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INTRODUCTION

When I finished that book [Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*], I had all the permission I needed to become a writer. Someone who looked like me had written a masterpiece. —Bebe Moore Campbell (author of *72 Hour Hold*), *Time* magazine, 1996

A WRITER'S TALE

Oftentimes people ask me how I started writing. And it's always a difficult question for me to answer because I never know where to start. Do I start in 1970 when I wrote my first story in Ms. Milazo's fifth grade class or do I start in 1992 when I attended the Romantic Times Readers and Writers Convention in Savannah, Georgia? For this introduction, I think it appropriate that I start in 1992.

Prior to 1992, I was a research engineer for a major telecommunications company. My job was planning new telephone services. I used to tell people that it was the best job in the world—if you had to work for a living. And it was true. It was a wonderful job. But sometime around 1990 I began to go through what I now call an early midlife crisis. I began to

Angela Benson

question my job and the role it played in my life. Was my job something I did or was it an extension of who I was as an individual? The unsettling and unsatisfying answer was that my job was something I did that was completely separate from who I was as a person. On some level this separation could be considered a good thing, but my reasoning was that if I was going to spend *at least* one-third of every day of my life working at something, it should be something that was an extension of who I was as a person. A lofty goal, I admit, but that lofty goal set me off on a quest to find a vocation that would fulfill my financial needs as well as my personal need for self-expression.

The journey took me down several paths. I sold Amway for about two weeks, until I realized that I didn't like being away from home so much of the time. I investigated becoming a secondary school teacher and would have done so had I not been told that first I had to take a computer science course. Taking a computer course seemed redundant, given that I'd been working as an engineer for over ten years. Next, I became a distributor for a multilevel marketing diet program thinking that I could lose weight then help others to lose weight too. That brief stint ended when I realized I wasn't losing any weight. I could go on, but I think you get the point: I made a lot of false starts in my quest for a new and fulfilling vocation.

I finally hit the motherlode in 1992 while on a business trip in New Jersey. A closet romance reader since my college days, I ran across a copy of *Romantic Times* magazine in a local bookstore and learned about the Readers and Writers Convention being held that weekend in Savannah, not far from my Atlanta home. After checking with the airlines and learning that a round-trip ticket to Savannah would add only one hundred dollars to my fare, I decided to attend the convention.

That decision changed my life. Sounds dramatic, I know, but it's true. Writing workshops given by published authors were a part of the convention agenda. One of the workshops I attended was conducted by three romance writers who'd each had more than one book published. I don't remember the topic or anything

specific that the authors said, but I do remember that as they spoke, a single thought formed in my mind: *They don't look any smarter than me. If they can write a book, so can I.*

And so began my writing career. I went back home, joined a local writers' group, and began my first novel. That novel, which I started in early 1992, was completed in early 1993, sold to Pinnacle Books in late 1993, and arrived in bookstores in late 1994.

Some of my published friends hate it when I tell this story. They accuse me of perpetuating the myth that anybody with a pencil (or a typewriter or a computer) can write a book. They say that the story, especially my epiphany, completely discounts the skills that a writer must cultivate in order to produce a publishable book. I agree with them to a point, but I continue to tell the story for three reasons.

First, the story shows that I came to writing because I had a need to express myself more fully. I didn't start writing for the big-money payoff; I started writing because there was something inside me that I wanted and needed to explore.

Second, the story shows that I had some faith in my ability to become a writer. In my mind, becoming a writer was an attainable goal. Like most endeavors, though, writing required a lot more work than I had expected and with it came more disappointment than I could have imagined. Fortunately, the childlike faith that motivated me to start has kept me writing in spite of the disappointments.

Third, the story shows the power of living and breathing examples. I decided I could become a writer because I saw other people not that much different from myself (at least, I didn't focus on the differences) who had become writers. The women who gave that workshop at the convention were giving hope as much as they were teaching writing skills.

