Check for updates

CHAPTER 4

"Your Successful Man of Letters Is Your Successful Tradesman": Fiction and the Marketplace in British Author's Guides of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Paul Vlitos

Introduction

If in recent decades the worldwide proliferation of creative writing programs in higher education has suggested (in Mark McGurl's words) a discipline which is "on the way to becoming a global Anglophone phenomenon" (McGurl 2009, p. 364), the same period has also seen a flourishing of scholarship examining this phenomenon. While D. G. Myers's pioneering *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (1996) traces the history of the development of creative writing as an academic discipline, McGurl's *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009) explores the effects that such formal and

P. Vlitos (✉)
University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

© The Author(s) 2021

A. Masschelein and D. de Geest (eds.), *Writing Manuals for the Masses*, New Directions in Book History,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53614-5_4

institutionalized literary training has had on the fiction produced by those writers who have undergone it—famously suggesting that "the rise of the creative writing program" can be seen as "the most important event in postwar American literary history" (ibid., p. ix).

Building on the work of Myers and McGurl, recent scholarship by Mary Stewart Atwell and Paul S. Collins has endeavored to extend and complicate discussions initiated by *The Elephants Teach* and *The Program Era* in two key regards: firstly, by exploring further the prehistory of the ideas about creative writing generally systematized and promulgated in the postwar creative writing classroom; secondly, by seeking to emphasize the British contribution to such discussions, in the form of the kinds of writing advice offered to aspiring writers during the nineteenth century in the periodical press, in public talks, and (especially toward the end of the century) in literary advice handbooks (see Atwell 2013; Collins 2016).

It is on such handbooks that I shall focus in this chapter, which discusses a number of writing guides published in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whereas Collins examines such texts in the context of "the development in nineteenth-century America of self-identified instruction in fiction-writing, both in academia and through mass-marketed commercial guides and services" (Collins 2016, p. 3), with the United States from 1826 to 1897 providing his primary focus, Atwell examines how ideas of craft and technique were developed and transmitted in handbooks and periodical s on both sides of the Atlantic in the eighty years from 1850. My own focus is on the ways in which British writing guides of the mid-nineteenth, early twentieth century offer not only technical and creative advice but also professional and commercial tips and hints—advising their readers not only how to write but also how to be a (professional) writer. In so doing, I shall suggest, such texts not only reflect, but take active part in contemporary debates about the status of prose fiction as an art form, the relationship between the writer and the marketplace, and what it might mean to be an author.

Author's Guides, Agents, and Yearbooks: The Late-Victorian and Edwardian Literary Advice Industry

"What do you think I'm writing just now?" asks Whelpdale, a "poor devil" who has "failed as a realistic novelist" in *New Grub Street*, George

Gissing's 1891 novel of literary life in London (Gissing 1985, pp. 249, 248).[1] The answer is "an author's Guide": "You know the kind of thing," Whelpdale remarks, adding that "they sell splendidly" (Gissing 1985, p. 249). Indeed, scholars including Peter Keating, Christopher Hilliard, John Gross, Michelene Wandor, and James Hepburn have observed the dramatic changes in the literary marketplace and its rapid expansion during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Gross notes that "[m]agazines and periodical s sprouted up as never before in the 1880s and 1890s, while by the end of the century the London Directory contained the names of over four hundred separate publishing houses" (Gross cited in Wandor 2008, p. 10), which were accompanied by a remarkable flourishing of what Hilliard dubs "the literary advice industry" (Hilliard 2006, p. 20). As instances of this latter phenomenon, Hepburn identifies as the world's first professional literary agents A. M. Burghes and A. P Watt, both active by 1880 and rivaled from 1896 by J. B. Pinker and from 1899 by Curtis Brown (Hepburn cited in Keating 1991, p. 71). On a similar note, Keating—whose groundbreaking *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875–1914* (1991) remains the fullest and most detailed account of the relationship between the fiction being written and published in Britain and the "changing business of literature" during this period, and whose work is vital to an understanding of the wider context in which the author's guides of the period were being produced—records the appearance in 1897 of a publication entitled *The Literary Year Book*, containing "addresses of publishers and literary agents" alongside "essay-length surveys of the year's publications" and "photographs of fashionable authors" (Keating 1991, pp. viii, 72). By 1902, this had been renamed *The Writer's Year Book*, and by 1906, it had evolved into *The Writer's and Artist's Year Book*, which is still published annually today (albeit without the author photographs) and, as Keating points out, remains "the handbook to which aspiring writers are most likely to turn for reliable information on market requirements and rates of pay" (Keating 1991, p. 72).

In 1883, the Society of Authors was founded and began its increasingly widely publicized efforts to define and defend the concept of literary property, to agitate for the reform of domestic copyright laws, to promote binding laws on international copyright, and, in Wandor's words, to "demystify the publishing process so that would-be (and already) professional writers could protect their rights to earnings and be armed with information to defend themselves from predatory publishers" (Wandor

2008, p. 98, see also Keating 1968, pp. 27–30). To this same end, in March 1887 the Society would host a day-long conference on the topic of "The Grievance Between Authors and Publishers" (the proceedings of which were later published) during which the most prominent of the Society's founders, the novelist Walter Besant, would accuse publishers of "selfishness and dishonesty" in their dealings with authors. This claim was followed up on by the Society in two further published works, *The Cost of Publishing* (1889) and *Methods of Publishing* (1890), which attempted to detail the true costs of printing, binding, promoting, and selling a book, and were intended as "aids to the author in negotiating contracts" (Hepburn 1968, p. 77). The same valuable information would also appear alongside much other well-informed advice on matters creative, commercial, and professional in Besant's *The Pen and the Book* (1899), a real-life author's guide intended (like Whelpdale's fictional one) "for the instruction and the guidance of those young persons, of whom there are now many thousands, who are thinking of the Literary Life" (Besant in Collins 2016, pp. 96–100).

"Novel-Writing Taught in Ten Lessons!": Literary Composition as an Art and Authorship as a Trade

"The first of the self-help manuals on writing," Hepburn records, were such anonymous works as *The Author's Hand-Book* (1844), *The Search for a Publisher* (1855), and *How to Publish* (1857), issued by vanity publishers in the mid-nineteenth century as "advertisements" for their own services (Hepburn 1968, pp. 22, 23). "In the middle years of the century," Keating observes, an "important part of the appeal" of such publishers was that they presented themselves as "the friend of authors known and unknown," a message strongly reinforced in the manuals and handbooks they published. *The Search for a Publisher*, for example, which was "issued for twenty-six years by a series of obscure publishers at several different addresses" and eventually reached eight editions, begins with "a description of the publisher as a figure especially created to be the author's agent in his dealings with the printer and the public," offers an account of what it claims are the "typical contractual arrangements between author and publisher," and then provides a collection of "testimonial letters from contented authors" (ibid., p. 23). As Hepburn comments, given the absence of any practical writing or sound publishing advice in such works it is hard to see them as serving any real purpose other than

"paving the way to the vanity publisher's door" (ibid., p. 22). One of the major concerns of author's guides like Besant's *The Pen and the Book*, in contrast, was to help the aspiring author to avoid allowing themselves to be gulled or exploited, often cautioning their readers to be highly suspicious of any publisher who—for example—expects the author to share the costs of production. "Publishers are purely and simply men of business," Besant reminds his reader, and "they publish in order to make money" (Besant 1899, p. 146). "Do not," he therefore cautions, in your dealings with your publisher: "be deluded by the champagne nor the lunch he may offer you," nor his "plausible words and plausible manners," and "do not on any account [...] accept as plain truth any and every statement that he may make" (Besant 1899, p. 147). Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of Besant and others to provide more reliable literary advice and to bolster the respectability of the idea of the author's guide, it is clear that considerable cultural suspicion and skepticism regarding such guides still lingered at the end of the century, as it perhaps lingers still.

Keating has described *New Grub Street,* the ninth of George Gissing's twenty-nine novels, as an "astute and probing" analysis of the "business of literature," and a "sociological document of genius written in the form of a novel" (Keating 1968, p. 9). In its depiction of Whelpdale's inventive attempts to monetize his ability to provide literary advice it pays tribute not only to real-life developments in the cultural marketplace but also the kinds of anxiety such developments provoked among those accustomed to thinking of more traditional relationships between the author, their work, and the marketplace.

In commercial terms, Whelpdale conceives of his author's guide primarily as "a good advertisement" for his business of "literary advisorship" (offering paid editorial advice on unpublished novels) which he plans to develop into a full-blown school of creative writing, offering "[n]ovel-writing taught in ten lessons!" (Gissing 1985, p. 249). Unlike the services offered by vanity publishers, however, this idea is "no swindle," according to Whelpdale. He is "quite capable of giving the ordinary man or woman ten very useful lessons" in the practicalities of novel writing and of making a living as a novelist—even if he has never quite managed to achieve this latter feat himself (ibid.). Indeed, Keating notes it was generally thought during this period that "the only person who could possibly bring himself to write such a manual was a failed author" (Keating 1968, pp. 71–72). As we shall see, however, it was not always the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that

those who had succeeded in achieving literary success were the least likely to contribute to the advice literature in this field, as both Walter Besant and Arnold Bennett were successful and lauded fiction writers who also wrote author's guides.

Whelpdale's first lesson deals "with the question of subjects, local colour – that kind of thing":

> I gravely advise people, if they possibly can, to write of the wealthy middle class; that's the popular subject, you know. […] I urge study of horsey matters especially; that's very important. You must be well up, too, in military grades, know about Sandhurst, and so on. Boating is an important topic. (Gissing 1985, p. 249)

It would be easy to assume that the target of Gissing's mockery is the idea that the art of writing is something that can be taught. In a letter to George Bainton, however, written a few years before the appearance of *New Grub Street*, Gissing reflects on the idea that "there are persons extant who undertake to instruct young men in the art of journalistic composition," and claims "[w]ithout irony" his own interest in attending such a lesson to see how it was conducted. "Does the teacher select a leading article from the *Daily Telegraph*," he wonders, and invite the class to ponder "the artifices of style whereby this writer recommends himself to the attention of the public?" (Gissing, cited in Bainton 1890, pp. 83–84). Gissing's tone may be jocular here, but when in the same letter he reflects whether creative writing might be taught in a similar way, he concludes in all apparent seriousness that:

> If a man of ripe intelligence could have taken me at the age of twenty, and have read with me suitable portions of Sir Thomas Browne, of Jeremy Taylor, of Milton's prose, of Steele, De Quincey, Landor, Ruskin – to make a rough list of names – that, I think, would have been a special training valuable beyond expression. (ibid.)

What troubles Gissing, then, is not the idea that aspiring writers might be helpfully assisted, through the carefully guided close reading of some classic English prose, "towards an appreciation of style in others, and to some measure of self-criticism" (Gissing, cited in Bainton 1890, p. 84), but rather that they would be encouraged, as *New Grub Street* puts it, to "make a trade of an art." This, according to the novel's Edmund Reardon, is "the unpardonable sin" and a "brutal folly" (Gissing 1985, p. 81) which

not only implies a loss of status for the artist but also a degradation of the art form they practice. The real problem with Whelpdale's advice to aspiring authors, as Reardon and *New Grub Street* frame it, is not that it is ridiculous per se but that the tastes of the reading public are ridiculous, and that Whelpdale seems to be proposing we allow market forces in an almost literal sense to dictate our fiction.

Reardon himself is described in the novel by the character Jasper Milvain, an ambitious young journalist, as "the old type of unpractical artist" (Gissing 1985, p. 38), one who "might write a fairly good book once every two or three years" but who is unable or refuses to compromise and cater to the market, and who is therefore by no means "the kind of man to keep up literary production as a paying business" (Gissing 1985, p. 36). Milvain refers to himself, in contrast, as "the literary man of 1882"—the year the novel opens—and experiences no qualms in announcing that "Literature nowadays is a trade," nor in opining that:

> Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your successful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising. (ibid., p. 38)

Whereas Reardon writes his fiction with no thought of the market and then tries to sell the manuscript "as if he lived in Sam Johnson's Grub Street," the modern author, according to Milvain, knows "what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world" (ibid., p. 39), and sets to work to provide whatever the public appetite demands. Such information is in large part what Whelpdale's lessons and his manual claim to pro Popular demand for the kind of advice he is offering results in the quick sale of "nearly six hundred" copies (ibid., p. 304). Nor is Whelpdale's book "all rubbish, by any means," Milvain asserts "In the chapter on writing for magazines, there are one or two very good hints!" (ibid., p. 249).

Challenges and Opportunities for Writers in a Changing Literary Marketplace

Although it may surprise today's reader to learn that Whelpdale's author's guide contains a chapter on writing for magazines, this was by no means unusual for the new generation of literary advice handbooks

which began to appear in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In contrast to the relatively specific modes of writing addressed in individual twenty-first-century advice literature, guides of this era tended to discuss novel-writing, short stories, poetry, drama, and also how to write for newspapers and periodicals. Percy Russell's *The Literary Manual; or, A Complete Guide to Authorship* (1886) is divided into two parts, the first dealing with poetry, drama, fiction, creative properties, and the art of fiction, in addition to discussing copyright and suggested reading for aspiring writers. The second part deals at equal length with the history of the newspaper press, the workings of a printing office, the life of a working journalist, ordinary reporting, leader writing, reviewing, how to deal with newspaper proprietors, the libel laws, and how to write for such specialized outlets as the comic and illustrated press, the religious press, and trade journals.[2]

Russell's second such work, *The Author's Manual*, first published in 1890, explicitly subtitles itself *A Complete and Practical Guide to All Branches of Literary Work*, and is divided into two parts of equal length, the first covering "Newspaper and Periodical Literature," and the second "Book Literature" (including two chapters on poetry, one on drama, one on the novel, one on fiction as an art, one on making a name in literature, and one on writing for children). Leopold Wagner's *How to Publish a Book or Article and How to Produce a Play: Advice to Young Authors* (1898), which is divided equally into three parts ("Books," "Periodicals," and "Plays'), notes that "it is in the minor magazines that young writers generally obtain their first footing in literature," and provides separate chapters on writing for each different type of journalistic publication (including newspapers, ladies' magazines, the illustrated monthlies, the old-fashioned monthlies, the comic press, and Christmas specials). It also includes chapters on such practical matters as publications to be avoided, traps for the unwary, acquiring technical knowledge (and a reputation for expertise in a specific area), copyright, and remuneration—not only offering a list of newspapers, journals, and magazines but also discussing the rates of pay for different periodicals and even which day of the week and month contributors should expect to be paid by each (Wagner 1898, pp. 113, 159, 167 ff).

