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# GHOSTWRITING BY THE LIGHT OF DAY

A writer's side gig, once defined by contracts of anonymity, has gone public, and is more competitive than ever.

by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

I was halfway through *Shoe Dog: A Memoir by the Creator of Nike* by Phil Knight when I thought, “How did a man who’s been a businessman his entire life write such a gripping memoir?” The book had a solid structure, great writing, and it had me—someone not the least bit interested in Phil Knight or Nike’s origins—turning the page, and the next page, and the next. (I facilitate a leadership book group and this was that month’s read.) And then it occurred to me: there had to be a ghostwriter involved.

*Of course* there was. J. R. Moehringer, author of one of my favorite memoirs, *The Tender Bar*, (released as a film in 2021), was the guy. I had Moehringer on my radio show when *The Tender Bar* came out, and I loved his writing. This had to be why I loved *Shoe Dog*: because Moehringer wrote it.

I’d been wondering where he’d been, and when his next book would be coming out. It turns out he’d been busy ghostwriting and, rumor has it, commanding seven figures for his work. He also wrote Andre Agassi’s memoir, *Open*, and is working with Prince Harry on his memoir, to be released this year.

Back in 2008, in *US News and World Report*, career coach Marty Nemko said ghostwriting would be a lucrative career for writers in the twenty-first century. Was he psychic?

Some years back I thought ghostwriting might be the sort of work I’d like. It paid fairly well, and it was writing, so what’s not to like?

I ghostwrote a couple of fitness books and a book proposal for a motivational speaker’s memoir, but the gig wasn’t for me. It paid well, but the back and forth with the client became annoying. Not an attribute of a successful collaborator, as ghosts are often called these days. I turned down subsequent projects—wisely, I’m sure.

## The Upside

Those who find happiness, if not success, as collaborators enjoy getting close to the author, tak-

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ing on their persona, and don’t mind putting their own stories and voice aside.

“I find it genuinely fun and interesting to be a chameleon and take on someone else’s voice,” says Erica Moroz, a *New York Times* best-selling ghostwriter. “Also, I think it’s probably just less personal to not have my name attached to writing. There’s something freeing about being anonymous.”

“People’s lives are fascinating,” says author Skip Press, who has collaborated on and off since the mid-1990s, “and it’s great to learn how they think and *what* they think. One story Patti Page wouldn’t let me put in her book was about a date she had with Frank Sinatra when they were both playing Vegas and single. It was a very funny story, but she was afraid Frank’s widow would be offended. It was totally innocent, but that’s what Patti wanted.”

You should also be adept at getting in close. “It’s a level of intimacy to get inside people’s words, meanings, emotions,” says Pamela Johnson, a multimedia journalist and former senior editor at *Elle* magazine.

Empathy is another aspect of ghostwriting. Jill Amadio, who has collaborated on 18 books so far, says she was surprised in an unexpected way. “I found I empathized so deeply with clients I often found myself weeping with them as they recalled sad moments, especially with the victim of a crime for whom I wrote a book. When we finished it, the client declared he had no wish to publish; our interviews had become a catharsis. He’d gotten the crime against him, a childhood event, off his chest, told someone about it—me—and could now go forward with more confidence.”

Michael Coffino, novelist, writing coach, freelance editor, and a ghost collaborator since 2015, says the best thing about the work, for both client and author, is the storytelling, “the opportunity to give voice to the experiences of the client and how each project refines and improves my writing and my coaching skills, and in addition, requires introspection for personal growth.”

When asked what the best thing about collaborating is, Claudia Suzanne, who’s been in the game for more than three decades and has been dubbed the godmother of ghostwriting, says, “Only everything! The constant learning, the creative flexing, the author interaction, the satisfaction of bringing a first draft up to an industry-standard second draft, the fun of musical line editing, the money.”

Robert W. Stock, who spent 29 years as an editor, writer, and columnist with *The New York Times*, agrees but adds: “The best thing about ghostwriting? It pays the bills.”

## Surprises

The surprises that come through collaborating run the gamut from the wondrous to the depressing. Suzanne, who teaches in the Ghostwriting Professional Designation Program at California State University Long Beach, says, “After thirty-plus years and two hundred-plus titles, I can honestly say I still learn something new from every book and every author.”

Vanessa McGrady, journalist and author of the memoir *Rock Needs River*, says, “I was surprised by how easily I let go of the work once I fin-

ish it. I never really look back at it.” She goes on to say new ghostwriters might be surprised by “how little your opinion actually matters. You have to try to live in someone else’s mind for a while.”

Johnson says, “You’ve got to be the other person’s twin and sublimate how you would say it or do it. You take the back seat.”

Another thing collaborators must deal with often are clients who seek “bestsellerdom.” “Your subject might fully believe that you will somehow magically write a bestseller for them while they put in little work personally,” says Press. “In contrast, the best-selling biography of Steve Jobs was written only after Jobs did forty interviews with Walter Isaacson.”

## The Downside

While the amount of money you can potentially earn ghostwriting is a major draw, dealing with clients who won’t pay or never get past the starting gate is something collaborators often have to contend with.

Coffino says he’s been surprised by “how difficult it is for prospective clients to pull the trigger on moving forward, whether for financial or personal reasons. It’s a major undertaking, and I have lost several clients to inertia.” He also hates “watching clients reject advice you know will improve the project. . . . It’s hard sometimes to see them insist on a path you know won’t yield results.”

Suzanne says the worst thing is “not being able to help someone because they cannot get out of their own way on the path to success.”

For Stock, “The whole ghosting enterprise is built on presenting what you have written as the work of someone else, misleading the work’s readers. Sometimes that fact is made clear, as when the ghost is given a coauthor or ‘with’ listing on the cover of a book. Sometimes the understanding is implicit, as when the putative author is an actor, sports star, or politician who is unlikely to have written the book alone. Otherwise, the reader is misled.”

Press, too, finds that immersing himself in other people’s stories can be a problem. “I’m so

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## Tips from a Pro

Keep the following in mind, according to Claudia Suzanne ([www.ghostwritingcentral.com](http://www.ghostwritingcentral.com)):

Set your fee in accordance with your book-ghostwriting expertise, because what you charge and how you charge it essentially fixes your standing in the author’s eyes. Once set, it cannot be altered. Keep these Ghostwriting Psych 101 points in mind:

- \* To effectively manage any book project, you must be in either the **one-up or at least level position** in the client-writer relationship.
- \* Your writing credentials, academic background, personal achievements, and other writing services **do not count** toward book-ghostwriting expertise; rather, they position you as a freelancer seeking work. The following practices subliminally position you as a freelancer:
- \* Using a rate sheet.
- \* Charging by the hour or page subliminally positions you as a freelancer.
- \* Quoting a fee without taking the time to consider the project subliminally positions you as a freelancer.
- \* Charging below industry standards subliminally positions you as a freelancer.
- \* Freelancers are considered work-for-hire/at-will employees in most states and are thus **automatically in the one-down position** in any client-writer relationship.

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interested in people and their stories I can get too invested in writing their stories and lose track of my own work.”

“Often enough the nominal author will either have little to do with the project or be totally lovely to work with,” says Moroz. “A couple of times, the nominal author has been somewhat challenging to work with. For example, insisting on adding things that I strongly believed would compromise the text—or being overly mediated by their managers/publicity teams/self-image.”

### **What to Charge**

As longform journalism dries up and publishers consolidate, putting editors out of work and reducing the chances for midlist authors to get a contract, the ghosting field has grown increasingly competitive. Ghostwriters are in high demand and can command huge fees. The writers I spoke with said the best collaborators can command anywhere from \$75,000 to \$100,000—or more—for a memoir or novel, and successful published authors who are also experienced ghostwriters often charge between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Midtier collaborators may not garner quite that much money, but it’s up there, and \$30,000 for most other books sounds about average. Ghostwriters who write fast say they can handle two book proj-

ects a year, and that’s not a bad income for a writer, especially those who have other income streams.

