

# Do you have a book in you?

**Jeanine Connor** shares what she's learned from her experience of being a published author



## WORDS

**Jeanine Connor** is a child and adolescent psychotherapist, clinical supervisor and training facilitator, whose work is psychodynamic in orientation. Jeanine has supported young people, and those who work with young people, in a variety of settings for 25 years. She is the author of *Stop F\*cking Nodding and Other Things 16-year-olds Say in Therapy* (PCCS), *Reflective Practice in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy: listening to young people* (Routledge), editor of BACP's *Children, Young People & Families* journal, psychology editor for Curriculum Press and reviews editor for *Therapy Today*. [seapsychotherapy.co.uk](http://seapsychotherapy.co.uk)

I was flattered and surprised, in equal parts, to be asked to present a session on how to get a book published at this year's BACP Private Practice Conference. This isn't an unusual response for me to being asked to present anything to anyone, but the theme, 'Beyond the room: finding your inner entrepreneur' made me wonder: why have they asked me?

The dictionary definition of an entrepreneur is a person who sets up a business, taking on financial risks in the hope of profit.<sup>1</sup> I think that if your main motivating factor for writing a book is financial richness then, unless you're JK Rowling, Jamie Oliver or Terry Pratchett (the top three most valuable British authors since records began),<sup>1</sup> it's probably not for you. But the conference theme was *inner* entrepreneur and, as a psychotherapist and wordsmith, I was interested in that concept. In relation to writing, I interpreted it as putting, not your money necessarily, but your pen (or computer keyboard) where your mouth is, in the hope of reaping some sort of subjective reward.

There's an adage that everyone has a book in them. I disagree. I don't think everyone can write a book, just as I don't think everyone can be a psychotherapist, an actor or an astronaut. These things take a particular set of talents, skills and savvy. But even if you do have a book in you, few of us get that book out. I set out to share my story and demystify the process.

## People like me

I've been told that my ordinariness is what appeals in terms of potential clients, conference delegates and readers, and, in those contexts, I take being described as ordinary as a compliment. I have working-class roots and was educated at the local comprehensive school and expected to learn a trade, post 16, rather than continue in further education. I was told that people like me don't do degrees (I have three), that we are not psychotherapists and that we don't become published authors. I began writing for publication while working as a sixth form psychology lecturer and have written over

90 resources for various educational publishers, ranging from factsheets to dictionaries. I continue to write resources and have been Psychology Editor for Curriculum Press since 2008.

During my psychotherapy training, as an impoverished student member of BACP, I responded to a call out in *Therapy Today* for book reviewers, which I saw as an opportunity to get free books and see my name in print. I've written lots of reviews (and received dozens of free books) and was appointed Reviews Editor for *Therapy Today* in 2018. Writing reviews and having them published, alongside getting good grades for essays on my master's training, gave me the confidence to write my first article, *Where lunatics prosper*,<sup>2</sup> in 2011. The thrill of seeing it in print and the feedback I received, both positive and negative, motivated me to write another and another, and I've had the writing bug ever since. Contributing articles and reviews meant that the journal editors got to know my writing, and I was invited to create a regular column, firstly in the quarterly *BACP CYPF* journal and later in *Therapy Today*.

It's worth noting that none of these commissions came with financial remuneration, but I didn't care; I was being published and people were reading what I'd written, which was thrilling. More thrilling still, was the publication of my book, *Reflective Practice in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy: listening to young people*.<sup>3</sup> This was an amalgamation of all the leftover

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## It's worth considering the messages you've absorbed about writers and writing and being honest with yourself about why you want to be published



material in my head from years of writing columns and articles with short word counts of 400 to 2,000 words. Around the same time I signed the book contract, I also signed a contract with BACP to become editor of *BACP CYPF*, the journal that had published my first article a decade before. Then, in April 2022, came the book I really wanted to write. *Stop F\*cking Nodding and Other Things 16 Year Olds Say in Therapy*<sup>3</sup> is an homage to all the 16 year olds I've had the pleasure of working with over the last 25 years.

### Reality check

It's worth considering the messages you've absorbed about writers and writing, and being honest with yourself about why you want to be published. While we're checking in with reality, here are some other home truths to mull over, which I shared at the conference. Statistically, the odds of a completed manuscript being published are slim, with publishers suggesting estimates ranging from 1 to 2% to 25%: those are not great odds. My experience of writing (and reading) books has taught me that there are between 60,000 and 80,000 words in the average paperback: that's a lot of writing.

