

VI. Writing Career Paths

How do creative writers get started as creative writers? Or journalists as journalists? Do we ever get to know that? Sometimes we do from their works, and aspiring writers can learn about career paths from them. This is the sixth The Magic Library Card! article in a set about career paths embedded in acclaimed literature. The previous ones addressed biology/environmental science, the law, political science, art & archeology, and engineering.

Mark Twain's "Roughing It" (1872) is, according to his own prefatory (Signet Classic paperback edition of 1962), "a record of several years of variegated vagabondizing" in the rough, westernmost lands of mid 19th century North America. "Variegated vagabondizing" tells you a lot about probably America's most revered humorist as creative writer.

During that period, still as Samuel Clemens, he worked his way along in various money-earning capacities, including as a reporter, a reporter for whom sometimes "the facts of journalism are no longer allowed to interfere with the demands of narrative art" (Leonard Kriegel's Foreword). The reader of today will have to face that fundamental conflict in journalism: true journalists who work in the best of tradition report according to the facts, and do not let imaginative art or fancy intrude, especially not political fancy. (That does not mean that the facts cannot be said artfully.) Twain is here being spoken about as a "journalist" with a mind to storytelling, as in a novel. And that last is how we know him best today, as a creative writer, not just the fact-toeing professional journalist that he might have been without "Roughing It."

Ernest Hemingway's "A Moveable Feast" (1964) is a memoir about his own struggling days as a young professional journalist in 1920's Paris. It was published posthumously, after such well known novels as "The Old Man and the Sea" (1952) for which he won a Pulitzer Prize, "For Whom the Bell Tolls" (1940), and "A Farewell to Arms" (1929). He continued to write as a journalist or correspondent, too, during his life, during World War II for example. Twain started with journalism and migrated to creative writing, while Hemingway seems to have remained in both worlds.

Elena Ferrante's creative writing career path is different again. She is author of the four-volume "The Neapolitan Novels" (2012-15), translated from the Italian into English: "My Brilliant Friend"; "The Story of a New Name"; "Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay"; and "The Story of the Lost Child". The protagonists are Elena and Lila, lifelong friends who travel different paths after growing up in rough and tumble, chauvinistic Naples, Italy of the late 1960s and 1970s. Lila's story stays in Naples, but Elena seeks more in the outside world. It is she who becomes a novelist, and gives us this other career path to follow in creative writing.

At its best, maybe even always, creative writing calls on a burning need to put some insight, some fire, or some pain into words. The intensity of that can be found nowhere

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better displayed than in the works of African-American writers who speak as multi-generational victims of Jim Crow polity, and even denial of it. James Baldwin, Colson Whitehead, and Toni Morrison do not have to put their step by step paths to creative writing on the page. You see a common path plainly when you read “The Fire Next Time” (1963), “The Underground Railroad” (2016), and “Beloved” (1987), respectively.

All of the above writers have a lot to say to you, whether you are on a writing career path or not, if you give them a chance. They are career mentors, and more.

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation