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# Careers for Girls: Writing Trash

Sally Mitchell



In a 1900 *Girl's Realm* competition on "my ambition," the largest number of entrants wanted to be "famous writers" (Low, 1009-10). The sample is biased—these are, after all, girls who wrote essays about their ambition. But Walter Besant, as secretary of the Authors' Society, was said to be "inundated with packages from the country containing the verse and fiction of young ladies in their teens who are wishful to earn money" (Leslie, 233). As advice books with titles like *What Girls Can Do* and *Careers for Girls* began to appear from the 1880's, they came inevitably to include "literary pursuits." Magazines from the *Monthly Packet* to *Atlanta* to the *Girl's Own Paper* carried articles about careers in journalism. Advice manuals, magazines, autobiographies and novels that seem to fictionalize the author's experience on grub street provide an array of impressions and evidence about young women's opportunities in professional journalism between 1880 and 1920.

In the 1871 Census, 255 women listed themselves as "author, editor, writer." Two decades later the number had more than doubled, to 660. By 1892, women had formed a Writer's Club to give themselves a quiet room near Fleet Street where they could produce copy (Jones, 411). In 1899, the Society of Women Journalists, open to women who "have worked in the literary or artistic departments of any recognized journal or magazine as a paid contributor for two years" (*Englishwoman's Year Book*, 1899, p. 120), had 200 members. The Institute of Journalists, a somewhat more professional organization,<sup>1</sup> admitted women on the same terms as men. In 1895 it had 60 women members and Catherine Drew was its vice president (*EnglishWoman's Review*, 15 Oct. 1895, p. 267).

The disparity between the 200 and the 60, however, suggests some of the contest over who was actually a journalist. In Ethel F. Heddle's novel *Girl Comrades* (1907) the characters include Eliza Small, who does "fashion pars in the *Mode* and *Town Talk*" (56); Eilidh Chandos, who becomes typist, proof-reader and assistant to an editor; and Mercy Tempest, a Canadian journalist who is writing "The Seamy Side of Great Citities" for the *Eagle*" (p. 54).<sup>2</sup>

Mercy Tempest, however, is definitely an exception among fictionalized women in journalism. Nor do we find those who write for the intellectual periodicals. As one character in a breezy novel explains:

"I've had essays in some of the best quarterlies. But that isn't journalism. That's play. Nothing which doesn't make money is journalism.... The Reporter isn't a journalist—he's a reporter.... As for the special correspondent—he's such a rare bird that he can't be counted either" (Muir, p. 30). So what *could* girls do? According to the advice manuals, "Serial-story writing, for the newspapers and minor magazines, is the most remunerative branch of present-day journalism for women" (Chapman, 160).

Adeline Sergeant (whose career began when she won a story contest in *People's Friend*) (Tooley, 687) provides specifics:

The short story for minor magazines affords a very respectable livelihood for the unambitious author. There is at present a crowd of small serials, which neither pay their contributors much nor set up a high standard of excellence. The writers of stories for these magazines are generally quite unknown to the outer world, but often make a fair living out of their productions. (*Englishwoman's Year Book*, 1899, 112).

Writing for the periodicals educated people read, she continues, is far more difficult: "People whose names are already well known fill their pages: the high-class monthly is for writers who have 'arrived,' not for beginners.... It is far easier to launch a novel than to place a short story in a good magazine" (112-13).

It may well have been easier for women to gain entry by writing fiction. But it was also much more "suitable." Newspaper staff work had three major drawbacks, which were often cited: the work had to be done well into the night; assignments might take the journalist into unsuitable places; and finally, as the *Girl's Own Paper* put it, "the girl reporter has to assume a bold mien when, with her notebook, she takes her place at a table among perhaps a dozen men, on whose province she is encroaching. It is not an occupation which tends to the development of feminine graces..." ("Young Women as Journalists," 396).

W.T. Stead scoffs at the idea that womanly manners suffer—indeed, he asserts that women's chief advantage in journalism is that "they are more pleasant and therefore better liked than men," (13), which is an asset when doing interviews. He does say, though, that women must learn to accept all assignments without complaint and to take criticism. Too many of them, he writes, seem to feel "chivalry and courtesy demand that [their] work should be judged more leniently" than men's (12).