If you do find a publisher, my experience is that it's likely to take up to a year to write your book and the same again for the publishing process: that's a big commitment. There are around 32 million books listed on Amazon, so books do get written, and they do get published, but there's a lot of competition.

The consensus seems to be that the average year one sales for nonfiction are about 250 copies<sup>4</sup> (many books sell far less) and although publishers vary, the average that they may pay authors in royalties is around 10% of the book's retail price,<sup>5</sup> which isn't much.

So, let's imagine you've written your book and it's been published, and it's selling at £15 and makes the average number of sales of 250 in its first year. Three years down the line, you can expect a payment of £375. Now do you see why I dashed your hopes of financial richness so early on? If you're still keen on getting a book published, I'll share what I've learnt from my experience of the three main stages: getting started, getting published and being published.

### Getting started

This is what you can do right now and it's the stuff I've already talked about. You can get experience in the area you want to write about, because it's important to write what you know. It's also important to read. I get inspiration from psychological literature and fiction, as well as from magazines and journals. It's impossible for me to turn off my editor's eye and, as I read, I notice styles of writing I like and don't.

You can also start writing and sharing what you write with an audience. There are eight BACP journals you can contribute to in the form of letters, book reviews and articles. Read BACP's author guidelines<sup>5</sup> and contact the editors with your proposal. They will guide

you through the process, give invaluable feedback and, if your idea has legs and you have the skills, they will edit your contribution to get it ready for publication. You won't get paid, but the experience will be invaluable and help you to build a portfolio of published work.

### Getting published

The writing process for each of my two psychotherapy books took about nine months, which can be considered in five stages: pre-conception, conception, gestation, labour and birth. Pre-conception is the desire to write a book and the idea of what the book will be about. Be specific. Think about who you are writing it for and who your competition will be. How will your book be different to what's already out there? What's unique about your idea?

Conception is sealing the deal with a publisher. Firstly, you need to choose which publisher(s) you would like to work with, based on their area of expertise and yours. Look at publishers' websites for information for new authors. Don't send unsolicited material, as chances are it won't be read, and you'll have wasted your time. As an aside, the same usually goes for approaching journal editors. Each publisher has a slightly different

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process, but their proposal form will ask for personal details, such as experience, qualifications and a list of previous publications (hence my advice about getting experience and submitting articles to journals), and details about your book, such as provisional title, content, intended audience and competition (hence my advice about being specific). Publishers generally ask to see your work, either something that's been published previously, or a sample chapter of your proposed book.

The gestation period is the writing. Whether you're writing a short review of a few hundred words or a book of tens of thousands, make sure you stick to the brief, including word count and timescales, and that you adhere to the style of the publication in terms of referencing. I write in my own voice, using my own language and my own personal style. This might sound obvious, but I've read plenty that feels forced and unnatural, and my 'ordinariness' has become my selling point. Think about your reader; are they psychologically informed or generally educated? Do you need to explain specialist vocabulary, assume it's understood or avoid it altogether? And please pay utmost attention to confidentiality. I've written further guidance on this in a previous article.<sup>6</sup>

Following the period of gestation comes labour. Your book is almost ready to be born, but first it goes through the editing process. Your editor will, of course, check grammar, spelling and punctuation. They will also make

sure you've written in the agreed style to the agreed length. They will lay the work out on the page and advise you about referencing and indexing. Writing an index is an onerous task; sometimes it's done by authors, sometimes by the publisher. Usually, you will receive proofs of the manuscript to check before it goes to print.

Your book is then ready to be born, aka published. I used to think that if you had a book with your name on the front it meant you'd made it. But you've really made it when your name is on the back, the bit where it says, 'So-and-so read this book and they think it's great.' These are endorsements, and they are really valuable. Ditto reviews in journals and online. It's important that potential readers know your book exists and that influential people in the field have read it and rated it, because this is what pushes up sales. Publishers vary greatly in the extent to which they publicise your book or leave it up to you to spread the word.

### And finally

So, if you still want to be a published author and think you have what it takes, start now. Contact editors with proposals and get writing. Write anything: a letter, a book review or an article. Take all the advice and feedback that's offered and learn from the experience. Don't send unsolicited material to anyone. Expect and accept that rejection is part of the process. Don't give up. Harness your inner entrepreneur. Write that book. ●

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