

The Power of Belief

Dara Girard

The twenty-first century is a great time to be a writer of fiction. We are the dream weavers, the storytellers, the myth makers, entertainers and teachers. Our words move hearts, change minds and captivate millions. Don't believe me? That's why I wrote this article. I want to show you how the power of belief in a writer's life can influence every aspect of your career: what you will accept in a contract; the treatment you'll tolerate from an editor or agent; whether you'll make a living or not; or the type of fiction you'll write.

I've spent more than twenty years learning about this industry (thirteen as a freelance writer and unpublished novelist and nine years published). In those years I've seen talented writers burnout, get bullied by their editors, forced to write fiction they dread and eventually disappear. I've also seen others soar to dizzying heights—get big advances, gain best-seller status—and stay firmly established for years. Then there are those in-between, like myself, who've been knocked down from time to time (and have the scars and war stories to prove it) but rise up after each fall to write and publish again.

I wanted to know the difference between those who didn't make it and those who did. Through talks with career novelists and hobbyists, I came to the conclusion that one's beliefs was the deciding factor in the choices individual writers made and had more of an impact on their success or failure in this industry than the various situations and obstacles they faced.

I'm not talking about the belief in a certain deity or motivational guru. If you want to stand on one leg and pray to a plastic pink flamingo that's fine with me. Do what works, baby! No, I'm talking about three key beliefs: belief in one's self, belief in one's gifts and belief in opportunities.

How to Unlock the Power of Belief

"If someone gives you permission, they can take it away. I give myself permission."

Lucille Clifton, poet

As a whole, writers are mistreated because most undervalue themselves instead of believing in how powerful they are. When they buy into the belief that publishing is an impossible industry in which to make a living, that it's the luck of the draw, that mentality keeps them weak, desperate and poor. But when those writers focus on their strengths everything changes.

As a writer, you are the master of your fate. You determine the legacy you will leave. You are the CEO of your own literary brand. And if you don't believe that, then you're in the wrong industry. Too many writers think of themselves as 'sensitive artists' who need to be shielded from the big bad wolf of publishing. Writers with this belief system usually get swallowed up by

bad contracts, scam agents and publishers, bad book doctors and a host of other disasters lurking to trap naïve authors who ‘just want to write.’ Being knowledgeable about the business side of publishing is just as crucial as learning the craft.

This self-limiting belief is what separates writers who make a living from those who don’t. Successful writing careers are built by writers who take the time to learn: what their royalty statement means, what different contract clauses stand for, what rights they’re signing away (and what they’ll keep), and the value of their copyright. You don’t have to handle all this alone, assembled a team of advisors. Get a CPA to handle your accounting; a business advisor who understands the pros and cons of incorporating or starting an LLC; a marketing specialist to help with branding; a trustworthy agent and/or literary lawyer to negotiate and interpret your contracts. You need to understand that you’re a capable individual running an international business. You won’t know everything at first and you’ll make mistakes, that’s okay. But there’s no excuse not to learn. The fact that you’re part of an amazing organization like RWA says that you’re taking this industry seriously. And that’s great because if you don’t set up your writing business to make money off of your intellectual property (your stories), someone else will.

Never buy into the belief that you’re just a lowly writer. A fundamental belief in yourself and what you can accomplish (i.e. control) versus what you can’t is the foundation of a writer’s career. For example, you can write any story you want at whatever pace you want. However, if you want your novel published by Random House in hardcover or to win awards and be lauded by your peers that’s out of your control, no matter how much you may want it to happen. Here are examples of things you, as a writer, **cannot** control:

- *Your agent promised to send your book out but has been sitting on it for eight months*
- *The publishing house that accepted your manuscript files for bankruptcy and goes out of business*
- *You keep getting rejections on a book you’re passionate about*
- *Your manuscript gets an extremely low score on a recent contest entry*
- *Your publisher decides not to renew your contract*
- *Your editor leaves and your new editor hates everything you write*
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I could go on and on, but you get the gist. Focusing on what you cannot control is a frustrating activity. You need to focus on unlocking your power. You have the power to:

- *Say ‘No’ to bad contracts (no matter how desperate you are to sign one)*
- *Attend workshops*
- *Develop a marketing plan*
- *Collaborate with other authors*
- *Enter contests*
- *Create a short story or novella and post episodes on a blog*
- *Volunteer in your organization to find out more about the publishing business*
- *Read.*
- *Learn what criticism to listen to and which ones to ignore*
- *Submit your work to editors*
- *Write—novels, essays, articles, blogs, plays, short stories, scripts, poems*

- *Research different avenues towards publications like--Micro Press, Small Press, the Big Six, E-book, Print on Demand, Co-Op Publishing, Self-Publishing*

How Belief is Essential to One's Power as a Storyteller

Anyone can tell a story right? If you believe that statement I'd like to tell you about my Nigerian uncle who's worth ten million dollars and just needs your name and bank account to transfer money out of the country. Please send the info to my email address.

