

# CONFESSIONS OF A COMMERCIAL WRITER

*Eric Nicol*

I'M HERE TO TURN MYSELF IN. The guilt has become too much to bear. For more than 35 years I have lived with it, the crushing shame, and now, before it is too late, I must get this Kong-sized monkey off my back. I come to this respected periodical to ask the editor to take my statement:

I have made money as a writer in Canada.

No, I don't mean counterfeiting, though that sounds more feasible. I mean that I have supported myself and my family with my typewriter, with enough to spare to sustain a meaningful relationship with my broker.

I sense that the reader is already shrinking away from me. Anyone familiar with publication in this country knows that a Canadian writer's literary worth varies inversely with his financial liquidity. If the author has anything in his pocket besides a hole, he has obviously been engaging in — and I apologize for using the word in a respectable journal — *commercial* work.

I remember the pain and mortification I felt the first time I read a newspaper's theatre review in which my comedy of manners was described as a "commercial play." I was too young to understand what the term meant, or I might have tried to get out of the dirty business before the stigma had hardened. Hopelessly naïve, I thought that having my play classed with the style of Neil Simon was a compliment. Little did I comprehend that, whereas being popular is tolerated and even admired in most parts of the world, in Canada it is merely vulgar, in the worst Latin sense of the word.

The critics (reviewers, actually, as Canada has no professional critics in any performing art not directed by a referee) are seldom tolerant towards the author of a popular hit. If he attempts to repeat it, the watchdogs of Canadian culture will quickly have him by the seat of his designer jeans.

Instead of recognizing this early on in my mercenary career, I saw no harm in letting artistic directors produce a second play of mine despite the fact that the first play was a financial success. Fool that I was, I openly admired their moxie. Only latterly have I learned to plead with producers to conceal box-office figures unless they are really low.

I also write under several names.

Too late. In a pre-opening interview with one of Vancouver's drama reviewers, he asked me, almost sympathetically, "Why do you keep trying?" I didn't have a

reasonable reply ready. To say that I still hoped to write something both artistically meritorious and good for big bucks — well, it would have sounded absurdly pretentious, not to say hallucinative.

How then does a Canadian writer cope with success? One way is to live abroad. Mavis Gallant is suspected of earning substantial sums, as a contributor to *The New Yorker*, and in U.S. dollars at that. But she very sensibly holes up in Paris. This makes her an expatriate, her royalty cheques excusable because she is too far from Canada to be on welfare. Similarly, Canadian writers Arthur Hailey and Bernard Slade, though seen to be highly commercial, pay for their millions by having to work in the United States. They are more likely to be mugged, and they are entirely cut off from the Canadian Council grant — the modern equivalent of excommunication. They may have expensive homes in California, but they have little chance of being invited to read their work at a meeting of the Moose Jaw branch of the Canadian Authors Association.

For the commercial author seeking respectability the only other option is to live on the Gulf Islands of British Columbia, preferably an obscure and bleak atoll with no ferry service and brackish well water. So long as he keeps his ill-gotten gains in an old bait bucket and dresses like something discharged from the bilge of a Russian trawler, the bush man or woman of letters may conceivably prosper without inciting contempt.

But I, alas, am betrayed by my address (Vancouver's Kerrisdale), even though I avoid using the postal code. As a commercial writer I suffer an anxiety attack every time I send an unsolicited manuscript to a publisher or dramaturge, because under Canadian criminal law prostitution is not a crime but soliciting is. I must be careful not to appear pressing and persistent. I never try a publisher more than once, or on the street.

Yet, people know. Somehow the basically decent reading public of Canada can detect those of us commercial writers who cannot simply summon the Muse, but have to deal through her pimp. When my Muse does show up, she is wearing pink hot pants and fishnet stockings. Oh, God, how I envy the author who receives his divine afflatus in a tiny garret, as he nibbles his mousetrap cheese!

"No man but a blockhead," said Samuel Johnson, "ever wrote except for money." The doctor's prescription is not accepted in Canada. Here the blockhead is valued as totemic. He writes not for money but for the manifest destiny of being appointed as writer-in-residence at a recognized Canadian university. (I was offered a writer-in-residency once, but had to turn it down because I had encumbered myself with material objects, such as a wife and three children.)

Let my fate serve as a warning to the Canadian writer tempted to give up the *succès d'estime* for the greener fields of the commercial. Those fields are actually foul, soul-sucking bogs, my friend. Do us both a favour: keep out.