

# A Positively Productive Writing Career

by **Simon Whaley**

It all began with the letter Q. Or rather, with lots of words beginning with the letter Q. As a child I'd enjoyed doing word search puzzles on long car journeys, and I had the idea of creating a word search puzzle containing as many Q words as possible. Then I wondered what to do with it, so I sent it to the company who published the word search puzzle magazines. Amazingly, they accepted and published it. At the age of 17, I had my first published piece. More importantly, I had my first payment: a postal order for £3.50.

The idea of becoming a writer first occurred to me when I was seven years old. I devoured books (not literally, obviously) but at that age I was able to borrow eight books at a time from my local library. I remember reading James Herriot's *It Shouldn't Happen To A Vet* and was enthralled by all of the mishaps and adventures. After reading it, I knew I wanted to write about funny things that happened in life. So, I sat down with an exercise book and began writing my own novel about being a vet. This went well, until I reached the second page where I had to stick my arm up a cow's backside. Unfortunately, aged 7, I didn't know why vets did this, nor what it felt like, and I didn't particularly want to find out either. Like many first novels, that one fell by the wayside.

But the writing urge was still there. In my early teens I had a go at writing an episode of the police series *Juliet Bravo*, and the comedy series *Last of the Summer Wine*. Of course, I got letters back telling me they weren't very good and to try and come up with my own ideas. I once wrote a sketch for *the Two Ronnies* and received a handwritten rejection from Ronnie Barker telling me that my sketch was not up to standard. Still,

something within me kept me writing.

At the age of 14, I wrote to some famous writers and asked for their help. John Sullivan, writer of the comedy series *Only Fools and Horses* said, "At the age of 14, my advice is: Don't panic!" Alan Bleasdale, writer of plays like *The Boys from the Blackstuff* and *the Monocled Mutineer* suggested I become a brain surgeon instead. He said it would be a quicker learning curve, and looking back now, nearly three decades later, his advice was spot on. But when you're young and full of ideas you don't listen to adults, do you? I simply carried on writing anything and everything.

After A levels, I opted for the world of work, rather than university, and a career at a major high street bank beckoned. And after working overtime, and weekends, I would try to write an article, or two, whenever I had any spare time. And, surprisingly, some were published. The local county magazine bought an article, and a walking magazine bought some suggested walking routes. I even had a couple of articles in a dog magazine. The years ticked by, and the number of articles published grew into a double-digit figure.

Then, at the age of 26, I moved from the suburbs of Greater London, to rural Shropshire. Despite living in Greater London, I'd never been able to find a writers' group that I could go to. Working full time for the bank meant daytime meetings weren't possible and there weren't many groups that met in the evening. In Shropshire I found a group that met on a Saturday morning. Whilst writers' groups can offer an opportunity to learn your craft (it all depends upon the quality of the other writers in the group) membership of a writers' group does something else. It

tells you that it's okay to be a writer. And by going to the regular meetings it sends a signal to other family members, that this is something you enjoy doing for yourself. It also gives you the opportunity to talk about ideas and thoughts you wouldn't dream of sharing with your closest family members. They don't write, so what do they know?

Writing is a solitary affair. This allows negative thoughts to bombard our confidence. Is our writing really any good? Why would anyone else want to read what we've written? With a writers' group you can ask for other writers' opinions. Joining such a group gave me belief in myself. I began writing more, which meant I sent off more work. I received loads of rejections, but I also had more articles published.

I'd had some success writing a couple of articles for the dog magazines and knew I could develop the idea further into a humorous book. I began writing *The Little Book of Canine Care*, which I sent off. It was rejected. So I rewrote it and sent it off again. It was rejected. I rewrote it for a third time and sent it to a third publisher, only to have it rejected a third time. Undeterred, version four went through the postal system, only to return to me a few months later. Then, one day, I saw a humorous cat book in a bookshop. I bought it, read it, and realised I could rewrite my dog text (for a fifth time) in a similar style. I approached the publisher of the cat book and asked if they'd like a dog version. When they said, "Yes!" I was gobsmacked, and set about rewriting my text. A week later, I submitted it and, twenty-four hours later, Hodder & Stoughton offered me a book contract. A proper book contract. That was April 2003.

*One Hundred Ways For A Dog To Train its Human* (still available from all good book retail outlets!) was published on 15th October 2003, with an initial print run of 10,000 copies. At the end of October Hodder & Stoughton had to do another print run. And then another in November. At the beginning of December, my publisher emailed and suggested I buy the weekend newspapers. I did, thinking they may have placed an advert. They hadn't. Instead, I was dumbfounded to see *One Hundred Ways For A Dog To Train Its Human* on the UK bestseller lists. Gulp! My colleagues in the office of the local authority where I was working called it an overnight success. I remembered Alan Bleasdale's letter to me when I was 14. Here I was, eighteen years later with my 'overnight' success. Yes, training to be a brain surgeon would have been much quicker.

When Hodder & Stoughton supplied the 100,000th copy to a retailer three months after it was first published I couldn't believe it. Four weeks later, I resigned from my job and became a full time writer. Time for another gulp!

Naturally, Hodder wanted another book, so I began life as a full time writer fulfilling my second book contract. I even did the ever-hoped-for publisher lunch, which every writer dreams of. However, being a bestselling writer doesn't mean you are no longer rejected. You are. Writing full time meant I was now dealing with rejection on a daily basis. One thought stayed with me, though. I don't have a degree in media studies, or creative writing. I'm not the son of a publisher or magazine editor. I simply apply my bum to a chair and write. And when I've written something I send it off.

I'm now the published author of eleven books, hundreds of articles and dozens of short stories. One of the books I'm most proud of is *The Positively Productive Writer* (available from all good book retail outlets!). It explains how I deal with rejection, how I motivate my-

self when writing the big book projects and how I keep coming up with ideas. It's also the book that most writers thank me for writing. As a writer, nothing beats that feeling when a reader gets in touch to thank you for sharing your ideas, and, when that reader is another writer it's even better, because immediately we share that connection. *The Positively Productive Writer* gives writers a kick up the rear end, and from reading the reviews it seems that's just what many writers wanted.

Writers enjoy sharing knowledge and my next book, *Photography for Writers*, continues in that vein. I enjoy taking photographs, and photographs help me sell more of my articles. I think more

writers could improve their chances of success if they took photos to illustrate their words. And just like *The Positively Productive Writer* shares what I've learned on my writing journey, so too does *Photography for Writers*. It passes on the information I've learned over the years about how to supply photos to editors. Because writers need to maximise their opportunities for success.

So that's my positively productive writing career so far. Who wants to be a brain surgeon anyway?

For more information about Simon and his work, visit his website at:

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# THE POSITIVELY PRODUCTIVE WRITER

