

*Rethinking Incentives*

“No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.” Though frequently misattributed to Mark Twain, this is actually a quotation from Samuel Johnson, the author of the first dictionary of the English language. The experience of Iceland, however, casts Johnson’s claim into serious doubt. With only 350,000 speakers, the potential readership for Icelandic books is truly minuscule; yet Iceland’s publishing scene is thriving. One in ten Icelanders will publish in their lifetime, according to an article in *BBC Magazine* by Rosie Goldsmith. An Icelandic phrase translates literally as “Everyone has a book in their stomach.” Are Icelandic writers and publishers somehow managing to turn a profit against long

odds? Or do they write, edit, and publish for other reasons?

I asked experts on Iceland's publishing scene for their views on Samuel Johnson's blockhead quote. Egill Johannsson, chairman of the Icelandic Publishers Association, paused, puzzled by the question. "I don't think that applies to Icelandic authors," Johannsson finally replied. "I don't relate to those words at all. From my knowing a lot of authors, both Icelandic and foreign, I have yet to meet the author that writes for money." Baldur Bjarnason, a graduate of the University of Iceland's literature program and publishing industry consultant, was even more blunt. Bjarnason let loose a long and hearty laugh, before composing himself for a proper response: "No. Icelandic writers don't set out to make a living. Nobody writes for money."

Both men report that only a handful of authors in Iceland earn a living from royalties. These are mostly crime novelists who signed good contracts for translations into German and French. Perhaps another dozen authors benefit from a government stipend that funds a year of full-time writing. These are the exceptions, however, rather than the rule. "Writing needs a day job," Bjarnason states emphatically. Despite the low financial prospects, Iceland's publishing scene is thriving. "Icelandic authors

have a passion for writing,” Johannsson says. “They have a passion to be heard. That’s why they write.” Bjarnason agrees and identifies a second reason: the financial incentives may not be high, but the barriers are extremely low. In Iceland, he says, “It’s extremely easy for anybody to find somebody who’s capable of doing an editorial read of a text or give you feedback on narrative structure.” It is also easy to find a publisher, or to self-publish. “There are two ways to express yourself in Iceland,” Bjarnason claims. “One is writing a book and the other is forming a band. The one thing those two share is that there’s an easily accessible infrastructure and expertise.”

Iceland’s publishers may be more profit-minded than its authors. “They are trying to make money,” Bjarnason believes. “They try and they fail.” Johannsson, head of Iceland’s largest publishing house, Forlagid, disagrees. Although the company does make a profit, Johannsson denies this is the goal. “We don’t do it for profit. We use the money we profit to invest in more publishing, doing what we love to do. That is very publisher-like to use the money you make to publish something else you love.” Few other Icelandic publishers turn a profit. Johannsson generalizes: “Is publishing in Icelandic profitable? No. Nobody enters publishing to get rich. . . . But you have the benefit of doing something that is extremely nice and

fun to do. And if you have a passion for it, it's the best thing to do in the world.”

### (Dis)incentivizing Authorship

It might seem obvious that financial incentives will motivate more of the incentivized behavior. A moment's reflection, however, reveals that the relationship between incentives and behavior is more complicated. In many cases, people are motivated to do things without any financial incentives. For example, most people fall in love and raise children without being paid to do so. This is referred to as *intrinsic motivation*; the incentive comes from the activity itself. When Johannsson says that Icelanders write and publish because “they have a passion for it,” because it is “what we love to do,” “extremely nice and fun,” even “the best thing to do in the world,” he is identifying intrinsic motivations.

For her book *The Eureka Myth*, legal scholar Jessica Silbey extensively interviewed artists and scientists about the motivations for their work. Novelists and painters, journalists and computer scientists—all reported that internal motivations are more powerful than money. Silbey found that successful creators are initially inspired by serendipity and a sense of play, focus more on the process than the outcome, and are motivated by notions of

rhythm, artistic integrity, and community-building. She concludes that intrinsic motivations, rather than financial ones, power most creativity. “The emotional and personal rewards derived from these commitments eclipse the financial payoffs of the work, be they uncertain or robust,” Silbey writes.

