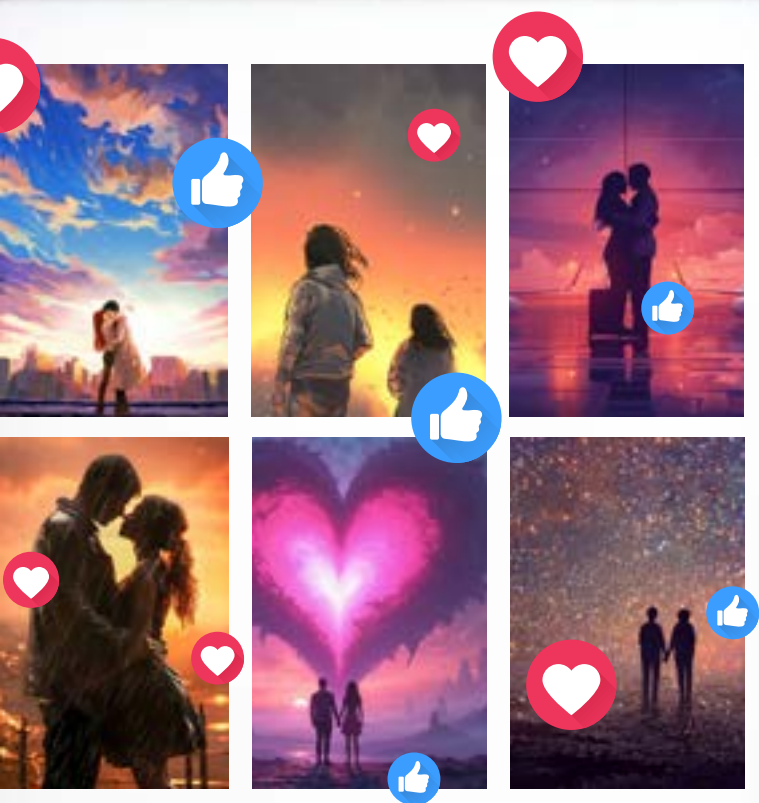




Reading and Writing in the Platform Era

Content Machines considers how social media and platform-based and short-form writing have reshaped practices of writing, reading, and publishing. Bringing together a Marxist-feminist and sociological approach, Sarah Brouillette attends to the forms of labor, often

Content Machines

SARAH BROUILLETTE

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Reading and Writing
in the Platform Era

SARAH BROUILLETTE

DUKE

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*I need an emoticon for lol
and flinching with dread
simultaneously.*
—JOSHUA CLOVER

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Introduction

In August 2024, a debate broke out online after National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), which is now defunct, shared their position on artificial intelligence. The statement read that “questions around the use of AI tie to questions around privilege” and “categorical condemnation” of the technology “has classist and ableist undertones.” NaNoWriMo was a nonprofit organization offering guidance, workshops, and support to people from underserved communities who wanted to complete writing projects. In seeking to honor “the transformational power of creativity through writing,” NaNoWriMo secured funding—from the California Arts Council and the National Arts & Disability Center, among others—to try to redress how exclusionary and homogeneous the world of contemporary writing and publishing can be. It claimed that the power of creativity has been historically denied to people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and class background. Their projects were aimed at creating a more inclusive publishing community; their approach to AI was meant to be an extension of this.

It didn’t land as they had hoped. People from within the community served by NaNoWriMo programming pointed out that, whatever needs they might have, they did not require help from AI. They found the idea itself classist and ableist, in its apparent presumption that writers who do not fit the usual authorial profile are incapable of writing without “cheating.” Academics weighed in as well, evidently bruised by having to read reams of AI-generated student work. They wondered how it came to be that an organization supporting writers would promote doing something that took the difficulty out of the process. Writing is supposed to be hard. Writing is supposed to present barriers to us, if we want to learn to do it well. Writing is supposed to make us want to give up in despair. “Where did the idea come from that everyone has the right to be a

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writer?" one English professor tweeted, plaintively. Why do we think, in other words, that writing is a behavior that everyone should participate in, even if they need to use AI to do it? How has writing become so important a capacity that these lengths should be gone to for it to be made possible for people?

Access mattered to NaNoWriMo because, in their culturally resonant phrasing, repeated across their promotional materials, *everyone has a story to tell*, and *everyone's story matters*. Sharing our stories fosters bonds among us, such that "writing can deepen and expand a person's empathy and community." It is this experience, of telling your story to cultivate empathy and community, that they claimed "should be accessible to people of all ethnicities, genders, cultures, belief systems, class backgrounds, ages, abilities, and sexual orientation."¹ NaNoWriMo's insistence that thoughtful use of AI is compatible with these aims touched a nerve. That a popular national writing organization would defend such a practice seemed to be a harbinger of ominous changes in the culture of reading and writing. What are these changes exactly, and how should we understand them?

On July 24, 2022, Joyce Carol Oates tweeted that a friend who is a literary agent told her editors are no longer interested in reading first novels by young white male writers, "no matter how good." She was saying this in support of an article by former *New York Times* columnist Pamela Paul, who argued that the publishing industry is being destroyed by "illiberal scolds" who stifle free speech.² Among Paul's examples are the industry's recourse to sensitivity readers, who ostensibly try to control authors, and the backlash against 2020 best-seller *American Dirt* on the grounds that its white author Jeanine Cummins was not the right person to tell the story of poor Mexican migrants. Paul is implying, in other words, that calls for publishing to address its whiteness problem amount to a form of woke censorship. In sharing Paul's piece and adding her own anecdote about men being overlooked, Oates was connecting their fate to Paul's complaint: White men are the victims of the industry's takeover by the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) mafia.

The idea that white male writers today face diminishing opportunities has since occasioned considerable debate and several attempts to lay out in greater detail the forces behind their marginalization. Jacob Savage's explanation is that they are "vanishing" because, having been castigated as toxic masculinists and told there are no "Good White Men," they no longer feel that they are allowed to have a voice.³ Tim Lott argues that an industry now dominated by women editors and agents, who are naturally biased toward manuscripts that center their own experiences, is guilty of the same inequality that women once complained about, except now it is men who are excluded.⁴ This leaves men

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with a dearth of literary role models to look up to, according to Jude Cook. The founder of Conduit Books, a publishing house devoted to releasing books only by male authors, Cook states he had to step up when he noticed that “narratives addressing fatherhood, masculinity, working-class male experience and negotiating the 21st century as a man were simply not getting through to the tables of Waterstones and Foyles.”⁵ Others fear that young white men without literary reading on their nightstands are being propelled into the arms of online misogynists like Andrew Tate, as one is more likely to fall prey to right-wing political sensibilities without the armature of deep literary thinking. Creative writing instructor David Morris, whose classes are made up mainly of women, argues that “young men have regressed educationally, emotionally and culturally,” a regression that “seems even to have been a significant factor in [the 2024] presidential election.”⁶