Madeleine Morel, a literary agent who represents only ghostwriters, says pay depends on the genre. “Business books pay more than diet books. The fee for writing a diet book can start as low as \$30,000, rising to maybe \$65,000. Of course, there are high-profile health/diet books that pay more. On the other hand, the fee for writing a business book for one of the Big Five starts at around \$75,000 and can often top out with a healthy six figures.”

“Ghostwriting has become so competitive,” Morel adds. “There’s a ton of work out there, but there are more writers looking to fulfill that work.” Her advice: “Spend a few thousand dollars on a professional website rather than a homemade one. Include quotes from people with whom you’ve worked: agents, authors, et cetera. Also, take out a paying subscription to Publishers Marketplace. Every day you’ll see what kinds of agents are selling what kinds of books to editors. You can find a contact, get the personal emails to agents and editors out there. You never know when they’re looking for a writer. Matching ghostwriters with authors is a bit like blind dating.”

“Ghostwriters notoriously get paid little for their work,” says McGrady. “Honestly, if someone can afford a ghostwriter, it’s worth it to fight them for what you think you deserve—especially if it’s a project you *know* will do well. Get in on those royalties if you can . . . even if it means taking a little less up front.”

Payment levels depend on the experience and reputation of the ghostwriter. Someone like Moehringer, with a best-selling book of his own and a track record of successful books for his clients, can demand top dollar. The new kid on the block, not so much.

“It’s tempting to lowball to get jobs, and while that might make some sense in the early goings, eventually it becomes bad business,” says Coffino, who wishes he’d known how to structure a fair fee before he got into ghostwriting. “My base financial model is a two-tier structure: one, a flat fee for a set number of words, paid in monthly installments

over the projected life of the project; two, an additional amount for any additional words. . . . And while I have done so in the past, I'm disinclined to take upside in lieu of certain payment. Too speculative in most cases."

## Contracts

As in all business transactions, a good contract helps you avoid nonpayment mishaps, but negotiating a price can be a sticky enterprise. Clients often want you to give them a dollar amount up front. Even with a contract, be prepared for flaky clients. The best of contracts won't help you if you cannot afford to or don't want to sue, so be sure to do some due diligence on the potential client and send the contract to the Authors Guild legal team for review before signing.

"I signed a contract with a billionaire's wife to help her do a how-to book," says Stock. "I researched her subject and spent time talking it over with her. I submitted my first invoice, for \$600, and payment never arrived. It took weeks of hectoring and third-party intervention before she came across, claiming that she had never received my emails and phone messages. She also mentioned that she was very busy on other matters and was rethinking the whole project. We haven't had any further conversation."

Morel, who gets 80 percent of her business from other literary agents and 20 percent from publishers, does collaboration agreements between her writers' and authors' agents. She says ghostwriters should insist on having the right to put the project on their résumé. And, she says, if you don't have an agent involved, be careful with the payout.

"Frontload the payment," she says. "Have incremental payments. For every three chapters, the writer gets another payment. If worse comes to worse and the client decides not to proceed with the book, and as a result you don't receive your final payment, you've at least been paid to date."

She goes on to caution ghostwriters to never sign a deal where someone wants to share the

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**"BUSINESS BOOKS PAY MORE THAN DIET BOOKS. THE FEE FOR WRITING A DIET BOOK CAN START AS LOW AS \$30,000, RISING TO MAYBE \$65,000. . . . ON THE OTHER HAND, THE FEE FOR WRITING A BUSINESS BOOK FOR ONE OF THE BIG FIVE STARTS AT AROUND \$75,000 AND CAN OFTEN TOP OUT WITH A HEALTHY SIX FIGURES."**  
— MADELEINE MOREL

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back end instead of paying an up-front fee because "there's never a back end, or almost never."

The other reason not to take payment on the backend? People die.

Suzanne was writing a book for a CEO of a huge corporation that had agents and editors salivating when her client died.

"Logic dictates that after an appropriate span of time, I'd write up that critical last chapter so the book could be published posthumously," says Suzanne.

Because of her confidentiality agreement with the client, she can't say what happened next, except that there was "no last chapter. No posthumous publication. No legacy book for a remarkable man who affected, and continues to affect, millions of people with his decent business practices, diversity hiring mandates, and exemplary company culture." **AG**