

# The Elusive Quest for Writing Success

BY JOHN MOIR

I arrived at the Maui Writers Conference filled with elation. It was the late 1990s, and I had been selected to participate in a small, three-day, pre-conference workshop with several prominent authors. Here was an Opportunity—with a capital “O.” But as the workshop began, doubts crept into my mind: how would I measure up? I wondered if anyone else felt the same way.

Then I met one of the presenters: novelist David Guterson.

At the time, Guterson was riding high with the success of *Snow Falling on Cedars*. It dawned on me that only recently he had been an unknown writer himself, just like most of us in the workshop. How was he dealing with his stunning success?

Before having a bestseller, Guterson had published a nonfiction book as well as a collection of short stories, but neither had attracted much attention. Every morning, he arose at 4:00 a.m. to write before heading off to teach high school English.

Then *Snow* changed everything.

In the workshop, Guterson discussed his sudden rise to fame with genuine humility. He viewed his achievement as simply another step on a much longer journey, a milestone that was not without its own set of problems. And he made the intriguing observation that much of success is beyond our control.

Of course, what Guterson said flies in the face of the deep-rooted American belief that intelligence and hard work are the key elements of success. That’s what Stanford professor Lewis Terman wanted to prove when he began a study in the 1920s to show that high IQ combined with personal drive largely decided who became societal leaders. Terman eventually recruited about 1,500 school children with IQs ranging from 140 to 200 and set out to follow the lives of his little geniuses.

My mom was one of the students Terman selected, and for the rest of her life she filled out periodic questionnaires that tracked her education, financial status, career path, family situation, and notable achievements.

As the decades passed, some of Terman’s participants did become the leaders he had predicted, but a remarkable number lived ordinary lives. Certainly that was my mom’s case. When her family lost everything in the Depression, she was grateful to land a job as a bank teller. She never attended college. Her life revolved around her long marriage and her two sons, and she worked hard

at caregiving for various family members. Her dream of becoming a physician never materialized. Like many women in her time, my mom did not have a lot of options.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell likens the factors that contribute to our success to a natural ecosystem that supports various species. Our personal ecosystem either bolsters or hinders our growth and includes influences such as when we are born, our social class, our parents, our personality, economic vicissitudes, and whether we have early opportunities to spend unfettered time perfecting a talent like writing.

And there is yet another component: luck.

Gladwell says that being super smart provides no advantage. Once a person’s IQ enters the 120 range, “having additional IQ points doesn’t seem to translate into any measurable real-world advantage.” Ironically, Terman’s study ended up proving this.

Furthermore, some endeavors have clear criteria that determine success. If an athlete runs a race, he knows his exact finishing time as well as where he placed—from first to last. Writing does not have such distinct demarcations. For example, if we use an author’s ranking on the bestseller list to determine how successful she is, what about great books written by midlist authors that receive no publicity and slide into obscurity? Interestingly, none of Guterson’s other novels has matched the commercial success of *Snow*, even though some of them are arguably better. Does that mean he is now not as good a writer?

If factors beyond our control determine much of our fate and if commercial writing achievement is a poor yardstick, what can help guide us forward? Here are a few possibilities:

- Focus on gratitude. It’s easy to move directly to our next challenge rather than savoring our victories. Taking time to celebrate positive developments helps avoid turning our goals into a mirage that is forever drifting into the distance.
- Be watchful for the “great pretender syndrome,” the apprehension secretly harbored by many in the creative arts that someday the curtain will be pulled back revealing their lack of talent. Many of us recognize it as an annoying internal voice chattering critical thoughts. It babbles at us that when an editor rejects a piece it’s our fault but tells us we got lucky when we receive a plum assignment.
- Write for something larger than yourself. Balance commercial success with your greater vision for writing. “Why do you

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write?” Guterson asked us. “Do you want to sell a thousand books? Or do you want to touch a thousand souls?”

As writers, we *do* need standards with which to judge our success, but it pays to be gentle with our judgments. There are

additional measures to consider other than our latest Amazon ranking: Are we writing pieces that are meaningful? Are we working hard to put our writing into the world no matter what the results? Are we continuing to improve our craft? Are we enjoying our writing? Are we touching readers’ hearts with our words? ■

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