Yet it is hardly only men who are struggling to find a foothold in the industry. It is difficult today to debut and succeed as any gender of literary writer. Literary fiction has seen its “rise and fall,” Dan Sinykin argues.⁷ All the major industry monitoring organizations agree with him. The Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society has tracked the decline in UK authors’ real incomes year after year since the early 2000s. Referring to “a profession struggling to sustain itself,” it finds that most writers cannot make a living by writing alone. In 2006, median author earnings were £12,330 (around \$22,000). By 2022, this had fallen to £7,000 (around \$8,600), which is a 60 percent decline when adjusted for inflation.⁸ The situation in the United States and Canada is just as bad. The largest survey of American authors’ earnings ever conducted found incomes falling to “historic lows”—a median of C\$6,080 (about US\$7,200) in 2017, down 42 percent from 2009.⁹ The Writers’ Union of Canada found the median author income to be \$9,380 in 2018—a 27 percent drop since 2015, and down 78 percent from 1998.¹⁰ There are related declines in library usage, especially in borrowing fiction and other literature, and there have been ongoing bookstore closures. Where stores continue to operate, it is often because they offer event spaces that make money from café and bar sales—or, in a recent trend, they are dedicated to romance novels and marketed via BookTok.¹¹ As for study of English literature in universities, there is a vibrant industry of commentary on “the end of the English major” and what might be done about it.¹²

It is within these inauspicious conditions that women have come to “dominate” publishing. While by no means “vanished,” the literary part of the trade has been struggling, its profits and prestige undercut. With these declines comes the feminization of work, meaning both that women are doing more of

the jobs and that the jobs are more likely to be casualized and badly paid. Contrary to the more exciting idea that an army of DEI warriors has forced men to the sidelines, what is really happening is that the industry has itself become a site of more contingent and more precarious work that is more often done by women. If women have girlbossed their way to the top of this field, we should pause before calling it an obvious win.

When novel reading first developed into a pastime in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was mainly women who read novels. Men who wrote novels were not taken as seriously as those who wrote poetry. As Gaye Tuchman has shown, it was only in the late nineteenth century that the novel started to become a respectable literary form. “Before 1840 the British cultural elite accorded little prestige to the writing of novels, and most English novelists were women,” Tuchman writes. “By the turn of the twentieth century, ‘men of letters’ acclaimed novels as a form of great literature, and most critically successful novelists were men.” As opportunities to make a living in what was an increasingly respectable and professionalized industry expanded, men were eager to take advantage of them; defining the novel “as a genre suitable for elite men,” and dismissing novels by women as “low” or popular, was part of their emerging dominance.¹³

The conditions for this professional and commercial development of prestige fiction were relatively short-lived, reaching a peak with the surge in university enrollments after World War II, when there was, in the “advanced” economies, expansive state-supported higher education and relatively high rates of secure employment. Those supports for a flourishing literary industry have slowly withered away, while leisure reading has declined, and competition from other media has ratcheted up. Evan Brier has accounted for how, beginning as early as the 1960s, the literary novel fell into a “diminished position” in the “prestige competition,” as high-level film, music, and journalism came to be recognized as equally weighty and important.¹⁴

Across this same period, more women entered the workforce, and for those graduating with university degrees, publishing held great appeal. The industry benefited because women worked for lower wages, and often only until they left to establish families, when they were replaced with other low-wage employees. With women doing most of the housework and parenting, men found it easier to stick it out and move up the ranks, and this calcified into hiring biases preferring men in higher-ranking positions even when women were dominant in lower-level roles. In Canada in 2023, the majority of female publishing workers were employed part time, and they worked part time in greater proportion than their male counterparts.¹⁵ Women in Canada and the

United States continue to be dominant in the jobs at the lower work tiers, and there is a greater percentage of men in the highest ranks than can be found at other levels. An Australian survey found similarly that “as respondents’ job roles move up the ranks of seniority, the proportion of men increases.”¹⁶ Still, in conditions of declining profits and prestige for literary books, where already feminized, denigrated niches like romance and young adult fiction are the main growth areas, men have been able to follow their inclination to exit to compete for better opportunities. Women have not. They have stayed and taken men’s places.

These are the forces that bring us to where we are now. Women constitute nearly 80 percent of the US publishing workforce; the figure is 60 percent at the executive level—a sea change since the 1970s, when women were hard to find in high-ranking positions.¹⁷ A recent UK study found that 63 percent of industry employees were women and that women are now also becoming a slim majority in executive leadership and senior management positions.¹⁸ These changes have real implications for the publishing landscape. In 1960, women authored only 16 percent of the books published in the United States. They now write more than half.¹⁹ In Australia, where women make up two-thirds of book authors, respondents to a 2022 publishing employment survey were overwhelmingly female.²⁰ In Canada, a 2022 survey found that three-quarters of industry employees identified as female.²¹ That same year, a Writers’ Union of Canada report indicated that approximately 62 percent of authors identified as women.²² This is because feminists have been relegating toxic male voices to the sidelines, right? Not at all. It’s more correct to note, as Katherine Bode says of women’s fiction in Australia, that growth in women’s authorship is inextricable from the “diminishing cultural value of novel writing as a career.”²³

These shifts have emerged hand in hand with a variety of new pressures on writers, most of which stem from the incursion of digital platforms into publishing processes. Digital platforms are technologies of precarity. They are a means for publishers to scout talent, meaning writers who arrive with an audience already formed. They make it possible to place a lot of the work of marketing on a writer’s own shoulders. On April 2, 2024, author Amy DeBellis tweeted about the email she received from an agent she had approached with a manuscript. “I wish I could pursue representation,” the agent wrote, “but unfortunately the larger publishers with whom I work require a more fully developed platform.” They offer the advice that her best bet is “taking another year or so to share your message while building your social media numbers, at which time you could have a shot at a major publisher.” Stories like hers are proliferating. Veteran publicist Paul Bogaards told journalist Kate Dwyer

that when head editors at major publishing houses meet to discuss a submission, their keyword is “platform.” He describes this as a “seismic difference” in the book world today. Editors ask, “What is the author going to bring to the table?” The answer used to be “the work itself.” Now, it is their platform, which is often built through personal disclosure and active self-branding and self-promotion.²⁴

New commercial pressures are showing up in novels, including in works by young men who feel their force and want to push back against them. In Jordan Castro’s playful autofiction *The Novelist*, published in 2022, the narrator skewers a woman editor who has tweeted about eating shrimp chips while working on a manuscript. She represents everything he hates: overly confessional about the mundane aspects of her life and unprofessional about the work itself. The editor’s ostensibly gluttonous eating habits become a sign of how unsuited she is to anything like real literary evaluation. “I imagined the editor smacking her lips together, like a cow chewing cud,” he writes, and “I felt disgusted.” He laments that the literary world is now “full of poisoned people . . . totally unconcerned about the issue of their own unseemliness,” and because of social media they are constantly in your face.²⁵ He doesn’t want to have to work with people like this. He certainly doesn’t want to use his traumatic story of drug addiction and recovery to build an online fanbase—he barely wants to use it as material for his fiction.

Castro’s narrator, who is working on his debut novel, knows that he has a hard row to hoe. Many of the new writers who come to our attention today are working a kind of middle job between writer and influencer, and a younger version of Castro—one that *The Novelist* sublates—was himself quite willing to engage in internet stunts to attract attention.²⁶ Visibility is a precious commodity in a cultural marketplace glutted with free and cheap content, and a lot of other things to do with your leisure hours. If you don’t want to tweet about your snack foods and if you disavow the online performance of selfhood—and there is some evidence that straight, working-class white men are among the most likely to—you are at a disadvantage.²⁷ If you do manage to find a publisher despite the odds, failure to play the game may mean your work sells less well and is less visible, which makes it less likely that you will get another contract.