While pleasure is obviously a primary motivation for reading, we might not expect the same to be true for writing, because it is more difficult. Writing a book may be a source of greater psychological satisfaction than simply reading one, however, precisely because it is more difficult. Psychologist Reed Larson studied how the emotional state of “flow” affects the writing process. Bored writers, he found, were unable to find challenge and excitement in their projects and produced dull writing that was unenjoyable to read. It is not simply a question of being interested in one’s topic; the writer must also work to find an appropriate level of challenge in the task, neither too high nor too low. In this state, Larson explains, an author can enjoy the excitement of guiding the project to a successful conclusion.

Psychologist Edward Deci suggests that human beings are intrinsically motivated to select and complete challenging creative tasks because of our deep need to feel autonomous and competent. He hypothesized that external

rewards could have the unintended consequence of undermining these motivations. A great number of studies he and others later conducted found precisely this impact. “Careful consideration of reward effects reported in 128 experiments leads to the conclusion that tangible rewards tend to have a substantially negative effect on intrinsic motivation” for people who were originally highly motivated to perform a task they saw as enjoyable, Deci and his coauthors concluded in *A Meta-Analytic Review of Experiments Examining the Effect of Extrinsic Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation*. This “disincentive effect” is strongest when the external reward is financial. In contrast, praise can reinforce intrinsic motivation.

The counterproductive effect of financial rewards is strongest for activities that people find psychologically rewarding because they are fun, culturally valued, or otherwise meaningful. Writing can be enjoyable on all these dimensions. An author can experience the writing process as play, in which the creator enjoys a high degree of control over the outcome. Having a book published tends to make people feel proud of their accomplishment. An author may also feel gratified for having made a contribution to society, advancing knowledge in an area that one cares about, or the pure satisfaction of self-expression. Moreover, society praises certain activities precisely

because they are socially valuable, yet not very lucrative. To the extent that people internalize the notion that doing something for profit makes it less praiseworthy, being financially rewarded may undermine the sense of pride or virtue associated with it.

### Millions of Blockheads

If research on creative motivation is correct, Icelandic authors are in fact highly fortunate. From the beginning, they start with no expectation of a financial reward. They know they are writing for expression, enjoyment, and esteem. The resulting book is a source of satisfaction and pride even if it sells only fifteen copies. The financial prospects for English-language writers are substantially more promising. Because the American novelist expects to make money, however, a modest royalty check may be perceived as a discouraging negative indicator of competence, undermining intrinsic motivation. The elusive prospect of fame and money can be a double-edged sword. Past financial success can also heighten the sense of pressure to deliver an even more successful next book. The opposite of flow is “writer’s block,” when an author is so anxious over whether the current project will be successful that he or she experiences a creative shutdown. “I feel this way all the time,” admitted best-selling author John Green, who

placed second on the list of highest-paid authors when *The Fault in Our Stars* came out on film. Green beat long odds; even in America, most books sell fewer than five hundred copies. Green's advice on handling writer's block, as quoted by Julie Bort in *Business Insider*, echoes the psychological literature on intrinsic motivation. "The only way through it for me is to take pleasure in the process of writing. The act of writing for an audience must feel valuable in and of itself, or else I am doomed." In between episodes of financial success, or in its absence, authors must draw upon deeper motivations—such as pleasure, self-expression, writer's high, public appreciation, a sense of calling or of giving a gift to the world—to fuel their art.

According to U.S. census data, only a few hundred Americans identify themselves as independent authors. Across all stages of their careers, they report an average income of \$60,000, just 20 percent more than the typical *starting* salary of a recent college graduate. Writers looking for monetary rewards do not write books; they write catalog copy, corporate policy manuals, press releases, and legal documents. "There's a reason most well-known writers still teach English," novelist Patrick Wensink warns. "Even when there's money in writing, there's not much money." J. K. Rowling bought a castle thanks to her top-selling Harry Potter books; but she is literally one in

a million. Choosing to become a full-time author is like any other career in the arts. A few stars do extremely well financially; many more are “starving artists.”

