

# The Short, Sad Life of an Unsuccessful Novelist

BY MARGARET VERBLE

I noticed my first symptom in 1999. A tingling in my fingertips. An odd feeling, like they were trying to grasp what they couldn't reach or, maybe, trying to run away. Definitely doing something they shouldn't be doing. I, however, was doing exactly what I thought I should be doing: running a consulting business, playing tennis, vacationing in places that suited my self-image. Still, the tingling persisted. There was something wrong with me.

When I wasn't on the road working, I began hibernating. My basement den is nice. Equipped with a computer, exercise equipment and TV. The exercise equipment and TV didn't alleviate the tingling. The computer keys, though, had a soothing effect. That's what those fingers had been wanting to do. Tap, tap, tap, and so on.

And on. I spent every spare moment I had from 1999 through 2007 in my basement den at that computer. That's nine full years. I decided early on that I could run a business and write fiction. But I didn't have time to run a business, write fiction and talk about writing fiction. The only person I discussed my writing with was my husband. He was also a consultant; but, when we'd fallen in love, he'd been the poet in residence for the metro Nashville school system. David had once had a fine mind for literature. I'd had a fairly good one. But, you see, we'd chosen, instead, to earn a living.

By 2007, I'd produced a couple of novels. And had tried to get agents for them. But I had no success at that. I began having other symptoms. A sinking feeling. A tenderness. Maybe a perpetual pout. I decided I couldn't get a novel published alone. I needed help. I used the handy computer and looked on the Internet.

To my surprise, there were writers' workshops out there. Evidently, other people knew this. It was an industry. But, you see, I'd been in the basement, attending to the reading, writing and imagining it takes to produce novels.

I picked my first workshop on the basis of dubious criteria: (1) it had to be near New York, as even down in a basement in Kentucky it had come to me that the action is up there in the City; (2) it had to be near enough to drive to, as I fly too much for a living; (3) it had to offer critique sessions, because I had to know if I'd been wasting my time; (4) it needed nonfiction offerings, so I could entice my college roommate to go with me.

We picked the Wesleyan Writers Conference, and I was assigned Roxana Robinson as my instructor. I read a couple of Roxana's books, as I wanted to be sure she could write. (She sure can.) I took the books with me, as you can't expect anyone to take an interest in you if you don't take an interest in her. Roxana critiqued my manuscript. After I left our session, I read what she'd inscribed on the title page of her novel *Sweetwater*: "For Margaret, Already a good writer." That's what nine years in a basement will do for you. You have to write to be a writer. And write. And write. And so on.

You also need a mentor, because nobody, I mean nobody, is successful alone. Roxana was kind enough to try to find me an agent. But agents are running businesses and have agendas of their own. None of the ones we tried wanted to take me on. I was discouraged. Kept writing. By then, not really by choice. By addiction. In July 2008, I wrote in a journal, "I thought I'd found an agent for my fiction. But I've just opened a letter that says I'm wrong about that. Likes the writing. Doesn't know where to sell it. He's not the first. I've failed at this so much that disappointment feels like destiny calling. Hard work isn't enough. I need that confluence of forces called Luck."



Photo by Lee Thomas

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**"When luck comes knocking,  
you have to answer immediately,  
no matter what you're doing,  
no matter how many  
pain meds you're on."**

—Margaret Verble

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In October 2009, I wrote, “If I were inclined toward discouragement, that rock would be rolling me down a hill. Every morning I’m home, seven days a week, I get up early and write for an hour and a half. Then, after supper, I write nearly every night. I still haven’t found an agent. I may have lost sight of the line between perseverance and futility.”

In February 2010, Roxana came to Lexington for a book appearance. On that trip, she suggested I try writing short stories to build some credentials. I’m a novelist at heart; I didn’t want to do that. And I was busy. I had a contract with the National Health Service in the UK, and a new British partner who was going through treatment for cancer. I was also exhausted and frightened. I didn’t take up Roxana’s advice until the next year.

In January 2011, I wrote my first short story, “The Teller,” and sent it off to the *Arkansas Review*. I didn’t hear anything for months. I finally followed up with the editor, Janelle Collins. She told me the story was in the “maybe” pile. But on August 13, she e-mailed me to say she’d accepted it. The news gave me validation and hope. It justified all those years down the stairs.

I got a few more short stories published after that. But I still didn’t have an agent. And I still hadn’t given up being a novelist. By fall 2013, I’d finished a new novel, *Maud’s Allotment*; but by then, I knew I had cancer. Informed by the pathology report after surgery for something else. My cancer surgery had to be delayed until I’d healed enough to be cut open again. I went on to Scotland to work because I had a commitment there, and because, when you’re in business, if you’re not actually dead, you have to show up. While I was in Edinburgh, I had a bad meal alone, and a short story rejected by e-mail. You get the picture here: cancer, rejection, bad food, and half an island away from my partner. I e-mailed Roxana. Mentioned only the bad food, rejection and novel. She e-mailed me back. Said her agent was taking new clients. To send her, Lynn Nesbit, a hard copy.

When I got back to the States, I had two days before surgery, but I mailed that manuscript off. When Lynn sent a request for an electronic copy, I was somewhere in the bowels of the University of Kentucky Medical Center, too ill to sit up. My best friend brought my computer to me, moved me up in the bed and helped me hit the right keys. When Luck comes knocking, you have to answer immediately, no matter what you’re doing, no matter how many pain meds you’re on.

I was two days out of the hospital, still heavily doped, and sitting next to a bag of urine hooked over a drawer when Lynn called. She said she thought my book was “about 85 percent there,” and before she

tried to sell it, she wanted me to send it to an editor she would pick. I tried to sound coherent, and Lynn said she’d call back with a name. When we hung up, I looked at the bag of pee. Wondered if I’d understood. Wondered if I’d hallucinated. Decided to wait and see. Cancer puts things in perspective.

But the sailing has been smooth seas from there. The editor, Adrienne Brodeur, had good judgment and was helpful. I slowly regained my health. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt bought the book, and Lauren Wein, my editor there, has been lovely to work with. *Maud’s Line* (the title was changed in New York) has a Pulitzer finalist badge on the paperback cover, and is selling. I have a new manuscript with Lynn right now.

Fifteen years isn’t really a long time to learn a complicated task like novel writing. It really isn’t. It’s not painting by numbers. That unsuccessful novelist is dead and buried. For now. I am alive and healthy. Again, for now. My fingers still tingle. But I’ve gotten used to that. ♦

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Margaret Verble’s debut novel, *Maud’s Line*, was a Finalist for the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. She lives in Lexington, KY.

### Who Pays Writers What?

In 2012, when Manjula Martin came up with the idea of a website that would list what various magazines and websites were paying writers, most freelancers—and many in-house writers—were in the dark as to what to expect, or dare ask for. Their only hope was a tip from a fellow writer, the sort of exchange that can be uncomfortable for both sides. Martin’s crowd-sourced WhoPaysWriters.com (see article opposite) cracked open the door. Since then dozens of sites listing payments at outlets big and small have proliferated on the web, some of them offering “premium” listings for a price as well, others that focus on specific genres. For writers just starting out, they can be useful, but be careful where you click. Here’s a sampling—visited by us but not endorsed.

[whopayswriters.com](http://whopayswriters.com)

[contently.net/rates-database](http://contently.net/rates-database)

[writejobs.info](http://writejobs.info)

[www.makealivingwriting.com](http://www.makealivingwriting.com)

[thereviewreview.net/publishing-tips/](http://thereviewreview.net/publishing-tips/)

[show-me-literary-magazines-pay](http://show-me-literary-magazines-pay)