The time of the formation of the literary novel, when it became professional, prestigious, part of a growing novel industry, and predominantly male, was not that long ago. That history is not over, but the culture of literary distinction, with its craft-based imaginary emphasizing education, training, discernment, and tradition, faces unique challenges today. Its defenders have been reanimating historic divides between high and low culture, recoding them now as:

appreciating narrative form versus functionalizing stories; nuanced thought versus ideological rigidity; focused attention versus online distraction; and the value of estrangement versus preference for relatability. We should understand the “lower” emergent dispositions and affects that are disparaged here, I argue, not as manifestations of woke ideology, or as what results when people with insufficient intellectual stamina and aesthetic training take over, but as the cultural registration of broader economic transformations.

Instead of a path to a career, or the pursuit of art for art’s sake, or a contribution to an esteemed tradition, a lot of writing now is a means to explore and curate one’s identity and to have it affirmed within a supportive community. This community is often on the internet. To continue with the example of NaNoWriMo, the organization was highly active online and even boasted about being “internet-famous.” Many of its affiliated writers already do, or intend to, self-publish their work via online platforms. This aspiration is perfectly congruent with the idea that writing is a way of connecting with people by telling your unique story. In a platform-based cultural economy, one’s “story” is potentially a marketable asset, and validation of identity is registered by likes and shares (“engagement”), monetization of one’s content, or even eventually, though more rarely, securing a more traditional publishing contract. Cultural critic Ayesha Siddiqi has described the contemporary cultural marketplace as one premised on this dissolving of boundaries between self-expression, identity, and commerce. There is an “illusion of opportunity,” she writes, arising from ostensible democratization and diversification within the cultural marketplace. It is an illusion because its appearance has coincided with a real foreclosure of prospects for financial security. There is an avalanche of content available online, and contributing to it and engaging with it offers dwindling material rewards.²⁸

Worsening conditions of work in the industry have arrived alongside a bibliotherapeutic vocabulary that grounds reading and writing in passionate care work, self-care, self-expression, self-validation, and belonging, as well as by the growth of platform-based processes that at once cheapen work and intensify the pressure to engage in self-promotion and entrepreneurial strategizing. Many scholars studying the history of creative work, interested in the “labor of love,” or the artist’s “love discount,” have emphasized that care is inseparable from commerce.²⁹ Construing book work as a form of care is a commercial move. The pace of platform-based cultural activity is speeding up as people use reading and writing as conduits to self-expression, self-care, and community identification. Expression converges with self-branding. Finding an authentic and sustaining community blends into monetization. One’s hobby becomes

platform content attracting users whose data is, in aggregate, highly valuable. And so on. This convergence is a crucial feature of the new landscape of reading and writing today. This book explores its contours and significance.

What Are Reading Platforms?

The release of the Amazon Kindle in 2007 was welcomed by some as ushering in a period of relative dispersal of authority in publishing. The rise of self-publishing and digital distribution were to threaten the control of the dominant media. Yet our era might just as well be called the age of Amazon, as Mark McGurl suggests.³⁰ Most self-published work, however self-directed, is channeled through dominant media platforms. The mediation of reading and writing by platforms takes advantage of equipment that is always at hand, given day-to-day reliance on digital devices for work and entertainment. Reading is increasingly a digital device-based experience that accompanies people moving from thing to thing, glancing at a text when time allows, recuperating through escape, or finding via reading a way of connecting with a sustaining community online. This is not to say that the age of print is over, of course; but digital platforms are increasingly primary within mainstream publishing production chains. Reading is integrated with and mediated by social media platforms, where people find and discuss texts. Meanwhile, growing numbers of print novels are beginning as self-published online texts, and authors seeking traditional contracts, or drumming up sales for their self-published work, are establishing their brands on social media first.

Arathi Vadde pinpoints some of the crucial distinctions between traditional publishing houses and the new platforms: “A publisher,” for example, usually “faces stringent liability laws for works they put into circulation,” whereas a platform is shielded from this due to its identity as a mere “intermediary for an abundance of information.” Publishing tends to take time and “bears the marks of editorial intervention” and other activities that lend to the “legitimation of the published content’s quality.” Platforms, in contrast, “evanesce around their content creators,” serving neither as employers nor as reliable intermediaries between creators and the marketplace. Taking too much of an interest in the quality of the content, Vadde writes, would expose platforms to accusations of bias and slow the content transmission process.³¹ It would also make them more responsible for creators’ livelihoods than they are designed to be. Here Nick Srnicek’s general definition of platforms is useful: They are a new type of corporate firm, backed by private equity, that profits from “providing the infrastructure to intermediate between different user groups.”³² Hosting content is

a way of achieving the real goal of drawing users into interactions that generate data.

Reading platforms appear to be a means of offering free or cheap content and easy sharing with likeminded people; they present themselves as disruptors of exclusionary, expensive, gatekept, and homogenous traditional publishing houses. Their purpose, however, is something else completely. As Eric Drott argues in his work on Spotify, in a sluggish economy, capital that might once have been invested in production of goods is now channeled into tech firms, which face unique challenges in attempting to generate profit.³³ Platforms attract users to secure money from advertising partners; gather user data so that they can offer those partners targeted opportunities; track which material is popular so they can use it in other lucrative ways (from turning it into a print book to selling it to Netflix); have users act as unpaid marketers by liking and sharing content; make opting out increasingly difficult; and so on.

While platforms are associated with the democratization of access to telling your story and “having a voice,” their proliferation comes at a considerable cost. They are not just new methods of content delivery. They are a “technology of wealth redistribution,” as Drott writes.³⁴ They are cheapening the production and circulation of content in ways that enable tech firms’ data-extracting profit-maximizing strategies. Returning then to the question prompted by NaNoWriMo’s stance on AI: Where does the idea come from that everyone has the right to be a writer? Part of the answer is that it has arisen to attend today’s forms of feminized bookwork. The more content circulates online, the better for platforms. As Timothy Laquintano describes, in his prescient 2016 book on self-publishing, the more writers produce for platforms, the more readers begin to expect faster work from their favorite writers; these are “processes that are sustainable for the platform but perhaps, not for those supplying the content.”³⁵ The older literary model of craft mastery is irrelevant to such conditions. In fact, it is a problem, if it hinders speed of production of content and development of the user base.

Platforms arise when they do for a reason. They reflect and reinforce tendencies toward outsourcing, underemployment, contingent work, and the digitization of daily life, which arise in response to an ongoing downturn in capitalism’s overall profitability. Permissive monetary policy and a lack of exciting investment opportunities in traditional industries “sets the stage for the rise of exploitative platform technology,” Andrew deWaard writes.³⁶ At the same time, evolving cloud technologies have allowed companies to grow rapidly without spending much on physical infrastructure or permanent employees.³⁷

Platforms partake of the general capitalist tendency toward labor- and cost-cutting—a tendency that has for decades now taken the form of firms that, in K. Sabeel Rahman and Kathleen Thelen’s terms, avoid “standard employment contracts (and associated social contributions) in favor of indirect employment and ‘atypical’ work arrangements.”³⁸

We might imagine that reading and writing are loftier pursuits, separate from such broad phenomena of political economy. It is true that, as deWaard notes, the cultural industries have historically not been targeted as “investment vehicles,” because of the risks presented by fickle audiences and the commanding presence of the existing traditional media oligopolies. Yet private equity firms have seen, and advanced, how platforms address the problem of unpredictable audiences through data analytics and operate by “destabilizing legacy media’s grasp on the foundational components of talent, distribution, and marketing.”³⁹ I argue that it is these same tendencies that Srnicek and deWaard identify, toward digitally mediated contingent work in a situation of intransigent economic decline, there beneath the platforms that are changing what it means to read and write today.