Besant's *The Pen and the Book* seeks to provide its readers "first with a general view of the Literary Life; next, with a chapter on the requirements of each branch and thirdly, with the facts relating to the meaning and value of literary property" (Besant 1899, p. vii). The first section of

the book discusses not only poetry and prose fiction (in a single chapter entitled "The Life of Imagination") but also a variety of other literary careers, with a chapter each devoted to jobs in publishing, editorship, and the life of a critic and essayist, while the third section of the book devotes another whole chapter to journalism. E. H. Lacon Watson's *Hints to Young Authors* (1902) offers five chapters of advice on how to build a career in journalism: "How to Handle an Editor," "Books for Review," "More about Reviewing," "The Expert" and "Notes and Leaders"—before it reaches the one chapter it devotes to "Poetry – as a relaxation" and its single chapter of "Notes on Novel Writing." Arnold Bennett's *How to Become an Author: A Practical Guide* (1903) includes advice not only on "The Literary Career," "The Formation of Style," "The Novel," "Sensational and Other Serials," and "Short Stories" but on "Non-Fictional Writing" and "Journalism" as well, noting that although he means to deal chiefly with "the art and craft of fiction," "he notes that "very many, if not most authors begin by being journalists" (Bennett 1903, p. 10) (see also Atwell 2013, pp. 121–125).

It is Besant who addresses most fully the reasons why this was the case, and why practical information about journalism had come to occupy such a prominent role in author's guides of this period. "There are at this moment" he comments, "hundreds of papers and journals and magazines, weekly and monthly, published at prices varying from half-a-crown to a penny," the circulation of some of which is "enormous, far beyond the wildest dreams of twenty years ago" (Besant 1899, p. 30). As Peter Keating points out, "the immediate economic causes of this phase of expansion" were "new technological developments in printing and communication" alongside the "mid-Victorian free-trade legislation which repealed the Advertisement Duty in 1853, Stamp Duty in 1855 and Paper Duty in 1860" (Keating 1991, p. 34). Both these changes allowed much cheaper periodicals to circulate much more widely, freely, and rapidly. Noting another major cultural and socioeconomic change with equally significant literary repercussions during this period, Besant suggests that such periodical s provided "the favourite reading of millions who until the last few years never read anything at all: they are the outcome of the School Board, which pours out every year […] by the hundred thousand, boys and girls into whom they have instilled […] a love of reading," and he further observes that "to provide this literature thousands of pens are at work every day" (Besant 1899, pp. 54, 56). The Elementary Education Act 1870, which laid the foundations of universal

elementary education in England and Wales, had established elected local school boards with the authority to build and manage schools in areas in which there were insufficient places. Further Education Acts between 1870 and 1893 established the principle of compulsory attendance for all children up to a certain age, which had been extended by 1880 to ten years.

In *New Grub Street* to write for this audience, to expend one's energies in "the manufacture of printed stuff which no-one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day's market" (Gissing 1985, p. 137), is presented as degrading—implicitly or explicitly—even by those who are willing and able to embrace the new economic logic of the changing literary marketplace. Whelpdale, for instance, characterizes the new generation of students being produced by the reinvented school system as "the quarter-educated [...] young men and women who can just read but are incapable of sustained attention" (Gissing 1985, p. 296), while even Milvain feels the need somewhat defensively to assert that "we people of brains are justified in supplying the mob with the food it likes" (Gissing 1985, p. 43). *The Pen and the Book*, in contrast, like other literary handbooks of this period, presents the advent of mass literacy and resulting development of a hugely more varied and wide-reaching print culture as a tremendously positive development for writers. "The critic who speaks with contempt of a penny paper circulating by the hundred thousand," Besant argues, "does not understand that it expresses a certain stage in the growth of the mind" (Besant 1899, pp. 55–6). The implication of this somewhat patronizing way of putting it suggests that these changes will ultimately supplement with new readers the existing literary culture, rather than supplanting it.

Furthermore, thanks to the income possible from a side-career in journalism, claim both Besant and Percy Russell, a trajectory of tragic literary failure like that of Thomas Chatterton—the precocious poet and forger who had poisoned himself in despair at his poverty at the age of seventeen in a garret in Holborn in 1770—is now a thing of the past (see Besant 1899, pp. 23–24; Russell 1886, p. 2). Nor was it only journalism which now claimed a mass readership. "The public in view for the successful writer of fiction is vaster than any novelist of old ever dreamed of," declares Percy Russell (Russell 1886, p. 187). As a result, notes Arnold Bennett, the "rewards of the really successful novelist seems to increase year by year," and he goes on to observe that "By writing nearly a hundred and fifty thousand words a year" the author of best sellers

can expect to "make an annual income of three thousand five hundred pounds" (Bennett 1903, p. 25).

Men of Genius, Literary Value, and the Business Side of Books

It is perhaps telling, however, that several of these literary advice handbooks feel the need, like Milvain, to make an exception of the "man of genius" when discussing the need for aspiring authors to bear in mind, when writing, what Bennett calls "The Business Side of Books" (ibid., p. 169). "I am not writing for the genius," declares E. H. Lacon Watson, since such an individual is seemingly in no need of the kinds of practical and professional advice Watson provides (Watson 1902, p. 25). "Genius, of course, [...] will surely work out its own way" to success, agrees Percy Russell (1886, p. 86). The issue being glossed over here is what becomes, in a world in which literature is a trade and the successful writer is a canny professional who has familiarized themselves with the demands of the market and set themselves to meet them, of the idea of the heroic man of letters in a Carlylean sense, a "Great Soul," living apart from the world, "endeavouring to speak forth the inspiration that was in him by Printed Books, and find place and subsistence by what the world would please to give him for doing that" (Carlyle 1980, p. 205).[3]

This version of what a writer might or should be, this model of the relationship between the writer and the world, is one that haunts both *New Grub Street* and the late-Victorian and Edwardian author's guides under discussion in this chapter. By allowing a loophole in the rules for the occasional individual genius, Milvain pays tribute to the persisting influence and appeal of this archetype, while at the same time refusing to examine the full implications of his suggestion that to achieve success, or rather to avoid failure, it is necessary for the literary aspirant to "think first and foremost of the markets" (Gissing 1985, p. 38). Indeed, it may be no coincidence that *New Grub Street* opens so precisely and emphatically in 1882, the year after Carlyle's death.

Approaching a similar set of cultural anxieties from a slightly different angle, Walter Besant repeatedly reminds readers of *The Pen and the Book* that we should "keep quite separate and distinct in our minds the literary value of a work and the commercial value of a work," further explaining "The Literary value you understand without any definition: the commercial value of the book is just measured by the public demand for it

– that and nothing more" (Besant 1899, pp. 3, 5). As Adrian Poole has noted, however, when it suits Besant's argumentative purposes he is quite prepared to collapse this distinction, prescribing the ultimate decision of value to the reading public and blithely declaring that in the modern Anglophone literary marketplace "good work is instantly recognised, and the only danger is that the universal cry for more may lead to hasty and immature production" (ibid., p. 37, cited in Poole 1975, p. 127). Such a sleight of hand allows Besant to reconcile two contrasting and contradictory versions of what it might mean to be a man of letters.

Not all Besant's contemporaries felt able to assert such confidence in the taste of the reading public, such faith in the continued survival of a generally agreed, implicit, and unchanging sense of what might constitute good work. What else, after all, are the extensive reading lists which feature so prominently in late-Victorian writing guides except an anxious attempt to ensure the transmission of a shared sense of literary value, at least among practitioners of the art of fiction? In *The Author's Manual,* Percy Russell emphasizes "the absolute necessity there is for the young writer being well read," providing a twenty-page reading list in his chapter "On Reading and the Use of Books," which includes "Recommended general reading" (including works of theology, philosophy, social, architectural, economic, and natural history); "a general foundation in English Literature," from Old English onward, including novels, poetry, plays, and non-fiction; key works for understanding the history of language, and a course focused on general Continental literature, which takes in "Tourgénieff, Dostoievski and Tolstoi" (Russell, n.d., pp. 221–241). Only through such an ambitious program of autodidacticism, it is suggested (through what Bennett calls the "self-education of the aspirant") that is it possible to become an author (Bennett 1903, p. 38). Besant himself insists upon the necessity that the aspiring writer "should read and know Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Addison, Fielding, Smollett, Johnson, Cowper, Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, and a great many others, here omitted" (Besant 1899, p. 41).

As we have already seen, when Gissing imagines how creative writing might be taught, his first step is to compile a preliminary list of authors whose work would repay guided close reading, additionally recommending the aspiring writer carry with them everywhere the "a

small volume of selections from [Walter Savage] Landor's 'Golden Treasury' series, and examine closely Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and *Villette*" (Gissing, cited in Bainton 1890, p. 85). Gissing is unusual among purveyors of literary advice during this period not only in the concern he demonstrates for how the aspiring writer is able to afford all these books, in an era before municipal public libraries and cheap paperbacks (he names a specific affordable edition of Landor) but also in raising the question of what exactly is to be gained by closely studying specific authors and texts in a guided and focused manner. Gissing recommends that aspiring writers read Brontë's novels, for instance, with particular attention to her skill "in the selection of words and the linking of sentences" (ibid.), to be consulted as models of good stylistic practice, and as texts which illustrate deft and inventive ways of engaging with some of the specific technical challenges facing the literary craftsperson. It is often less clear, when it comes to Russell and other author's guides of the period, whether such reading lists are intended for the same purposes, or whether the recommendations are for the general accumulation of cultural capital. It is also true, of course, that the narrators of the novels of this period generally allude to, and quote directly from other authors and literary texts much more freely and directly than the narrators of most twenty-first-century novels, so there is a sense in which a handy mental catalog of quotation and allusions is part of the professional equipment of an author of the period under discussion.