Fiction writing, on the other hand, was a perfectly acceptable occupation for women, and could be done in privacy and "safety." By the turn of the century, penny and halfpenny fiction seems to have lost the moral taint it had carried in the G.W.M. Reynolds days. In the 1890's, "real literature" was more likely to be racy and dangerous than the novelettes and cheap serials. Thus advice givers were perfectly willing to recommend newsprint markets. Arthur Vanderbilt, in *What to do with our Girls* (1884), points out the "good prices...paid by the *Family Herald*, *London Journal*, and various children's papers" (111). Ethel Heddle, author of several novels about girl serialists which she said were based on experience,<sup>3</sup> advised a writer who sent her work for criticism to try *The Family Herald*: "Their weekly supplement requires about 25000 words...and they pay on acceptance" [her italics] ("Between Ourselves," 278).

These must have been the true golden years for serial fiction. The *Writers and Artists Year Book* for 1916 listed dozens and dozens of markets. The Amalgamated Press alone was represented by 38 titles<sup>4</sup> and had the convenience of a unified "Fiction Editor" who distributed submissions to the appropriate journal.

What kind of pay could be earned from this work? The rate most often quoted is a guinea a thousand.<sup>5</sup> And proficient writers could produce astonishing quantities—the fictional freelancer in *Cupid's Caterers* claims that "when I'm in the mood I can do anything between five and eight thousand a day" (Muir, 20) and the real Lillias C. Davidson told an interviewer that she wrote twenty thousand words a week ("Our New Serial Story," 470). Twenty guineas a week—even with some vacations figured in—is a fairly substantial income for 1898.<sup>6</sup>

It is not really clear whether beginners were actually paid at that rate; and certainly it would need experience to produce those quantities and to place everything. The entry for Harmsworth's *Girl's Friend* in *The Writers' Year-Book* of 1902 says that payment "varies" (25). The aspiring journalist in a 1916 Mills & Boon novel gets one guinea for 2,000 words for her first sale (Stevens, 38-39). And one "poor lady" in Ethel Heddle's *Three Girls in a Flat* is reported to have written "a story for the *British Daily Sheet* and got two shillings and sixpence for it. And she had six children and supported them entirely on hack work. She does pars<sup>7</sup> now for a fashion paper; that pays better" (91).

The question of sex discrimination is also not clear. The editor in *Three Girls in a Flat* says, of a girl who does work for his women's weekly, "I pay her about half what the men get. She's clever, too.... She's poor, and glad to work for very little" (146).

On the other hand, an article in the *Monthly Packet* claims that journalism "compares favourably with other employments open to women" because of its equality: "The woman teacher has longer hours and much lower pay than men who teach; but the woman journalist is as well paid for the work she does as if she were a man" (Green, 504). But relatively few jobs were open to women. As W.T. Stead says, "many editors...other things being equal, would give a journalistic commission to a man rather than to a woman" (p. 12).<sup>8</sup>

The weekly story papers often held "prize competitions": One guinea for the best story under 2,000 words in *Forget-me-Not* in 1899, for example. These serve a number of purposes. Headed "by a Reader," the stories simulate realism and also foster the fantasy that anyone can become a writer. For editors, the contests may have helped locate new talent. Among the writers who got a start by winning competitions were Adeline Sergeant (Tooley, 687), Ethel Heddle ("The Author of Our New Serial Story," 464), Lillias Campbell Davidson,<sup>9</sup> Sylvia Brett (Brook, 76), and Annie Swan, who served in 1906 as the president of the Society of Women Journalists (Meadows, 1000). In addition, as a moment's math reveals, the "guinea for 2,000 words" competition lets one pay beginners just about half the standard rate.