The Feminization of Bookwork

My first chapter is about Wattpad, a self-publishing platform that offers a tremendous quantity of content to readers at little to no cost. It has tens of millions of users. To hook readers to the platform, Wattpad stories are mainly serialized. Authors are expected to upload material at a dizzying pace—a segment per week is the norm—and to learn to market their work through optimal use of the site, maximizing fan engagement, searchability, and so on. They do this work largely for free. Very few writers make money from the site, and Wattpad encourages them to participate regardless of material rewards by promising involvement in a supportive community. To Wattpad it does not matter much if authors are there to establish careers or as a hobby. What matters is that they grow their user base, because the more authors and readers are using the platform, the more readily they can marshal reams of data to accurately identify the most popular content and find ways to profit from its repurposing.

A particular kind of writer suits a platform that works like this. Annie McClanahan writes that transformations in work, however abstract and technical they may seem, “both depend on and produce qualitative forms of social being and social organization.”⁴⁰ As a form of work, authorship likewise changes in relation to its technological and social history. Platform authorship entails thinking of yourself not as an individual creative genius but as a node in a

network of needy users who depend on you for content; not as a professional supported by an editor and firm but as a free agent who must invest their own time and money in design and sales if they want to succeed; and as a person whose creativity is fundamentally routed in their own self-care needs and in their participation in a wider bibliotherapeutic community.

My point here is not that authors lack agency. Rather, how creative people understand themselves emerges in response to their working conditions, and this shapes their fiction, as transformations in the work of writing are registered in narrative. For example, Micah Good's *The Opposite of Falling Apart* (2020) envisions creative writing as a nonpaying pastime that is a boon to mental health. Jo Watson's *Big Boned* (2021) imagines art as the creation of an inclusive community. These are two examples of dozens upon dozens of novels that are published by Wattpad's own print division, Wattpad Books. We are seeing a convergence between platform-based cultural production and feminized, bibliotherapeutic conceptions of writing as self-care and care for others. Wattpad is one of the organizations that is harnessing and advancing the new dispositions toward writing that are becoming culturally dominant—less as a craft-based prestige practice and more as a means of self-expression and community belonging that is valuable to platforms.

Reading and writing platforms tend to code their operations in a language of care, presenting the activities they facilitate as so many paths to inclusive community that can assuage various forms of anguish, including social isolation and exclusion, stress, anxiety, and depression. This way of thinking about reading and writing has a longer history, but it has intensified alongside what Marxist-feminist scholars have identified as a deepening crisis of care.⁴¹ Economic turmoil and government austerity have exacerbated social, psychological, and emotional needs, while also producing the conditions in which those needs are increasingly unlikely to be met in any affordable or sustained way. For many people, reading and writing step in as a real means of managing anxiety, isolation, and unease, and platforms position themselves as the conduits to having these needs met. They harness narrative culture as a conduit to necessary escape and self-care, while suggesting that sharing one's writing and one's reading experiences online is a way to be together and be validated. The help you need is there on your digital device—affordable, and in seemingly endless plenty. This deepening association between bookwork and care work is evident even at the textual level, in fictional narratives like *Big Boned*, a Wattpad novel that I discuss in chapter 1, which is designed to facilitate a positive experience of affirmation and uplift.

This is not about self-help books as a particular publishing niche. What is happening is a far more generalized collapse of reading and writing into

accessible bibliotherapy. Professional bibliotherapy has asked readers to engage with books as a way of encouraging them to think deeply about their own psychic lives and experiences. The opportunity to discuss a character instead of oneself can loosen inhibitions and allow for deeper insight in analysis. Amateur bibliotherapy provides a readily accessible and inexpensive version of this use of books, as readers and writers seek sustaining online communities and are drawn to relatable characters who can model persistence in life despite suffering. These bibliotherapeutic conceptions of reading and writing have accompanied a deepening of the gendering of publishing work. The gendering of this work as particularly suitable to women is not the cause of its low value. The truth is more the inverse: I follow Alyssa Battistoni's suggestion that we understand gender as such as a function of the differential distribution of work and wages.⁴² Just as in other sectors where women make up most of the workforce, the ideology associating book work with care and community obscures the domination that coerces people into doing even the worst paid and least reliable jobs. The vocabulary of care recodes labor market processes as personal choices based in naturally gendered proclivities.

In Mark McGurl's terms, reading has become subsumed within "a repertoire of habits of experiential optimization and self-care."⁴³ I show that writing has as well. It is meant to provide affective, often therapeutic, rewards. Many Wattpad and Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) authors even describe material success as something that is impossible unless one is engaged in a passionate labor of love routed fundamentally in their connection with readers. Money may seem like a crass consideration when a writer is just pursuing their hobby or speaking to their community. But platforms are not charities. They pay their executives healthy salaries and host advertising while continuously developing innovative new revenue streams. Reflecting on the importance of amateur labor to the history of internet culture, Joanna Walsh remarks: "Whatever we're making online, this is not a hobby. This is business. And if we're not being paid for this work, someone is." She describes what is offered in lieu of money as "surplus-enjoyment."⁴⁴ Affective rewards are presented as a mystical supplement to poor material compensation.

This is what is meant here by the feminization of work: justification of sub-employment conditions via appeal to a gendered language of care. The mechanisms driving down wages in the sector can be located in generalized conditions of economic exigency, and in the transformative force of the reading and writing platforms that turn content into a free or cheap resource that can be used for other things—to generate, package, optimize, and monetize user data; to increase ad revenue; and to take the risk out of selecting popular authors or

works for lucrative reversioning and adaptation. Associating these processes with democratization, inclusion, and care is hardly pure smokescreen. Instead, publishing profits are being secured via increasing reliance on platform-based feminized work that continues to be at once sped up and cheapened, and this is work that can be exhorted and extracted by appeal to immaterial rewards like service to others and meeting community needs.

The Function of Romance

Evolution of the pastime of novel reading, and the development of sentimental middlebrow and mass-market genres, especially romance, are inseparable from the history of women's relative sequestration within the home and the policing of gendered spheres separating productive waged work from the unwaged work of family reproduction. Domestic ideology relegated women to reproductive labor as a realm of ostensible nonwork, where they could, among other tasks, pursue activities of cultural curation and thereby "feminize" their family sphere. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the resulting associations between gendered nonwork, presumed to be effortless and "natural," and nonelite sentimental narrative genres such as romance fiction. Even as women began to make up a growing percentage of the publishing workforce, the idea that they embraced a civic mission of pastoral guidance, or that work in books was a natural expression of feminine gender, has been used to make paying them less than what men earn more palatable.

