georgian house, whose drafty chill often turned my typing fingers a cadaverous shade of white. It was all very *La Bohème*, save for the Cadbury chocolate and Irish sausage rolls I was regularly stuffing into my face.

I had no choice but to write. And even though Dublin isn't exactly a small pond and has a bit of a literary legacy of its own (if you count those early content providers, Joyce and Yeats), I felt freer and less intimidated than I ever had in New York. In New York, if I'd pitched a piece on becoming a burlesque dancer, my email would have been deleted in the time it took the editor's eyes to skim "burl—" Whereas in Dublin, I was given 2,000 words, got to take lessons on shimmying,

and was given a Gypsy Rose Lee–style makeover by a woman wearing an eye patch. The national newspaper ran the story along with a half-page photo of me in fishnets and an ill-fitting corset, looking like the world’s sweatiest, angriest drag queen. At long last, my Titty days had come full circle.

I look back on that long-ago plea from my professor, where he called writing “a difficult business,” and I marvel at his restraint. He was right. I have never been very well suited to the financial scramble of a writing career. But I also have never been in it for the money. Just typing that made me laugh. (It made my husband laugh as well. Or is that what weeping sounds like?) While I may own more shirts from Target than Barneys, I tuck all of my experiences away like Krugers. And my Target seams sag happily under their imagined weight.

A few years ago, I had an essay in an anthology, and was asked to do a reading with a few other essay contributors, one of whom was ’80s icon Andrew McCarthy. *Pretty in Pink* was a seminal film of my childhood, and while I was always more of a Duckie girl, I was still pretty jazzed to meet McCarthy.

The reading was at my old haunt, the Strand bookstore. As I sat in my little seat, I eyed the stack of books sitting on the table. Books that actually featured my name. And that were currently being guarded over by Blane. I was delighting by the oddness of the *experience*.

I imagined the ghost of my twentysomething self rushing into the store, her shoulder being sliced by the strap of an overflowing sack of books she hoped to sell. I imagined how disbelieving she’d be if I approached her with the anthology and pointed out her name on the table of contents. Maybe I could give her some complimentary chardonnay, and introduce her to my bud, Blane. Maybe I could even give her a signed copy.

No doubt, once my back was turned, she’d sneak over to the sales desk and swap it for cab fare. But I’d be cool with it. She had a long journey ahead of her. And I knew she needed the money.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Johanna Gohmann has written for numerous publications, including Salon, The Morning News, xoJane, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Babble, and *Curve*. She is a regular contributor to *BUST* magazine. Her essays have been anthologized in *A Moveable Feast: Life-Changing Food Adventures Around the World*, *Joan Didion Crosses the Street*, *The Best Women’s Travel Writing 2010*, and *The Best Sex Writing 2010*. Find out more at JohannaGohmann.com.