Finally, there's a wonderful scheme—I wonder how fictional it is—in Ethel Drower's 1916 novel "*and What Happened*". The book begins with a country girl coming to London to attend the "Cradock School of Journalism." She has paid, in advance, 40 guineas for a six-months course, but what she finds in a courtyard off Fleet Street is an office with *Art and Fashion*, *The Family Friend*, and *Society Snapshots* painted on its windows. The proprietor, in essence, has interns paying him to be allowed to do the scut work on his papers.<sup>10</sup>

For novices who were serious about a career, it would probably have been excellent training. Writing for the story-papers was, as Annie Swan (who was enormously successful at it) said, "almost a profession by itself" which "many first-class writers" could not master (*My Life*, 280). After a great deal of trying, Berta Ruck (1878-1978) got an opportunity to do something for *Home Chat*:

It pleased them; and they paid me a guinea. But it was a long time before they liked anything further...although high-brow friends always spoke (and speak) as if writing for "those penny rags for women" were merely a matter of a bottle of fountain-pen ink and a lack of taste...(Ruck, 91).

The listings in *The Writer's Year-Book* laid out the requirements. *My Weekly* wanted, for example, "Serials from 80,000 to 100,000 words, suitable for family reading; strong love stories of the novelette type, dealing with high and low life; light, breezy school-girl stories; stories of the adventuress 'above her station' type. Short stories 6000 words, light love interest. Articles 800 to 1000 words—hairdressing, beauty, crochet, cookery, fortune-telling" (1916, p.50).

Dora Chapman described the way in which editors and serialists work together:

The usual custom is to submit two or three instalments [sic] and a synopsis of the plot to an editor, who may then send for the writer to come and "talk things over," very probably modifying the plot before definitely accepting it. (160)

Or, as Berta Ruck recounts of her apprenticeship as a writer for Harmsworth's *Forget-me-Not*: "I used to sit and ask them what they would like me to do; I used to be given cups of tea to tell them a story; altering it as I went along, according to the expression in their faces" (92).

Obvious derivatives of Harmsworth and his cheap-press empire appear in several of the novels. In Muir's *Cupids Caterers* (1914) the rags-to-riches publisher is "Mr. John Slightford," who has 30 journals including two (edited by the same man) called *Honeysuckle* (for single girls) and *Dreamtime* (for the young married) (26). Harmsworth's comparable stablemates were *Girls' Friend* (1898-1918) and *Forget Me Not* (1891-1918). Given the difficulty in discovering circulation figures for these periodicals, it may be of some interest that the novel says *Honeysuckle* sold 200,000 copies a week.<sup>11</sup>

Another Harmsworth stand-in is "Mr. Dalziel" in Heddle's *Girl Comrades* (1907), whose genius lies in market segmentation. His *Women's Delight*, for example, is

for the rather serious type of woman—the young suburban, and provincial matron—who doesn't only want fashions and recipes, but information and sympathy. She wants her lines of poetry and quotations traced. Rather of the Nonconformist Conscience order. Girls who read Browning and Tennyson, and want things and life explained! (87)

The stories that feature ambitious young writers tend to be a little cynical, a tiny bit discouraging—but also filled with a sense of fun and adventure about this light-hearted new world, in which "girls" in their twenties can live in "Mansions" or shared flats, and take London 'busses at all hours of the day or night, and have jolly working friendships with

equally wholesome young men. The more serious novels that use some of the same material—Ella Hepworth Dixon's *Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) or *Winding Paths* (1911) by Gertrude Page—are much grimmer about career women's loneliness, lost social position and tawdry love life.

That very fact makes me suspect that penny magazines for women and girls, like the paperback romances which are their descendants, had an audience far wider than the "servant girls" or "working class" who are generally seen as their consumers. The fictional serialist "Lil" in one of Ethel Heddle's novels<sup>12</sup> describes her readers as "the bourgeois middle class of shop-girls and school-girls, and the people who live in the suburbs of London—in the little red-brick houses with a balcony and a conservatory" (*Three Girls in a Flat*, 11-12).

It is dangerously easy to patronize this fiction and the people who read and wrote it. Are there not some less superficial reasons for its success? One woman who began writing magazine stories in her teens suggested later that the experience provided therapy for a "morbidly suppressed" younger self: "My typewriter was never still, and each story I wrote seemed to lift a burden from my soul, as if I had rid myself of an emotion or a thought that had been weighing me."<sup>13</sup> And in one of the depressing "modern woman" novels of the nineties, an editor suggests why story papers are suddenly booming: "The public like happy endings. The novelists are getting so morbid. It's all these French and Russian writers that have done it. It's really difficult now to get a thoroughly breezy book with a wedding at the end" (Dixon 223).

