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Ghostwriters

The commercial memoir “Spare” (2023) was written by Prince Harry, or so its jacket cover pronounces. Or was it? Not entirely, as is often so with celebrity memoirs. There is a ghostwriter named J.R. Moehringer, who removes all guesswork about the joint effort in the writing process in his own piece, “The Ghostwriter,” in *The New Yorker* (May 5, 2023). Maybe the piece is even more interesting to read than the book itself. I do not know, because I have not read the book, but the magazine article is quite revealing about how ghostwriting works. And, for me, a part-time grant writer for others in the Library world, I found some parallels.

Before reading Moehringer, I had the idea that ghostwriters were just tools of the celebrity author, someone to take to the keyboard what the celebrity had to say, and give it order, color and context. He or she just took in the story as told and wrote it into a comprehensible whole, in a way that the celebrity could not, or perhaps was simply too busy to do. The main business of being the celebrity in the landscape of life was the priority. The ghostwriter, on the other hand, really needed this maybe thankless work, lacking the skills for self-fulfilling original authorship. This apparently does not sufficiently describe Moehringer’s position.

He is a very particular ghostwriter, apparently in demand, who is as likely, maybe more so, to turn down a celebrity gig as to take one on. He was intrigued enough to take on Prince Harry. At least, that is his story. And having taken on the project, the two became more than just celebrity-needs-ghostwriter. They developed a personal relationship. They argued points about what should be included and what should be excluded from the telling. It got personal. They argued and interacted as near equals to the project.

“I didn’t worry so much about the propriety of arguing with princes, or even risks. One of a ghostwriter’s main jobs is having a big mouth. You win some, you lose most, but you have to keep on pushing, not unlike a demanding parent or a tyrannical coach. Otherwise, you’re nothing but a glorious stenographer, and that’s disloyalty to the author, to the book – to books.” Moehringer likes William Blake’s credo: “Opposition is true Friendship.”

So, why do his words ring so true to me, as neither celebrity nor ghostwriter? I found in them common ground with the role of grant writer. I do not think that it is possible to write a convincing and successful grant application by just taking an idea generated across a table somewhere, one not shared by the grant writer. The grant writer has to be in on the ideation, the creating of the vision, or buy into it. He or she has to be an equal participant in the whole and might even in some cases have contributed the germ idea or a key ingredient in the cake. Best by far is that the grant writer comes to the table from overlapping experiences in the field of the principals. Otherwise, it really is not easy to cross the experiential barriers that separate one professional from another. He/she has to write persuasively from a shared vantage.

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Although I have not yet given myself a chance to know Prince Harry through “Spare,” Moehringer has surely helped me understand better why it is so much easier to write successful grant applications for some people and not others. Who knew that I would find that takeaway in a book not read and something called the “The Ghostwriter”?

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