A further role of such lists, we might suggest, is to emphasize the endurance of great writing, even of works which had not been recognized by the public at the time. Despite all the emphasis such guides place on the importance of understanding the changing marketplace, they are careful to refuse to allow the general mass of readers the final verdict on questions of literary importance. They frequently emphasize that nothing written solely with the marketplace in mind will last, and that aspiring writers should not aim simply to imitate the latest bestseller. "Our taste," suggests E. H. Lacon Watson, inviting his reader to identify with him as one of the literati, "has been over-educated, over-refined; we pay too much attention to the old models; we lay too much stress on sound and grammatical English, the value of words, and the delicate niceties of style" (Watson 1902, pp. 164–65). Watson further suggests that this results in an inability to appreciate what "the public find to admire in works like [Marie Corelli's] *The Master Christian* and [Hall Caine's] *The Eternal City*," which were best sellers of the early 1900s (ibid.). Although Watson

(ironically) concedes the supposed superiority of mass taste to that of the educated individual, he is instructing his reader in all the things to look down upon in the contemporary best seller and to avoid in their own work.

"Prepare for Serious Work": Diligence, Professional Practicalities, and the Rules of the "Art of Fiction"

What other kinds of literary advice do the author's guides of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer? The emphasis for the most part is very much on the professional practicalities of literary life: almost all the guides so far mentioned in this chapter contain sections on manuscript presentation, procedures for approaching publishers, the role of the literary agent, and what Bennett calls "matters of practical detail" (Bennett 1903, p. 78).[4] This includes suggestions such as the ideal length of a novel (80,000 words, according to both Watson and Bennett) (Watson 1902, p. 17; Bennett 1903, p. 130), different methods of receiving payment (of which he recommends the royalty system and advises against the risk of self-publication) (Besant 1899, p. 167), the laws surrounding copyright,[5] and the likely scale of remuneration for various kinds of literary projects (see Wagner 1898, p. 35; Watson 1902, p. 104; Russell, n.d., pp. 210–213). Arnold Bennett, drawing on his own experiences as a publisher's reader, takes the reader of *How to Become an Author* through each step of what happens to a manuscript that has arrived in a publisher's office, and provides a helpful warning that your manuscript will almost certainly "be refused by the first publisher to whom it is sent" (Bennett 1903, pp. 174, 173–177). Leopold Wagner includes a list of publishers (in 1897) who accept unsolicited manuscripts, as well as a model of the kind of cover letter to attach to one, encouraging brevity in such letters on the basis that, to publishers, longer letters are "more remarkable for verbosity than charm" (Wagner 1898, p. 59).

When it comes to the actual writing of fiction, the suggestions offered in these handbooks fall into two categories: advice on the practicalities of composition, and a discussion of what Walter Besant calls the "general laws" of the "art of fiction" (Besant 1902, p. 6). With regard to productive habits of writing, such guides universally place emphasis on the vital importance of hard work and diligence. "The one paramount

rule," claims Bennett, is that the writer "must always write his best; he must never leave a sentence until he is convinced he cannot improve it" (Bennett 1903, p. 45). Percy Russell likewise insists that a primary objective of his *Literary Manual* "is to inculcate above all things the unspeakable importance of taking pains, of attending minutely to detail, of investing every piece of literary work with the utmost finish that it is susceptible of receiving, and generally of avoiding all forms of careless, slovenly, or in any sense imperfect work" (Russell 1886, p. 86). On similar grounds, Wagner recommends that aspiring writers first create complete rough drafts of the entire work and then, in a second draft, "set to work on revision and correction" (Wagner 1898, p. 29). Advising aspiring writers, Walter Besant instructs that they should:

> Make up your mind that you cannot give to the work too careful preparation: too serious consideration: that you cannot correct your work too jealously: that you must be prepared to write and to rewrite, if necessary, with patience, until you have produced your effect. (Besant 1899, pp. 39–40)

Inviting feedback from others is also recommended before work is submitted to a publisher or agent. Bennett suggests reading all materials aloud to an audience or individual, while Wagner counsels that if a hopeful author wishes to "inflict his MS [manuscript] upon all his acquaintance," he should "impress upon them the fact that he does not seek their praise, but their candid opinion" (Bennett 1903, p. 45; Wagner 1898, pp. 30–31). Other practical suggestions include carrying of a notebook, which Watson claims is of great use to aspiring authors (Watson 1902, p. 94). Besant, too, insists that one "must carry his notebook always" (Besant 1902, p. 41). When it comes to how much writing they should aim to produce each day, Watson suggests they should aim for between one and two thousand words daily, the surplus allowing for selection, while Wagner advises that it will be profitable to "cultivate the habit of sitting down to write whenever and wherever he has the opportunity" (Watson 1902, p. 121; Wagner 1898, p. 31).