The labor economist Claudia Goldin finds that, more often than men, women tend to prefer work that offers them "temporal flexibility."⁴⁵ They will take jobs that pay less well if it allows them time for other responsibilities, usually domestic. It is precisely in conditions of increasing contingency, romanticized as "flexibility," that women have come to make up a greater proportion of the publishing workforce, and to write more of the published books and even dominate bestseller lists. They are already accustomed to low-prestige work and to taking jobs that allow them to continue with housework and childcare; and so, the more work in writing and publishing becomes available only to those willing to do it on a contingent basis, fitting it in between other tasks that may be equal or higher priority, the more it is likely to be women doing it. These shifts in the gender composition of the workforce have emerged hand in hand with the unsettling of traditional ideas about the social purposes of writing and publishing, and the spread of new dominant sensibilities correlating book work to women's work.

The romance industry has been at the vanguard of many of the most vital recent transformations in the publishing industry. It was an early adopter of

consumer surveys and reader involvement in the industry. Before there were platforms, there were web forums giving space to extensive reader commentary and the creation of passionate communities of fans. “Romance was not just a market; it was a subculture,” Arielle Zibrak writes. It incorporates readers into the production process to an unusual extent, as it shapes and is shaped by new distribution systems.⁴⁶ Chapter 4 considers romance authors using Amazon’s self-publishing platform. They learn how to optimize Amazon searches; when they can afford to, they hire experts who specialize in building online audiences; they strategically categorize their works to get on bestseller lists; they learn how to best use the ads they pay for; and they write a lot of books, and write them in series, to keep their names and titles trending.

The industry’s feminization finds its models in the romance sector. The romance industry proficiently transforms readers into writers, by willingly codifying its standards into writing guides and expert advice. As Harlequin has done historically, platforms like Wattpad and Amazon’s KDP work to cultivate new writers. They present writing as an extension of love of the genre, an opportunity to pursue flexible creative work that is easy to fit in with other things, and a creative opportunity open to people without formal writing training. While women make up most of the workforce of authors and publishing workers across the board, they are even more unevenly represented in the romance and YA niches, both as authors and as industry employees, and these are by far the predominant genres of content on platforms. It is also within the highly gendered romance and YA niches that production and circulation involves, on the whole, the most free and badly paid work—free work in the sense that the online fandom moves these titles with little involvement from marketing professionals, and badly paid work in that self-publishing is a massive component in these niches, and self-publishing flourishes based on the sheer number of authors trying it, and on the supporting freelance publishing services workers who do things like design covers and copyedit for very little money. This system of entrepreneurial work is serving as talent scouting and marketing for the big publishers, who sign writers based on their online fandom and then profit from those sales.

In Tuchman’s account of the centrality of male writers to the development of prestige fiction, she argues realism was the literary mode through which this shift was mediated, and it was positioned against romance explicitly. By the 1880s, “realism had come to indicate a serious fictionalized depiction of plausible actions of socially and psychologically individuated characters.” It was socially “revelatory,” making it “an important enough activity to engage the best, the brightest, and the most talented”—meaning, naturally, men, as women

were preoccupied with domestic affairs.⁴⁷ Romance is, in this way, at once a feminized form and a feminizing one, attending the industry's contemporary transformation just as realism did previously, when men secured literature's symbolic heights. If sentimental romance was key to the novel's foundations, and was later superseded, romance returns now to cultural dominance both as a set of expectations about narrative and as a way of understanding bookwork. The idea of the labor of love, evident in many of the platform fictions I account for here, is itself an extractive romance with creative work. Women's empowering self-development, often through amateur creative pursuits, has become central to romance narrative as such.

The Passions and the (Entrepreneurial) Interests

Of course, unless you are among the already wealthy, being a writer has never not taken the form of an individual sinking a lot of work into something in the risky hope that it might one day result in some income. What is happening now is another turn of the screw. The work one does before securing remuneration goes far beyond just writing the text. Once, a writer with a finished saleable manuscript would then seek a contract with a publisher who would mediate between the author and the marketplace, adding value to their work via editing and then promoting their work to encourage sales. These things can still happen for some writers, but it is rare. What is preferred is if writers come to the publisher after already having established that they are saleable, having already acted as their own marketing department. They thus cover the costs of the whole writing process, as was traditional, but they also spend the extra time it takes to find their audience, and this usually takes place via social media and a rigorous self-publishing schedule that only seems to intensify.

On the surface the platform business model, which makes it difficult to make a living as a creative person, may seem to sit strangely beside a language of care and inclusivity, community and connectedness, that characterizes how these platforms market themselves. Yet it is a feature of platform-mediated bookwork that it tends toward a convergence of self-expression and commerce, entrepreneurialism and care. To be industrious—to produce a steady stream of new material, to interact with fans, to curate a social media presence that makes other people feel seen—is to be caring. To produce a new viral BookTok video is to provide something that users find emotionally and psychologically sustaining. To succeed, you must care. You can hardly just scheme and cut corners; you must instead understand what readers need, and write from the heart, and produce writing that they can see themselves in. Writers who hope

to earn some income from their writing have no choice but to deploy strategies of self-branding and entrepreneurial hustle, but even this takes place under a banner of caring service work.

Amazon's KDP, discussed in chapter 4, is the biggest self-publishing platform for e-books in the English language. John Thompson concludes that, though the numbers are hard to track for several reasons, including because KDP does not require that ISBNs be registered, "the figure of a million new ebooks being selfpublished on KDP every year is not implausible."⁴⁸ Authors upload their texts either for one-off sale on Amazon, receiving 70 percent of the cover price, or they can opt for release via Kindle Unlimited, which charges users a monthly fee to read as much as they like without downloading anything. Authors set the prices for their own work within a prescribed range, or, via Kindle Unlimited, writers are paid per page read. Unlike Wattpad, Amazon does not need to offer free content per se, as it controls so much of the publishing ecosystem, including Audible and Goodreads, that people would experience significant negative effects if they avoided the platform entirely.

For the Kindle Unlimited subscriber, plenitude appears to be simply there at your fingertips. You are not buying a singular item to be placed on a shelf but rather paying for anytime access to a continuous stream of indistinct and ephemeral experiences. KDP seeks to "transform a traditional good into a service," as Srnicek argues of Amazon, then collect "rent," or subscription fees, for access to it.⁴⁹ Writers trying to succeed on such a platform are by necessity less concerned with perfecting each sentence than they are with finding ways to make a living based on pennies paid to them per page that a reader loads onto a device. Instead of working with editors, they hire consultants who specialize in maximizing audience share. Instead of working with agents, they master search engine optimization.