Meanwhile, approximately 1.7 million faculty members at U.S. colleges and universities write books and journal articles in addition to their teaching responsibilities. It is extremely rare for an academic to earn significant income from royalties. We write to solve challenging problems, to influence others with our ideas, and to enhance our professional reputations. Even more people publish their writing for free. On the Tumbler platform alone, there were approximately 400 million blogs as of 2018. Wordpress, another online platform for publishing unpaid content, boasts more than 87 million new posts each month.

Money cannot be the primary reason that millions of people write books and hundreds of millions create blogs. Something other than royalties is motivating the overwhelming majority of authors, even in the world’s most lucrative languages. Authors write to express themselves, to communicate ideas, to experience a challenge, and because writing is fun. We might land closer to the truth by editing Johnson’s famous words to read: “Only a blockhead ever wrote for money.” (Perhaps Johnson, a passionate poet as well as a successful dictionary editor, was being

ironic in suggesting otherwise.) Ultimately, the financial prospects for writers in Icelandic are not that different from those of most writers in English. Iceland simply lacks the wildly unrepresentative example of J. K. Rowling to delude anyone.

### Motivating Authors

Many scholars speak of copyright protection as solving a “public good” problem. Books are a public good because they have social value, and because it is difficult to prevent people from sharing in them without paying. Copyright protection turns literary works into a more conventional “private good,” which individuals must pay to access. Only in this way, the dominant theory goes, can we ensure that authors go on writing. The unstated assumption is that authors write in order to get paid. Yet empirical research reveals that motivations other than money are far more powerful.

A parallel exists between writing books and playing sports. A tiny fraction of athletes—the very best of the best—become professionals. These elite few earn enough to focus full-time on honing their athletic talents. In a handful of cases, they earn enough to inspire significant envy. Yet surely no one would subscribe to the statement, “No one but a blockhead ever played sports, except for

money.” We easily recognize athletic endeavor as intrinsically rewarding. It challenges us, it is fun, it connects us to other people and, when done well, it brings a sense of accomplishment. While high-earning professional athletes surely enjoy their wealth, we tend to believe that even they play mostly “for the love of the game.” So it is also with writing. It is worthwhile to enable the most talented few to dedicate themselves full-time to stretching the boundaries of their craft. But in our adulation of professional genius, we should not lose sight of the importance of amateur creativity.

Rather than focus narrowly on creating financial incentives for potential authors, we should think much more broadly about motivating them. Efforts to address book hunger should be intentional about how they appeal to alternative motivations. Pratham Books founder Rohini Nilekani is particularly eloquent on this subject. “If you scratch an author deeply enough, the author wants to be read,” she argues. “Especially children’s authors. They get it.” The most powerful incentive for people to write, illustrate, and translate for Pratham Books is the exciting prospect of reaching hundreds of thousands of children. Equally powerful, Nilekani believes, is a sense of taking part in an important social mission, which she intentionally placed at the heart of the organization. “A lot is

possible if you have a societal mission,” Nilekani says. “Creating a community around the cause of reading, books, children—this is absolutely critical to the model.”

Human beings want more than the material necessities and luxuries of life (though most of us want those too.) We also crave meaning. Creative expression, service to others, and being part of something larger than yourself are prime ways that people seek to make meaning in their lives. Authorship and artistic creativity have long been seen as a form of spiritual expression in a wide variety of cultures. In the European view, copyright protection is justified not primarily as a financial incentive, but as a way to protect and honor the dignity of the author, who has invested his or her personality in the creation. For this reason, it is essential to give appropriate credit to the individuals who helped create a book.

People want to write. What holds most of them back is the difficulty of doing so. There are many more blogs than books because a blog is much easier to execute. Perhaps it is the case that very high financial incentives would motivate more people to overcome the difficulties of writing a book. Even in the most lucrative publishing markets, however, significant financial rewards are rare and cold comfort in the face of writer’s block. In niche publishing markets, the elusive prospect of slim royalties

simply cannot do this work. A much bigger impact is likely to come from appealing to intrinsic motivations, and from lowering the barriers to writing and publishing books, including barriers related to copyright law. Potential authors in Iceland know it will be easy to find an editor, get published, and have one's book marketed to the entire country. Potential translators of existing works into neglected languages should be given similar confidence.