In his lecture "The Art of Fiction", delivered at the Royal Institution on 25 April 1884 (and later incorporated almost wholesale into *The Pen and the Book*), Walter Besant claims that the novel, much like painting, sculpture, or music, is an art form "governed and directed by general laws; and that these laws may be laid down and taught with as much

precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective and proportion," and in his lecture, Besant seeks to set out these laws of fiction for his audience (Besant 1902, p. 6). Many of them remain familiar as the very same items of advice given to aspiring writers today: that they should write about what they know from firsthand "personal observation and observation," and that they should dramatize or show what is happening, rather than just flatly telling it (ibid., p. 34). Besant asserts that in given situations "it should be the first care of the writer to present it as dramatically" as possible (ibid., p. 48). Character should not be conveyed either "by reason of some mannerism of speech or of carriage" or by lengthy description, but rather revealed through "action and dialogue" (ibid., pp. 53–54). Besant also emphasizes the value of style to a work of literary art, which he defines as "careful workmanship," insisting on the importance of repeated rewriting for producing a finished and effective work of fiction (ibid., pp. 59, 61).

Another point on which Besant and the other literary advice handbooks of this period agreed is the primary importance of story to a novel. "All descriptions which hinder instead of helping the action, all episodes of whatever kind, all conversation which does not either advance the story or illustrate the characters, ought to be rigidly suppressed," Besant urges (ibid., pp. 47–48). According to Watson, it is therefore vital to plan out the plot carefully right from the start. He explains that "Most novelists of my acquaintance elaborate their plots and even go so far as to summarise each individual chapter, before they begin to write a word, and in the end this saves time and much mental worry" (Watson 1902, p. 118). Bennett advises that spending "A day over the plot before the actual writing had begun […] may save ten days later on" (Bennett 1903, p. 137). Percy Russell, on similar grounds, dedicates a whole chapter of his *Literary Manual* to plot construction.[6]

These writer's guides place equal emphasis on the importance of careful plotting in their discussion of other modes of writing. "The art of fiction is the art of telling a story" (ibid., p. 103), insists Bennett in his chapter on short stories, which discusses a variety of possible models and markets for short fiction. In playwriting too, Bennett suggests that "the plot is everything – or nearly so" (ibid., p. 89). Like other author's guides of the period, Bennett's discussion of playwriting is very much grounded in the practicalities and restrictions of the stage; he offers "a brief sketch of the conditions of the modern theatre, together with a few hints for the aspiring dramatist" (ibid., p. 209). Leopold Wagner, who discusses

a variety of theatrical forms including burlesques and musicals, as well as "Pantomimes" and "Curtain-Raisers," offers advice on securing copyright for plays, and notes what is not allowed on stage, even warning that a "bald caricature of a living personage is not permitted in a play" (Wagner 1898, pp. 187–188), and informing the reader that playwriting is "in these days by far the most remunerative form of literary effort" (Wagner 1898, p. 169).

Gender, Fiction, and Literary Advice

Platitudinous as some of this advice may sound, it is nevertheless reductive of Peter Keating to dismiss so much of it as "little more than belletristic chat" (Keating 1991, p. 71). For one thing, this irons out significant differences of tone and approach between different guides of the era. Arnold Bennett is by far the most prescriptive in his advice. Leopold Wagner frequently bolsters the authority of his own advice by quoting other, more celebrated authors, which is not a need felt by Besant. These texts vary widely in terms of the level of formality with which they address the reader, ranging from the jovial playfulness of Wagner, who wryly recommends in his discussion of how to choose a publisher that "sexual" fiction should not be sent to the S.P.C.K. (Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge) (Wagner 1898, p. 52), to the brisk practicality of Watson, to Percy Russell's relative formality. Nor are the least formal of these texts necessarily those with the least helpful practical information to impart.

Not only are the writing guides of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries valuable as historical documents, recording a pivotal moment in the development of writing as a profession, exposing usually unexamined assumptions about fiction and its purposes commonly shared by readers and authors in this period, but they are also, as I hope this chapter has suggested, literary documents, pieces of writing in themselves worthy of close critical attention in their own right. Who, for instance, is the imagined reader of each of these texts? How are they constructed and positioned?

One of the striking differences between Whelpdale's creative writing advice in *New Grub Street* and the advice offered in almost all the real-life guides is that Gissing's fictional "dealer in literary advice" consciously targets aspiring female writers. He reacts with "delight" when he hears that Jasper Milvain's sister Dora has read his literary handbook, and he

has plans for the lessons at his proposed creative writing school to be taught by a woman precisely because aspiring female students who wish to learn to write will "prefer coming to a woman" (Gissing 1985, p. 249). That the addressee of so many of these real-life guides is assumed to be male, Bennett being an honorable exception in this regard, is not simply a matter of pronoun convention, but another instance of the ways in which such guides attempt to frame and make manageable unsettling changes both in the literary marketplace and the idea of the writer, endeavoring to offer at times a consoling sense of continuity in terms of gendered norms even as they are themselves both symptoms and agents of such change.