Amazon has even developed its own editorial services marketplace, where authors can pay freelancers to help with everything from cover design to sensitivity reading. Beyond Amazon one finds countless courses and videos offering advice on how to make your work discoverable, including how to package and market and how to maximize visibility by understanding Amazon's ecosystem and algorithms. The industry of advice for self-published writers is a niche within a broader, growing, publishing services marketplace that has barely been studied.⁵⁰ This advice fosters a competitive disposition toward writing that benefits the industry by having writers shoulder any costs of professional training and content development. Writers are advised to navigate Amazon's market dominance by deploying strategies of entrepreneurial hustle that extend all the way down to the level of the sentence: how to end each chapter

with a hook, for example. An “algorithmic imaginary,” meaning an imperfect, agile, lay understanding of how the Amazon algorithm works, informs how KDP authors approach the activity of writing to begin with.⁵¹

There are now even self-publishing entrepreneurs who sell courses about how to earn passive income by establishing a small business publishing enterprise using KDP. Their key message is that you do not have to write at all to be a self-publisher. You can just use AI or hire ghostwriters to produce the content for you and then learn how to master the Amazon algorithm to sell the results. Companies like Royalty Hero and Publishing.com position this work *against* feminized cultural production: A refrain is “this is not about your passion project—this is a real business.” They invite people to think of themselves as intellectual property (IP) business owners rather than contingent freelancers. They are stitched into and dependent on the world of freelance publishing services platforms, such as Fiverr, Upwork, and Reedsy, where they find people to ghostwrite, design, edit, market, and more, but they flatter themselves and their potential clients with the idea that, as self-publishers, they are the employers commanding this other feminized labor force. They position Amazon as their partner in this process, a “fee-taking intermediary” doing the useful work of linking buyers and sellers. The self-publishing entrepreneur is meant to embrace their status as a self-employed “petty capitalist.”⁵²

Writers of romance fiction who self-publish via KDP are the ones who developed many of the techniques that these nonwriting self-publishers now deploy. Writing popular fiction has itself become inseparable from the activity of surveying, anticipating, and building audience demand—but this is never totally severed from the ideal of serving a community of readers via one’s own “labor of love.” Laquintano argued that self-publishing authors continue to invest in the idea that the best work will eventually find its audience, and that this is a way to keep going in trying conditions. Their “trust that good writing would prevail derived from a faith that the systems would be objective,” as the algorithm would reward those who are truly deserving.⁵³ This belief in the eventual recognition of good writing dovetails today with a language of passionate care—a faith that it is the writers who really care, exhibiting authentic passion in their writing and in their laborious efforts in support of its circulation, who are best positioned to succeed at self-publishing via Amazon.

Renyi Hong argues that affective appeals to passionate work provide a counterweight against the drudgery and disenchantment of daily content production and brand management.⁵⁴ This is certainly true for self-publishing KDP writers. They are participants in one of the book industry’s gig economies, in which individuals seeking to earn are exposed more directly to the marketplace

than they would be when working with traditional firms. There is no advance, and no marketing budget except what you can front yourself. Many more authors earn a pittance doing this work than make a livable wage. There is no value added from an official editor, only behind-the-scenes help from whoever you hire temporarily or convince to work for you for free—or, increasingly, from AI assistants, which people use to speed up production even as they understand that the ongoing development of AI, including for fiction writing, may mean they are helping to automate their own labor out of existence.

Self-publishing is among the forms of creative self-enterprise that people have turned to increasingly in our era of unstable, casualized, contract-based work. Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund write that the creative industries in particular “overwhelmingly rely upon freelance and project-based labor” and appeal to people based on the “ostensible rewards of the career . . . including the prestige, autonomy, and ‘coolness’ of the job,” the glamour and status if you make it.⁵⁵ We are familiar with the way that flexible work has been imagined as ideal because of the purported freedom and creativity it allows. Much has also been written about what this idealization masks—for example, the strain self-enterprising freelancing puts on creative workers, who must cover the costs of necessary equipment such as workspaces and laptops, as well as in many cases training, health care, retirement savings, and so on. Duffy and Hund note that creative workers are “encouraged to invest time, energy, and capital in an imagined future”—a future when the activity will pay off, when one’s effort will be rewarded. It makes sense then that as part of the aspiration for success, or this investment in the future, people develop self-branding strategies that usually appear in the form of “attention-seeking and status-enhancing behaviors.”⁵⁶ An author like Caroline Calloway, who first became famous after buying an army of Instagram followers, engages in the construction of her social media personality in hopes of future returns on her investment.

Calloway in fact sits at an important crossroads: between the self-branding social media influencer economy and an evolving book publishing world. In an increasingly common refrain, Calloway has reported taking meetings with industry insiders who told her that she would need fame and a fan base to get a book contract.⁵⁷ Like many influencers, Calloway participates in what Duffy and Hund call “the post-feminist ideal of individual success obtained through inner self-discovery.” The ideal is that making money could be just a bonus added to one’s natural expression of self—a fantasy that will return throughout this book.⁵⁸ The fashion and beauty bloggers that Duffy and Hund studied, who are forebears of today’s influencers, featured travel photos of beautiful people against stunning backdrops. The same is true of Calloway’s

initial Instagram push, which charted her travels around Europe. What appeared to be a holiday was also really an occasion for Calloway's building of her brand. What appeared to be candid shots online were in fact calculated images selected from many attempts. After the photos were shared the further work of cultivating connections with her followers, by reading and responding to their comments, took a great deal of time, as Calloway endeavored to create and share a cultivated, consistent, and distinctive "voice" and aesthetic effect.

The laboriousness, the self-expression, and the care are all entwined—and so is the pretense that none of it is work. Calloway's social media content is presented as a natural expression of an inner drive that emerges from her true self; at the same time, the pressures attending enterprising self-branding compel constant performance and confession. Calloway is openly passionate about her work and wants to perform her labor of love; she is also materially compelled to share during hard times, as the risk of losing followers if she goes silent for too long. The passion and the compulsion are indistinguishable. It is at once psychological and material. Economic uncertainty manifests as laboriousness—the necessary compulsiveness of "hope labor," perhaps, as you try to ensure your investment in the moment will reap rewards if you just keep going.⁵⁹

Calloway's performance of self reflects generalized and spreading conditions, in which people feel increasingly compelled to do the work of enterprising self-creation, self-branding, and performance via social media. Given expanding un- and underemployment, and the general collapse of any faith that stable waged work will be available or good, "we *must* post, participate, blog, twitter," Alison Hearn and Stephanie Schoenhoff write, because this will "demonstrate our special value and influence, which might act as a hedge against our insecurity."⁶⁰ Our unfolding present, with its interlinked economic, socio-cultural, and technological transformations, constantly cultivates and promises to reward Calloway's style of self-presentation and content management—repetitive and anxious because it has to be.

Writing in the Age of Ambient Mediation

As instances of sociological and technological transformation, and generators of anxious productivity and content management, I focus on Audible and TikTok in chapters 2 and 3. Platform fiction often means an audiobook. Revenue for audiobooks in the United States increased by over 50 percent over the last five years; in 2022 sales reached \$1.7 billion, when audiobooks were 9 percent of all book sales; in 2023 it was \$2 billion. One projection has the global market

growing at a compound annual rate of 26.5 percent between 2023 and 2030.⁶¹ An audiobook version might be a major portion of a book's sales; there are now titles that are audiobooks first or audiobooks only; and writers would be foolish not to be thinking about how to make their work easy to listen to.

