

PUBLISHING /

The Girl with the Ribboned Pigtails

BY SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN



On tour for my last novel The Selector of Souls, I was signing books at the Jaipur Literary Festival in India when a little girl with long ribboned pigtails approached with an autograph book.

"I want to be an author when I grow up," she confided as I signed.

"So you like to write?" I said, delighted to find a kindred spirit.

"Only when I don't have anything more important to do," she said.

I thought of the years of research and writing I had expended on a work of nonfiction, two story collections, and three novels and felt like a visual artist confronted by clipart. I left IT when it was called data processing vowing to pursue a profession that a computer cannot do. But though computers still can't write stories or novels, they have changed what a finished book actually represents.

The girl with the ribboned pigtails can upload to Kindle in a heartbeat, relying on spelling and grammar checkers to correct her text. By the time she dictates her first story to Google Voice, Siri or Dragon, Microsoft may have coded my greatest wishes for "Word": perspective and tense shift features. By twelve, she will carry a business card listing her publications. Nowadays, we can write and publish with speed and ease — so long as we don't have anything more important to do.

The trend augurs well for her and many whose opinions and stories would never see the light of day in traditional publishing. However, literary fiction writers need editors with their amazing ability to forget earlier drafts. Unless you're tenured, living off a trust fund or the lucrative career of a very understanding spouse, few writers can afford to pay editors to read a book-length work more than once. Our challenge as a society is to encourage and fund writers who offer their best though they could go to press

tomorrow.

Readers and writers are making the technology transition together. Readers are already adjusting to downloading works perpetually in progress, replete with homonyms, inconsistent capitalizations and transliterations no computer can yet parse. We are buying ebooks in the same way we purchase software, holding publishers harmless, agreeing to become product testers. And so we are becoming unwilling to pay more than two to 10 dollars, even for professionally edited novels whose creators spent years and thousands of research dollars to write.

Can readers defend themselves — perhaps with subscriptions to book publishers who offer carefully-curated, meticulously-edited, timeless novels? Or should we accustom ourselves to formatting errors, misplaced commas, and repetitious texts?

Can writing be defended as a primary professional activity? When a woman writes, can it be her only creative profession? Do readers realize that many of us do not have university or press jobs and get paid once every four, five or 10 years?

We are told writers have a unique role, that we "speak truth to power." To that I say: Some of us do, and some become bards for those who pay the bills or have the authority to help us get ahead. At Bleu-Met-Bleu in Montreal in 2005, Vladimir Tasic, a writer who came to Canada from the former Yugoslavia reminded us: "Yes, many of us speak truth to power, but power doesn't listen." At that, I whispered this secret mantra: the world would be a far worse place if I stopped writing.

I really hope that little girl with the ribboned pigtails will one day feel she can and should write stories for her living, and that she'll polish them to near-perfection before publication, though she'll find many more important — and lucrative — things to do.

Shauna Singh Baldwin's latest novel The Selector of Souls, about a Hindu midwife who tries to balance her karma after a terrible crime, received the 2012 Anne Powers Fiction Award. She is currently serving as a juror for the 2014 Scotiabank Giller Prize for fiction.