For Cosima Chudleigh, the young female writer who is the protagonist of the 1898 novel *A Writer of Books* by George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds), the "one immense disqualification for her chosen profession" which she experiences as a woman is her relative "lack of experience and knowledge of the world" (Paston 1898, p. 42).[7] As she writes she finds herself haunted and depressed by "[t]houghts of Balzac, Flaubert, the De Goncourts, the Daudets," men who "have drunk deep of the cup of life, and write of what they did know," whereas she, "a girl, bred in a library, had gained all her knowledge at second hand" (ibid.). Not only are the literary figures named all men, however, but they are also all authors of celebrated novels or memoirs of literary life, including texts like Balzac's *Illusions Perdues*, Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale,* the diaries of the de Goncourts, and Daudet's *Trente ans de Paris* (much admired by Gissing), which for a generation or more of aspiring writers in the era preceding the literary handbooks which have been discussed in this chapter, had provided or seemed to provide not only a rare insider's glimpse into the workings of the book world, but also (at least for male readers) a pattern on which one might attempt to model one's own literary career.

It is as a supplement and corrective to such male-focused narratives that *A Writer of Books* positions itself: as well as all the other challenges facing a young novelist who is trying to find a publisher for their work, Cosima also has to deal with the unwelcome attentions of a lecherous literary critic, and (in the latter part of the novel) with a husband who refuses to take seriously the idea of a professional female writer. It is furthermore striking that *A Writer of Books* is not only a novel about writers, but a novel that itself contains a great deal of practical writing advice. Indeed, one long discussion in which Miss Nevill, an acquaintance of Cosima's,

gives advice on how to make a living in journalism, would fit seamlessly into almost any of the writing guides which have been discussed in this chapter (ibid., pp. 35–36).

In opening my discussion with a fictional example of an author's guide and closing it with a glance at a novel in which the boundary between the novel of literary life and a literary advice handbook seems to blur, I have hoped (as well as giving a sense of the kinds of practical advice that were being offered to aspiring authors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) to provide a sense of the ways in which fiction and non-fictional accounts of the changing literary marketplace in this period inform, complement, complicate, interrogate, and debate each other. These illuminate each other not only in what they take for granted about the rules and purpose of fiction and what authorship means in the context of the contemporary marketplace, but also in what suddenly seems to be uncertain and attainable, a world of fresh anxieties and new possibilities in the process of being born which is recognizably the literary and commercial landscape we still inhabit.

Notes

1. See also Atwell(2013, pp. 111–3) and Collins (2016, pp. 136–9).
2. For more on Russell see Keating (1968, p. 71), Atwell (2013, p. 115), and Collins, (2016, pp. 126–129).
3. Adrian Poole discusses the impact of Carlyle and of Carlylean attitudes towards the figure of the man of letters on Gissing in his *Gissing in Context* (1975, pp. 105–108).
4. Bainton's *The Art of Authorship* is the exception here.
5. *The Pen and the Book* includes a chapter on this topic contributed by G. H. Thring, Secretary of the Society of Authors.
6. This is discussed (very critically) in Collins (2016, p. 129).
7. See Keating (1991, pp. 85–6), for a differently-inflected reading of this novel.

References

Atwell, Mary Stewart. 2013. The Craft of Fiction: Teaching Technique, 1850–1930. PhD dissertation. Washington University, St Louis.

Bainton, George (ed.). 1890. *The Art of Authorship: Literary Reminiscences, Methods of Work, and Advice to Young Beginners, Personally Contributed by Leading Authors of the Day*. London: James Clarke.

Bennett, Arnold. 1903. *How to Become an Author: A Practical Guide*. London: C. Arthur Pearson.
Besant, Walter. 1899. *The Pen and the Book*. London: Thomas Burleigh.
———. 1902. *The Art of Fiction: A New Edition*. London: Chatto and Windus.
Carlyle, Thomas. 1980. *Selected Writings*, ed. Alan Shelston. London: Penguin.
Collins, Paul S. 2016. Imaginary Subjects: Fiction-Writing Instruction in America, 1826–1897. PhD dissertation. City University of New York.
Gissing, George. 1985. *New Grub Street*. London: Penguin.
Gross, John. 1973. *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*. London: Penguin.
Hepburn, James. 1968. *The Author's Empty Purse and the Rise of the Literary Agent*. London: Oxford University Press.
Hilliard, Christopher. 2006. *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain*. London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
James, Henry. 1968. The Art of Fiction. In *Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Morris Shapira. London: Peregrine.
Keating, Peter. 1968. *George Gissing: New Grub Street*. London: Edward Arnold.
———. 1991. *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875–1914*. London: Fontana.
McGurl, Mark. 2009. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Myers, D.G. 1996. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
Paston, George. 1898. *A Writer of Books*. London: Chapman and Hall.
Poole, Adrian. 1975. *Gissing in Context*. London: Macmillan.
Russell, Percy. n.d. *The Author's Manual: A Complete and Practical Guide to All Branches of Literary Work, Fourth Edition*. London: Digby & Long.
———. 1886. *The Literary Manual; or, a Complete Guide to Authorship*. London: London Literary Society.
Wagner, Leopold. 1898. *How to Publish a Book or Article and How to Produce a Play: Advice to Young Authors*. London: George Redway.
Wandor, Michelene. 2008. *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Watson, E.H.Lacon. 1902. *Hints to Young Authors*. London: Grant Richards.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.