Amazon is by far the biggest purveyor of audiobooks via Audible; and its ACX (Audiobook Creation Exchange) enables authors to hire freelancer audiobook workers project-to-project. Jeff Bezos claimed in 2013 that "Audible makes it possible for you to read when your eyes are busy." This was canny. Audiobooks are such an important form because they allow people to read while doing other things. Sheri-Marie Harrison calls them "a leisure form for the perpetually busy . . . the technological vanguard of contemporary grind culture."⁶² Patrick Anson argues that "absorptive distraction" in audiobooks helps women manage tedious jobs and housework. It is likely that were it not for audiobooks, many of the women he spoke to wouldn't read at all, having no free hours to do so.⁶³ For some portion of readers, the novel is being kept alive by the audiobook, which allows them to achieve a state of "disordered attention," to use Claire Bishop's phrase, as they manage competing demands on their time.⁶⁴

Amazon markets an Audible subscription as an affordable means of mood management curated especially for you by the algorithm. The audiobook is your companion supporting you through states of anxiety, boredom, and unease, by providing access to feelings of excitement, love, compassion, relaxation, and so on. It is also significantly positioned as a means of remaining continuously industrious. In the face of "empty" time, people worry about their problems, and this is compounded by a feeling that one is "wasting" precious minutes. Audible steps in here as a way of serving and propelling our growing dependence on a constancy of ambient media. The production of ambient media depends on the cheapening of content. Audible offers a variety of complicated payment options, but the basic arrangement is for authors to receive 25 percent of "all a la carte net sales receipts." This increases to 40 percent if the work is available only on Audible, which adds incentive for authors to agree to exclusive deals. Audiobook authors complain about working with Audible.⁶⁵ The sheer glut of available titles, many of which are free or heavily discounted for Audible members, produces a winner-take-all situation. While celebrities can earn a significant amount on the platform, most audiobooks earn almost nothing.

That a growing number of titles are available exclusively on Audible, or even only as audiobooks on Audible, with no print version, affords Amazon yet further means to bring readers and writers into their universe through

targeted marketing and fear of the possible costs of opting out. Srnicek explains how Amazon “entices users onto its platform” by monopolizing content streams and cross-subsidizing its various divisions.⁶⁶ The more Amazon products you pay to use, the more money you save through cross-promotions. Chapter 3 argues that, through Audible, Amazon can celebrate this exact monopoly tendency as affording a constancy of ambient media that they claim serves customer demands. Consumers are basically enlisted as defenders of Amazon’s media dominance and as stakeholders in its capacity for constant content provision.⁶⁷

For its part, TikTok is such a huge force in publishing now that there is a regular column about it in *The Bookseller* trade magazine. TikTok is an official media partner of the Hay Festival, one of the biggest annual literature events in the world. TikTok displays are in most bookstores. Much of this can be attributed to influencers in the TikTok community known as BookTok. Their content often taps into nostalgic associations of reading with analog objects such as sticky notes, highlighters, and spiral-bound notebooks, emphasizing what Lindsay Thomas describes as “the visible labor of reading, interacting with, interpreting, and handling books,” as well as the emotive force of being lost in an absorbing title.⁶⁸ “This book killed me,” the phrase goes. BookTok videos emphasize readerly transport, with books as conduits to intense affective states of immersive escape. I focus on one series that has had a massive presence on TikTok: Ruby Dixon’s *Ice Planet Barbarians*. Part of the deep compatibility of the romance genre and BookTok is their mutual grounding in variation on beloved scripts, combining familiarity and surprise; this is true of the genre in general, of course, but on BookTok the passion for scripts and conventions is controlled by users who are mainly young women who identify as romance readers and use the platform to cultivate that community. I argue the scripts with the most power to generate fan activity are the ones that best address deeply rooted and psychically resonant cultural contradictions: In the case of the *Ice Planet Barbarians* series, we find the tension between an old social order grounded in naturalized heterosexuality and a new heteropessimism that sees women disaffiliating from and denaturalizing unsatisfying relationships, while remaining unable to escape the economic pressures that induce people into coupling up.

Study of BookTok further clarifies why romance and YA are the most commercially dynamic niches today.⁶⁹ They are the genres best able to find fans where they are—on social media platforms—and to use their everyday acts of online cultural consumption, curation, and engagement as an unpaid marketing push. Authors have incentives then to produce novels that will do well on TikTok, designed specifically to include textual moments and effects that have

proven popular with readers, as measured by engagement in the form of circulation of videos that highlight popular tropes. Examples include the enemies-to-lovers trope, a tear-jerker ending, a description of the characters that allows readers to “fancast” the books (imagining which actors should play characters), and an “oh . . . oh!” moment when the reader comes to realize something surprising, in a way that can be shown comically on their face. The cultural object is secondary. The social relations that the object is designed to elicit, and that are engendered by it, are primary.

Claire Bishop argues that the contemporary artwork is now designed to be “less self-important, less total; it grants us the space to be mobile and social, to react, chat, share, and archive as we watch.” This is a challenge to a “depth model of culture” that was premised on “fully focused presence and deep attention.” The depth model was tied to a particular practice of attention—to the serious literary novel, as well as to the development of “white cube” modern art gallery display and the silent, stage-facing theater audience. Bishop writes that attention today is, in contrast, “incessantly hybrid: both present and mediated, live and online, fleeting and profound, individual and collective.”⁷⁰ Like the rise of the audiobook, BookTok’s endless stream of short bookish videos, predominantly about romance novels and designed for social engagement, is a clear instance of what Bishop describes.

TikTok’s failed print publishing division, 8th Note Press, produced romance and YA titles aimed at young online audiences, by authors willing to build their own platforms. Their business plan entailed “building backwards” based on what was trending on TikTok. They offered writers smaller than usual advances, on the promise that as a TikTok brand they would be guaranteed high sales. Authors were basically to be rewarded with a print book because they had already successfully undertaken the work of online self-marketing and observation of trends in YA and romance fiction. The print-based work came very much after the fact then, as an addendum to the online activities that have already generated value for the platform in the form of user data and advertising contracts. Relationality overtakes originality again. The paper-based, “traditional,” published novel is now a media form whose value is backed by the platform’s network effects. In the case of 8th Note Press the model failed, with authors having their rights returned, because the publisher added no perceivable value to the process. Unlike Wattpad, it has no reading and writing platform of its own for training talent through user feedback and building a fanbase from the ground up.⁷¹

It is instructive to consider briefly one 8th Note Press title, which is at once a product of platform-based writing and a paean to it. In *So Many Somethings* by

Molly Dunn, published in 2024, Diana is working at her family's NYC restaurant while writing fan fiction on Tumblr, which she describes as "social media's weird, slightly sinister, and totally anarchic cousin."⁷² Her current project is a serialized story that places Sam Raymond, "YouTube cover musician turned stadium-touring megastar," in the alternate universe of the Connacht Academy books, a massively popular fantasy series that has been adapted for film and television.⁷³

When we meet Diana, she is just posting the first segments of the work. She is feeling a combination of pressure to post more and elation at the initial feedback: Tumblr "seems to lend itself to superfans looking for a community to come home to," Diana remarks.⁷⁴ Her fans are "mostly sweet and enthusiastic when they ask her for updates," but "as soon as she posts the latest five- or six-thousand-word chapter, usually one week after the last, her followers are panting for more."⁷⁵ It happens that Sam Raymond loves the Connacht Academy books, and one night he stumbles upon this emerging fan fiction about him. He messages Diana via a pseudonym. They start to flirt, though neither knows who the other is. Meanwhile, in real life, the two also happen to meet in New York when he comes into the restaurant. You can fill in the rest.

