

# A Writer's Manifesto

**Joanne Harris**

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Manchester Literature Festival  
The Department Store  
5 Oak Street  
Manchester  
M4 5JD  
[www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk](http://www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk)

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In a world in which the internet, with its forums and discussion groups, has blurred the line between readers and writers almost to invisibility, the relationship between one and the other now seems increasingly difficult. Online review sites and book blogs are overtaking print reviews - with a predictable effect on publishers and marketing departments. Online fandoms are shaping the development of TV shows. Fanfiction is a booming industry. And audience participation in the creation of art is considered by many to be not only legitimate, but desirable.

Both on and offline, everyone has an opinion. And everyone has a platform from which to disseminate their opinions. Much of the time, this is a good thing. It allows a potential dialogue to exist between readers and creators. It allows readers to get in touch with the authors of work they have enjoyed. It allows writers to understand where and how they might have gone wrong, and how they can improve and grow. However, this breaking-down of barriers has also created a false sense of entitlement, giving some readers the impression that artists and writers not only inhabit a privileged world, in which there are no bills to pay and in which time is infinitely flexible, but that they also exist primarily to serve the public, to be available night and day, and to cater for the personal needs of everyone who contacts them.

This is partly due to the fact that there are so many more writers than there were fifty years ago. The rise of self-publishing, e-books and fanfiction means that far more people are now able to identify as writers. And although this is a good thing in many ways, it

does also help perpetuate the idea that *anyone* can write a book, and that the people who do so are simply luckier, wealthier, or blessed with more spare time than those who do not.

The truth is, not everyone can – or should - be a writer, in the same way that not everyone can or should be an accountant, or a ballet dancer, teacher, pilot, soldier, or marathon runner. The same combination of aptitude, experience and acquired skills apply to being a writer as to any other job. We would never think of telling a doctor that we were thinking of taking up medicine when we retired. We would never expect a plumber to work for free – or a plasterer, for publicity. We would never expect to hear the word “privilege” of a teacher who has spent their career working hard to earn a living. We would never expect a lawyer who has paid to go through law school to tutor aspiring lawyers for free.

And yet, writers hear these things all the time. Perhaps it’s because the value of writing is such a difficult thing to quantify. Everyone dreams. Not everyone gets to dream for a living.

Not long ago, I was involved in the debate around an app. called CleanReader, which contained an algorithm that picked out and replaced “offensive words” in e-books by “acceptable substitutes.” Thus, “breasts” becomes “chest,” “bitch” becomes “witch” and any kind of profanity was reduced to a series of American euphemisms, making nonsense of the text, its rhythms, style and meanings. Writers rallied round to combat the distribution of this app, which was swiftly withdrawn from sale. But the designers of the app, a Christian couple from Idaho, wrote to me several times to protest that readers, having paid for my books, should have the *right* to change my words if they disapproved of them. Readers are consumers, they said. Therefore, just as a person ordering a salad in a restaurant should have the right to ask the chef for a different dressing, readers should also have the choice to

enjoy a story without being exposed to language they deem offensive, or ideas that challenge their perceptions.

Well, of *course* the readers have a choice. But a novel isn't a salad with interchangeable ingredients. The reader's choice when selecting a book is simply whether to read it, or not. As writers, we are always grateful when a reader chooses one of our books, and we hope that they will enjoy it. And writers value feedback and dialogue with their readers. But ultimately, what we hope for most is for the reader to *believe* in us; to trust us enough to follow us on our journey together; without asking "Are we there yet?" or trying to dictate the route. The relationship between reader and writer is not that of an employer and an employee. Nor do I believe it should be that of a pupil and teacher. It should be a relationship based on mutual respect, along with a shared understanding of books, their nature and their importance.

But is it? Why do we *really* write? Are we writers deluding ourselves by trying to keep control of our work? Are we deluded in our belief that books are somehow different to any other commodity? And can we writers still expect, in a world in which the consumer increasingly calls the shots, a relationship with our readers that transcends that of supply and demand?

Samuel Johnson once said: "*No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.*" If so, then there are a lot of blockheads in the book business, and a lot more eager to enter it. I am proud to be one of them – in fact I would go as far as to say: "No-one but a blockhead should ever write *just* for money."

The truth is that most authors are *driven* to write: would probably write whether or not they had an audience; or whether they were ever published or paid, just for the joy of writing. This is at the same time their strength, and also their downfall; with the exception of a canny few who treat art as a business, writers are often reluctant to think of their work as just another product. We do not like to think of our books as units, to be bought and sold. And yet, to the publishing industry, that's exactly what they are; the product of thousands of hours of work: of editing; copy-editing; design; marketing; proof-reading; promotion. Publishers spend most of their time thinking about the readers – the consumers of our work - but for an author, thinking about the readers while trying to write a novel is like thinking about the drop when performing a high-wire act; dangerous, counterproductive, and likely to lead to failure.

I love my readers. I love their enthusiasm, their willingness to engage. I enjoy our conversations on Twitter and at festivals. I love their diversity, and the fact that they all see different things in my books, according to what's important to them, and according to what they have experienced. Being human, I want to please them. But also, being a writer, I can only have one master – and that is the story I'm trying to bring into existence.

Because stories – even fairy stories - are never just entertainment. Stories are much more important than that. They help us understand who we are. They teach us empathy and respect for other cultures, other ideas. They help us articulate concepts that cannot otherwise be expressed. Stories help us communicate; they help eliminate boundaries; they teach us different ways in which to see the world around us. Their value may be intangible, but it is no less real for that. And stories bring us together – readers and writers everywhere – exploring our human experience and sharing it with others.

So this is my manifesto, my promise to you, the reader. From you, I ask nothing but that you take it in good faith, and understand that, whatever I do, I do for the sake of something we both value - otherwise we wouldn't be here.

1. I promise to be honest, unafraid and true; but most of all, to be true to myself – because trying to be true to anyone else is not only impossible, but the sign of a fearful writer.

2. I promise not to sell out - not even if you ask me to.

3. You may not always like what I write, but know that it has always been the best I could make it at the time.

4. Know too that sometimes I will challenge you and pull you out of your comfort zone, because this is how we learn and grow. I can't promise you'll always feel safe or at ease – but we'll be uneasy together.

5. I promise to follow my story wherever it leads me, even to the darkest of places.

6. I will not limit my writing to just one group or demographic. Stories are for everyone, and everyone is welcome here.

7. I will include people of all kinds in my stories, because people are infinitely fascinating and diverse.

8. I promise that I will never flinch from trying something different and new - even if the things I try are not always successful.

9. I will never let anyone else decide what I should write, or how - not the market, my publishers, my agent, or even you, the reader. And though you sometimes try to tell me otherwise, I don't think you really want me to.

10. I promise not to be aloof whenever you reach out to me – be that on social media or outside, in the real world. But remember that I'm human too – and some days I'm impatient, or tired, or sometimes I just run out of time.

11. I promise never to forget what I owe my readers. Without you, I'm just words on a page. Together, we make a dialogue.

12. But ultimately, *you* have the choice whether or not to follow me. I will open the door for you. But I will never blame you if you choose not to walk through it.