

WORKING CLASS



Taking a day job didn't just give this writer a regular paycheck—it saved his sanity.

IN HIS LIFE IN HELL BOOKS, Matt Groening has great advice for how to annoy writers. Just ask them: “But how do you make a living?”

While not always so brash, people do ask me this when I introduce myself at parties. They know that writers work for shiny rocks and hazelnut coffee and assume that I must have something else to keep me afloat.

I tell them that yes, I'm a teacher in the New York City public schools. What I don't tell them is that, in the past, I've been that special sort of writer without a day job, and it nearly killed me.

My story begins with the biggest day job of all: high school. I started writing personal stories for a local newspaper in 10th grade; I was terrifyingly productive. I'd go to school, come home, do three to four hours of homework, then write, and it never bothered me, because writing wasn't work. *School* was work. Writing was recreation.

All of that changed once I finished college. Having heard of the rocks-and-coffee salaries of writers, I worked toward a computer science degree and assumed I'd be programming in the day and writing on the side for most of my natural life. Then, months before graduation, I sold my first novel.

I immediately packed my bags for a Thai sex vacation—nope, wait. I immediately packed my bags for an apart-

ment that I felt would become my new writing lair. See, the first book was in the can, but I had to produce that next one; the contract I signed was a two-fer.

Problem was, the next novel was a nonstarter. Actually, it started, but it kept starting over and over. Now that I had all day to tinker, something was always off and, in the bigger picture, something was *really* off—writing wasn't a release anymore. It had become work.

I started to get depressed; the kind of depressed that comes with special pills. I shut myself in every day to try and make the magic happen, but it was nothing going. Finally, I decided the problem with my novel was tense—it needed to be present tense all the way through, so I started going through it from the first page changing each verb from past to present. After two sleepless nights of that, I called the suicide hotline in desperation. They told me to go straight to the hospital.

It took only a year and a half for the all-writing lifestyle to land me in the nuthouse. But a lot of things happened in the hospital that never would've happened while I was writing alone in my house.

I wrote about my hospital experience, and the resulting novel became my best-received work to date. But the problem wasn't gone. I was still a professional writer—it said so on my tax forms—but I didn't have any ideas for the *next* work. Articles and short stories didn't plug the gap; these are just shorter novels, with the same anxieties and lack of a steady paycheck.

Stints in computer programming and bike messengering jump-started my thinking a little. But the New York City Teaching Fellows program is what saved me. I should've realized it before; if I was happiest and most productive in school, I'd be happy and productive teaching school.

Now I'm headed back into the classroom. And something funny has happened along the way: I've begun writing a new novel—one I'm happy with.

The conditions in which we produce our best work as writers is critical. I always assumed that, given all the time in the world, I'd be able to crank out novels; it turns out that I'm much better at doing that when I cram in a few pages at the end of a day spent doing something else. Writers have to live, not just write, and sometimes something outside of this sacred field can give us a life—and a living. [WD]

NED VIZZINI's most recent novel is *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (Miramax).