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The rules of the Institute of Journalists required its members to have been for at least three years "professionally and habitually engaged as editor of a journal; or upon the staff of a journal in the capacity of leader-writer, writer of special articles, artist, special correspondent, literary manager, assistant editor, sub-editor, or reporter; or in supplying journals with articles, illustrations, correspondence or reports" (Green, 498).

<sup>2</sup>*The Young Woman* (a journal with which Heddle was closely associated) had a profile of Elizabeth Banks, the American "investigative journalist" who posed as a laundry-girl, domestic servant, flower-seller, etc, in volume 3 (1894-95) pp. 58-62.

<sup>3</sup>"Author of Our New Serial Story: A Talk with Miss Ethel F. Heddle," p. 464.

<sup>4</sup>The titles included *Boys' Realm*, *Family Journal*,

*Heartsease Library, Marvel, Our Girls, Penny Pictorial, Sunday Companion, Union Jack and Woman's Own.*

<sup>5</sup>See, especially, listings in *Writers Year-Book and Writers and Artists Year Book*.

<sup>6</sup>Rates for "articles" seem to run between 10 and 15 shillings, compared with a list given in 1891 of payment for the (much longer) essays in journals that were much harder to crack: three guineas for *St. James's Gazette*, three to five guineas for the *Spectator* and the *Saturday Review*, one guinea at the *Globe* (Green, 505).

<sup>7</sup>"Pars" was trade jargon for "paragraphs" or fillers, often composed of gossip and/or puffing mentions of goods or services for which the writer (as well as the periodical) might earn some "consideration," either in outright payment or in the form of a discount on purchases. Thus writing "pars" could augment the journalist's income and lessen the expense of the professional wardrobe she needed, but the work probably lay somewhat closer to canvassing for advertisements than to "authorship."

<sup>8</sup>Stead exempts himself: "for my own part, I must plead guilty to the opposite prejudice, for I would never employ a man if I could find a woman who could do the work as well" (p. 12).

<sup>9</sup>Davidson (Brooklyn born but raised in England) became a regular contributor to *Cassell's Magazine* after winning a prize for "a short story with a proverb title" ("Our New Serial Story," 469).

<sup>10</sup>The 1916 *Writers' and Artists' Year-Book* has an advertisement for a "School of Art, Journalism and Secretarial Training for Women" where training was given in story writing, interviewing, art criticism, society reporting, sub-editing, proofreading, research work, indexing, etc.

<sup>11</sup>Ward Muir (1878-1927) is identified in *Who Was Who* as an author and journalist. The passage, on p. 27 of *Cupid's Caterers*, also says that the advertisements in *Honeysuckle* are worth £50 a page, and that the editor earns £1000 a year. Later in the book we learn of one reason for the "double numbers" so often found in penny papers: "We're offering a thumping prize of five hundred pounds for the solution of the series of puzzle pictures which appear in each issue of *Dreamtime*, as you see. The first few sets of pictures are moderately easy, and the readers get keen on it, and think the five hundred is in their pockets. Suppose we now bring out a double number at twopence, they absolutely must buy it, because they daren't miss getting one of the sets of puzzle pictures. The difference in the receipts between a

couple of double numbers and a couple of single ones more than pays the five hundred pounds prize" (278).

<sup>12</sup>*Three Girls in a Flat*. "Lil" is named "Lilias" with one internal "l." A later Heddle novel, *Girl Comrades*, is dedicated (with the words "We Clomb the hill thegither") to her friend Lillias Campbell Davidson who, according to an interview in *The Young Woman* in 1898, wrote serials which had been running constantly in *Home Chat* or one of Harmsworth's other papers for several years (470).

<sup>13</sup>Sylvia Brook, *Sylvia of Sarawak*, p. 77. Certain passages in this autobiography strongly suggest a history of childhood sexual abuse.

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