The third point is the reason I decided to write *Telling Your Tale*. This book is my way of serving as a living and breathing example

to you and other would-be and novice writers I will probably never have the opportunity to meet. I hope that as you read this book and complete the assignments your faith in your ability to *tell your own tale* will be enhanced. I want you to read this book and think as I thought back in 1992: *She doesn't seem any smarter than me. If she can write a book, so can I.*

TELLING YOUR TALE

I wrote *Telling Your Tale* to help you complete your novel and hone your writing skills. In order to make the most effective use of this book you need to understand its three main characteristics.

First, *Telling Your Tale* surveys the broad spectrum of technical writing skills needed to produce a well-crafted novel and provides references for more detailed study. The topics covered range from voice and point of view to plotting and characterization to research and revision.

Second, the exercises provided in *Telling Your Tale* are designed for easy application to your current work-in-progress, thereby allowing you to improve your writing skills while completing your current writing project or starting a new one. The key to success with *Telling Your Tale* is completing the exercises. You don't learn to write by reading about writing; you learn to write by writing. I cannot stress this point enough: You must complete the exercises if you want to obtain the maximum benefit from this book. Some of the exercises will be fun for you, while others may seem like torture. But guess what? Sometimes writing is fun, and sometimes it's torture. You'll have to learn to write through those torturous times, and you can start by committing yourself to working through the exercises in this book.

Third, while the writing fundamentals presented in this book are universal and appropriate for all new and beginning writers, *Telling Your Tale* embraces authors who choose to forge their own publishing paths through print-on-demand (POD) and e-

book delivery mechanisms. In fact, *Telling Your Tale* is my foray into the world of independent publishing, showing again that if I can do it, so can you.

CHAPTER ONE: BEING A WRITER MEANS WRITING

If you want to be a writer, you have to practice writing. You have to sit at the typewriter day after day, even when it doesn't sound the way you want it to sound. Even if it feels as if nothing is happening, on some level something is. My advice would be, just write! —Connie Briscoe (author of *Money Can't Buy Love*), *Quarterly Black Review*, 1997

OVERNIGHT SUCCESS STORIES

Million-dollar book contracts, movie projects with Will Smith and Brad Pitt, interviews on *Oprah*. All these and more will be yours as soon as you finish the masterpiece of romance, intrigue, and plain-old-brilliance that's rolling around in your head.

Are those thoughts familiar? Well, dreams are what make the world go 'round. So keep dreaming and keep working toward making your dreams come true. Just to add a touch of reality to your dreams, though, let's take a brief look at the careers of some well-known, and some not-so-well-known, authors. As you read their stories, think about yourself, where you are in your writing career, and where you want to be a few years down the road.

Joe Konrath

Thriller writer Joe Konrath is an e-book publishing pioneer. But Joe did not begin his career as a writer who published his own work. He went the traditional rejection route most authors travel. In fact, Joe wrote several books and racked up hundreds of rejections before making his first sale (*Whiskey Sour*) to Hyperion in 2004. His promotion efforts are legendary. In 2006, he did mailings to over 7000 libraries and spent three months visiting more than 700 bookstores across the country to promote his print books. Joe, who regularly appears on Amazon e-book bestseller lists, has 40-plus e-books to his credit.

Terry McMillan

Many people view Terry McMillan (*How Stella Got Her Groove Back*) as an overnight success. They say they want careers like hers, but what they really want is her success, not the hard work and long years that went into creating it. Terry, who has an undergraduate degree in journalism and who has been writing since her college days, saw her first book, *Mama*, published in 1987. While the critics loved it, neither *Mama* nor her next book, *Disappearing Acts*, brought her anywhere near the success she attained with the 1992 *New York Times* bestseller *Waiting to Exhale*. Terry's books continue to appear on the *Times* bestseller list and several of them have been adapted for the movies.

Amanda Hocking

Amanda Hocking signed a multi-million-dollar deal with St. Martin's Press to re-release her young adult paranormal series, *Trylle*, in 2012. This major deal came after she sold over a million copies of her independently published e-books. If you think Amanda's road to millions was an easy one, think again. She wrote her first novel at age 17, but didn't find e-books and fame until age 26. Her instant success took about nine years of writing, revising and getting rejected.

Kathryn Stockett

Kathryn Stockett, who majored in English and Creative Writing at the University of Alabama, found fame with her first published book, *The Help*, in 2009. The novel landed her on the *New York Times* bestseller list and made her one of the few authors to have their books made into a movie. Not bad for a first-time author, right? Well, it took ten years and more than 50 rejections for Stockett's book to see print.