The important tale accompanying their budding romance concerns Diana's development as a writer and productive person with her own career prospects. The fact that she writes appeals to Sam as a sign that she is motivated and knows what she wants. The novel is as much about her passion for creative writing as it is about a love affair with Sam. Her most trusted readers praise her for discovering her own voice in a way that exceeds the fan fiction genre. Eventually, when financial exigency forces the family restaurant to close, Diana is ready to admit that she wants to be a writer, and through family contacts she secures a book deal. The novel closes with her busily "converting *Star Crossed* from cut-and-dried Connacht Academy fan fiction to a standalone fantasy romance novel."⁷⁶

So Many Somethings thus explains its own process of production in a way that readers are invited to emulate. You post free content online to develop your skill and audience, and eventually you will be good enough to get a book deal. Producing free online fan fiction is an excellent starting place, but your goal should be to develop beyond fandom and into your own clear voice and IP, which publishers can make money from. As it happens this is the novel's own origin story: Molly Dunn got her start writing fan fiction on Tumblr and eventually developed enough of an audience to get noticed by 8th Note Press. The novel helps to support this production process by valorizing writing for free as a kind of psychic compulsion that benefits the person doing it. When Sam asks why Diana writes, she explains: "I have to. I don't know what it is, but it's . . .

just a feeling. Like if I can't get the stories out, I get so restless and moody and—I don't know. It's just something I need. Like water and food.”⁷⁷ Writing offers immaterial rewards that are equated to the very stuff of life, as essential to her well-being as material sustenance. It is precisely because her passion for writing is anchored in her own needs that it can be the basis for a sustaining career going forward. Her sister is jealous that she has this creative outlet that could turn into a fulltime activity: “Do you know what it's like not to have something like that? To have a day job and not have anything to fill the nights with in the hopes it might get you somewhere else, somewhere better?”⁷⁸ This is clear counsel that we are better off filling our nights sharing writing online.

This presentation of the passionate work of writing feeds into the novel's broader fantasy about the new value of contemporary creative work. The family restaurant represents the old way of doing things—an outmoded and unsustainable enterprise—and Sam and Diana are figures of the new way, producing online content mediated by digital platforms. If you are good enough at it, and passionate enough, you will be able to use this as the basis for a fulfilling career. More than that, even, your work will be part of a whole world of thriving creative production. Diana jokes about her “totally normal fondness for paperback books” and, after the restaurant closes, Sam and Diana agree that it is at least a relief to know that the space it once occupied is now, of course, a bookstore.

So Many Somethings is ultimately a mediation of the TikTok platform itself. It is a novel that suggests that digital platforms are sustaining and sustained by a passion for printed books. In this vision, platforms are even supporting a resurgence of brick-and-mortar bookstores in high-traffic urban areas. It all starts with the simple activity of finding community by posting fan fiction on Tumblr. The forms of work that subtend this vision of revitalized bookish life are clarified by the failure of 8th Note Press. A business model built on low advances and the presumption of extensive online authorial labor exploits the desire for a creative life—the desire that Diana's character is designed to exhibit. This is not the same thing as genuinely sustaining it.

Care Crisis Content . . . Labor Regime

In 2023, after numerous delays, Caroline Calloway finally did self-publish her first book: *Scammer*, a memoir. It is thoroughly a product of a platform-mediated content environment. While accounting for her desire to be a famous writer, and some of her struggles along the way, it is mirror and engine of the industry's dominant tendencies: toward the self as marketable asset,

toward self-harrying overexposure online, and toward treatment of writing as primarily bibliotherapeutic. *Scammer* presents Calloway as a victim of bad press, whose personal traumas have never been understood by the public. At the same time, the book glamorizes her life as a literary “it girl” invited to every party. It is in this way quite indistinguishable from her social media content, which has over the years moved back and forth with ease between confessional content detailing the fun parts of her life as a minor celebrity, and more troubling material about her parents’ illnesses, including her father’s death from suicide, and her own struggles with poor mental health and addiction.

In chapter 5, I discuss some other contemporary literary works that emerge from and in response to platforms. These figure autofiction, confessionalism, and trauma narratives as gendered compulsions of feminized labor. Marie Calloway’s *what purpose did i serve in your life* (2013) and Sheena Patel’s *I’m a Fan* (2022), for their part, consider how one’s performance of a feminized and racialized suffering self has become an ambivalent asset that those with few other resources now trade for “likes” . . . and little else. In contrast, Jordan Castro’s *The Novelist* construes the appearance of a diversification of voices within publishing as a sign of literature’s degradation at the hands of those who want to use it for therapy. It presents the use of books as therapeutic conduits to good feelings as a cultural crisis, to be solved by experimental fiction and new cultural institutions of moral gravitas and intellectual seriousness. Castro’s narrative construes other readers and book industry workers as lazy, semiliterate, and inattentive to what really matters. Privileging therapeutic function over form, they lack the right disposition toward the literary object. In a classic strategy of distinction, Castro laments that these “deficient readers” are in “cultural ascendency,” as E. E. Lawrence puts it.⁷⁹

He fails to register the real problem, however. So many writers today, induced to promote their work and post about their lives on platforms, are drawn into a new kind of labor regime that turns people’s daily online creativity into an agglomerated mass of possibly monetizable material. In these conditions, the traditional craftwork of writing a nonserialized, previously unpublished long-form narrative, for traditional release via legacy media, becomes more and more rare; it also becomes an extension of the activity that already took place online.

Competition for visibility drives writers to figure out how to optimize search, build a profile, and amplify one’s voice online; they even enroll in paid courses and workshops to train them in these things. This benefits the industry by outsourcing training costs, while publishing and platform companies can either mine freely available, volunteered material in the hunt for the most saleable properties, or use the data produced along the way to do other things.

Even hobby writers sharing work online are a key part of the usable mass of content. The conception of writing as self-expression and a means to community is in this light highly serviceable. The more users the better; the more content the better. This is the entire premise of the platformization of reading and writing. Platforms can find out what is trending; they can find their next star author; or, as in the case of Calloway, they can take advantage of her appeal to users, while leaving Calloway to herself undertake the riskier work of self-publishing her memoir after failing to deliver the manuscript to Flatiron Books, a firm that had been willing to take a chance on her only due to her online platform. (To pay back Flatiron's advance she started an OnlyFans account, where she earned a considerable amount quite quickly by cosplaying as various literary heroines.)

Writing and reading platforms provide access to bibliotherapeutic activities that can be of real benefit to people, but they also trap people in styles of incessantly industrious digital life that can exacerbate rather than ease suffering. Nor would they exist if they didn't make content and its circulation cheaper. This cheapening is perfectly compatible with a language associating bookwork with feminized service work done for reasons other than money. The gravitational pull is toward constancy of platform presence, either as a hedge against economic uncertainty, or for entirely noncommercial reasons that are nevertheless useful to platform corporations. We arrive again then at that nexus of coordination and tension between the entrepreneurial and therapeutic. Calloway positioned the publication of *Scammer* in precisely this way. Playfully owning the idea that she really is some kind of internet scammer was "in long-term brand strategy . . . a really good move for me," she states in a Vice media video profile.⁸⁰ It was at the same time part of a personal journey of recovery that involved focusing on reading and writing as a daily therapeutic practice. *Scammer* offers aid to both the author herself and readers who may relate to her story of ambition and failure, and to the compulsions and risks of having an online life: "Go bully Caroline Calloway on social media," Calloway parodies in the Vice video, echoing a common disposition toward her: "She'll really love it. I'm just kidding. Don't do that. She might kill herself."

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 I am quoting from NaNoWriMo's website, nanowrimo.org, last accessed January 15, 2025. It is no longer there. For their AI statement, which they removed shortly after posting it, I am quoting from my own screenshots.
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- 40 McClanahan, "Introduction."
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CHAPTER 1. WATTPAD’S BIBLIOTHERAPY

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