But I digress...

Storytellers are a special breed. Establishing an unwavering belief in your gift as a storyteller will unlock the power of your voice. Your voice will separate you from other writers more than a marketing plan, a great promotional push or blog tour. It will give you staying power. With staying power, you will be able to survive a bad cover, bad sales, bad reviews, bad luck, bad decisions, bad anything. With the right belief in your voice as a storyteller, you can reemerge after years of no sales, with a new name and a new career. Or bounce back from being dropped by your publisher like veteran author Laura Resnick (*Unsympathetic Magic*) did with her *Esther Diamond* urban fantasy series. Her belief in her storytelling ability propelled her through fifteen years of believing in a series idea when others didn't.

"No agent would touch it," she said. And various publishers rejected it. When she finally did get a publisher, they printed the book poorly—bad cover, bad month...you know the drill--and the book tanked. As a result her publisher cancelled the series. But Laura didn't stop there. She got her rights back and sent her work to another publisher, DAW Books, and now has a successful series (three novels and two more in the works) writing stories she wants to (and feels led to) write.

If you don't believe in your gift, you might make career plans out of fear instead of faith and that can be detrimental. "I don't think we do ourselves any favors by buying into the idea that there are a gazillion writers who can take our places," *New York Times* best-selling author Madeline Hunter (*Dangerous in Diamonds*) said. "That is the same as saying every [published author] has a career based not on quality of writing and superior story-telling, but on some fluke of fate. If a writer believes she can be replaced easily by writers waiting in the wings and has nothing special to offer compared to them, I think it affects her relationship with publishers and editors, and not to the author's advantage. I think editors can sniff our confidence (or lack of confidence) in our talent."

She's right. Some writers stay with publishers, who aren't growing their careers because they don't think they have any other options. Others stay with abusive agents who belittle them instead of querying others. This kind of belief is like staying in a relationship with a toothless man who farts for fun just because you think that's the best you can get. *New York Times* best-selling author Jayne Ann Krentz (*Quicksilver* w/a Amanda Quick,) has kept her storytelling gift intact through different pen names and career setbacks. "When I need inspiration I find myself returning again and again to the archetypes, conflicts and themes that have compelled me from the start of my career. Whatever power I have as a writer is drawn from those elements," she said.

You need to know and believe that your passion to tell stories isn't a mistake. You were meant to honor your gift by telling thrilling and compelling stories in your voice.

How One's Belief can Expand Opportunities

If you believe that you can have a fun, fulfilling life as a writer (whether full-time, part-time or as a hobby), you will. If you don't, and choose to believe that only a lucky few succeed, that publishers are big bullies, and that most editors/ agents are heartless crooks, then you won't. Successful writing careers don't happen by luck, they happen by strategy. Learn from the masters about how they've sustained long careers. Discover how they utilize their copyrights, set up their businesses, and develop their work. You can do wonders with the right team and support. Believe you can have a great writing life and doors of opportunity will fly open. You don't see what you're not looking for.

When you begin to believe in opportunities you'll realize you're not in a race or a contest. You'll see collaborators instead of competitors and know that no one needs to fail so that you can succeed. Your business is to create a legacy (or for a more business like term 'inventory') of publishable fiction that you can sell. If one book doesn't do well, it won't matter because you'll be too busy working on the next one. Even classic authors like Charles Dickens and Jane Austen had flops, but because they kept writing we remember them for their enduring stories.

Belief and the Writer

"Doubt whom you will, but never yourself."

Christian N Bovee

With the right belief system in place you'll know that you're smart enough to understand the writing business. Be open to suggestions, but not dictations. You deserve respect not indignity. You have your own vision and need to work with people who have the same vision. You can be a 'sensitive artist' in the privacy of your home, but in the real world you're an entrepreneurial writer with stories to tell (and sell)!

You are powerful:

Only you can keep yourself from writing.

Only you can keep yourself from sending your work out.

Only you can keep yourself from taking risks.

Only you can keep yourself ignorant of the publishing business.

Only you can keep yourself from following your inner voice.

Only you can keep yourself from rising up when you've been knocked down.

Only you can keep yourself from moving towards your goals and aspirations.

This is your time. If you wish to believe nothing else, believe that.

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