E. Lynn Harris

Discontent in his career in computer sales, the late E. Lynn Harris (*Abide with Me*) quit his job in 1990 and wrote his first book, *Invisible Life*. After it was rejected by every New York publisher he sent it to, Harris depleted his personal savings account to publish the book himself. Then he sold it out of the trunk of his car. I've heard him tell the story of going to reading groups and having to look successful when in reality he needed the money from his book sales that night to pay for his next meal. He rose to fame after Doubleday bought the rights to *Invisible Life* in 1992. He first appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list in 1996 with his third book, *And This Too Shall Pass*. He went on to appear on the list 10 times. At the time of his death in 2009, he had just completed negotiations for movie adaptations of several of his books.

Walter Mosley

Another overnight success, right? Wrong. Looking for personal fulfillment, ex-computer programmer Walter Mosley (*Blue Light*) started writing in the mid-1980s. His first book, *Gone Fishin'* (Black Classic Press, 1997), was rejected by every major publisher the first time around. His second book, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (W. W. Norton, 1990), became his first published work. He rose to success in 1992 after then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton revealed to the nation—the world even—that Walter Mosley was his favorite mystery writer.

Evelyn Coleman

Evelyn Coleman is the critically acclaimed author of twelve young adult, juvenile and children's books and one adult thriller. Her awards include the Smithsonian's Most Outstanding Children's Book (*White Socks Only*), Carter G. Woodson Honor Book (*The Riches of Oseola McCarty*), and the Publisher's Weekly Cuffie Award (*The Riches of Oseola McCarty*). Before publishing her children's books, Evelyn spent ten years learning the craft of writing. One summer she read, studied, and dissected over 500 picture books and spent \$6,000 on writing classes. It's pretty clear that Evelyn's "overnight" success took a long, long time and a lot of hard work.

* * *

Reviewing the career paths of published authors can help us keep our feet grounded in reality even as our dreams soar into the stratosphere. Terry McMillan, Walter Mosley, and E. Lynn Harris have reached and continue to maintain a level of success that few authors attain. Terry's success came after years of writing. Walter Mosley's success was accelerated by the endorsement of a presidential candidate. Lynn Harris made great short-term sacrifices in order to achieve his success, and his marketing savvy was a definite plus. Have you been writing as long as Terry? Can you count on a national figure endorsing your book? Do you have the freedom to quit your job, or the marketing savvy to publish your work yourself and then sell it out of the trunk of your car?

Hocking and Stockett are recent winners in the publishing sweepstakes and there is much we can learn from them. Both women showed perseverance and didn't give up on their stories despite numerous rejection letters from major publishing houses. While Stockett finally broke through with her first book, Hocking chose to forge a different path and publish her books in e-book format. Both women have achieved great success though they took very different paths.

Though Joe Konrath and Evelyn Coleman have yet to achieve the commercial success of the McMillans, Mosleys, Harris,es,

Hockings and Stocketts of the world, they also serve as examples for us to follow. Evelyn invested time and money into honing her craft. Joe learned his craft and built his following with hard work and persistence. Follow their lead, do what it takes to learn your craft and never give up.

EXERCISE 1: WHAT IS SUCCESS?

You have to define success for yourself. My only advice is not to let your success be defined by forces beyond your control. The following questions will help you think through success and what it means to you and your writing career.

1.1. What criteria do you use to measure success? Why do you use those criteria?

1.2. List your three favorite authors. Find out when they started writing, the number of books they wrote before they sold their first story, and at least one anecdote about how they overcame adversity in their career. Start by googling them or visiting their website. Every author with a website has an "About Me" or "Bio" page that details their journey to publication. Back issues of popular magazines like *People* and *Essence*, as well as major newspapers, are also good sources. Your local library has online and paper indexes that can help you locate the information you need.

1.3. Review what you've learned about your favorite authors. How successful do you consider them to be?

1.4. What expectations do you have for your writing future? Do you think those expectations are realistic? What are you doing to enhance your chances for success?

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