
CAN WRITING PLATFORMS LIKE VELLA, RADISH, OR SUBSTACK ENHANCE YOUR INCOME?

It all depends on what you write and the size of your fan base.

In a return to the age of Dickens, writing apps like Radish and Stary's Dreame, which share new stories in serialized form, have grown significantly in a few short years. Well-funded internet companies like Amazon and Substack are introducing new apps that could quickly push out some of the smaller players.

Most of these serialized publishing apps are new to the marketplace, and so we have little data, or even anecdotal information, on whether they are a reasonable source of income for authors. We urge members to review the platform terms closely before committing to publishing through them, especially if they require exclusivity. Authors should also watch out for definitions of payment terms such as "net profits," "net receipt," and "amounts received," as these can have different meanings in this context than in traditional publishing contracts. The terms can also vary, with some apps offering better terms than others, and as often is the case with so many publishing endeavors, best-selling authors are far more likely to realize significant income through these opportunities than midlist or emerging writers. Nonetheless, if the terms are fair, the platforms provide a new potential source of income that is worth exploring for writers interested in serialization. It's important that Authors Guild members know what new opportunities exist, how they work, and the potential benefits and drawbacks of each as they seek out ways to grow their readership or sell more of their work.

The Authors Guild will keep a watchful eye on these platforms and let members know which are treating authors unfairly. We also ask members to let us know of any particularly good or bad experiences with any of these platforms. Thanks to a member, we learned that Crazy Maple Studio, developer of the Kiss app, advertises a 50/50 split of profits to authors, even though it deducts 32 percent off the top for vendor fees (e.g., Google and Apple's platform fees), as well as a whopping 30 percent across the board for undisclosed and marketing fees, leaving authors with roughly

19 percent of the gross revenue from their work. We are working with them to be more transparent about their terms.

Amazon Kindle Vella

Launched in July 2021, [Kindle Vella](#) is a serialized reading platform where readers can access stories or novels released in short episodic installments via a mobile or desktop app. Episodes range from 500 to 6,000 words, and while the first three episodes of any Kindle Vella story are free to access, readers need to buy tokens to unlock future ones. Readers can also interact with stories by “faving” them, though there is no place for reader comments.

How it works: Kindle Vella is relatively easy for authors to use, particularly if one has previously published Kindle e-books. Authors can create episodes directly from the KDP dashboard by typing in the story’s title, author, description, category, keywords, and image. Writers can then upload their first episode from a .doc or .docx file.

How authors make money: Kindle states that Vella authors earn 50 percent of what readers spend on tokens to read their episodes on the app. The cost of the tokens varies depending on how many tokens readers buy at a time. Two hundred tokens cost \$1.99 and allow the reader to access four episodes of any Vella work; \$14.99 buys 1,700 tokens, giving a reader access to 34 episodes. An author’s earnings depend both on how many tokens readers use to access one or multiple episodes of a story and the actual “purchase price” of those tokens.

But authors don’t actually earn 50 percent of what readers pay because the token vendors (generally Apple, Android, and Amazon) get a cut of the revenues earned—as much as 30 percent. So if a reader paid \$14.99 to purchase 1,700 tokens for access to all 34 episodes of one’s Vella story, the platform first deducts the 30 percent vendor’s fee (\$4.50) from the \$14.99 “price.” The author then gets paid 50 percent of the remaining 70 percent,

which translates into a payout of \$5.25, or 35 percent of the profits.

Pros

- * Offers a high-profile alternative to Radish or Stary authors
- * Might serve as a kick start for new or upcoming authors, particularly those who write stories of nontraditional lengths that might be hard to publish elsewhere
- * Authors can earn money per episode rather than having to wait until the whole novel/novella/narrative is completed
- * After publishing on Vella, you can compile all episodes together and seek to get it published as a full-length book, but you must wait 30 days from when your last episode is published

Cons

- * Doesn’t cross-promote or work with Kindle Unlimited
- * Different prices for tokens and token vendors make for a complicated payment structure
- * Content must be wholly original and cannot have been published anywhere else, in print or digitally
- * You cannot publish images, charts, or illustrations, which may prove problematic for children’s authors or nonfiction writers who rely on such graphics to round out the text
- * You earn money only if readers keep reading, as they have to pay tokens to access each episode

Radish

Founded in 2015, [Radish](#) is a serialized fiction app bringing “bingeable” stories to readers everywhere. It offers curated, premium, and original stories in multiple genres, including romance, mystery, thriller, and fantasy fiction, which are published and read in bite-size installments. Radish claims that more than 2,000 authors have pub-

lished more than 10,000 stories, with more than 500 million episodes read.

How it works: Writers must apply to be accepted and identify themselves as an emerging, established, or influencer author (e.g., big-name authors, top executives, and celebrities) to get the best pricing and publishing packages. The application must include the first 30 pages of the work to be published. The first three episodes of each story are available for free on Radish to attract readers. After that, interested readers must buy coins (similar to Vella’s tokens) and pay three coins to open an episode. Readers can pay even more coins to read ahead for “locked” episodes. Each coin costs approximately 12 cents, so access to one episode costs readers 36 cents. Radish recommends each episode be 1,500 to 2,000 words and that each story consists of at least 10 episodes.

How authors make money: Authors get 50 percent of the revenue earned per episode. So if an episode costs 36 cents, and the author wrote a 10-episode story, he or she would earn \$1.80 per reader who read the full story. However, Radish determines each author’s revenue based on a flat share, which is arrived at by counting all the coins the app has received for all works on the site each month, divided by the total number of outstanding coins issued to all readers. That number is then divided by 50 percent based on the number of coins each author’s piece earns each month. The money writers earn may also be impacted by which pricing model authors qualify for and whether the content is exclusive to Radish.

Radish pays its writers quarterly but only pays out if the amount earned exceeds \$50.

Pros

- * The most established of the serialized apps and the easiest to use/navigate
- * Authors retain their copyright, though the exclusivity and length of the license is governed by the pricing model and publication-type designations

- * Offers three pricing models to choose from
- * Editorial review of work before accepting a writer’s application helps ensure high-quality narratives
- * Allows for true interaction, as readers are encouraged to leave comments or ask authors questions
- * Authors may post previously published work

Cons

- * Primarily interested in genre fiction. They do not accept short story collections, poetry, or nonfiction
- * The content skews heavily toward YA and fantasy
- * JustUseApp rated it 18 out of 100 for readers, citing poor customer service and unreliability
- * The payment calculus is confusing and authors with limited readership may have to wait a long time to receive their first payment of \$50

Stary Writing (Dreame, Ringdom, and Slash)¹

Based in Singapore, Stary Writing offers multiple platforms:

- * Dreame emphasizes female-centric narratives with an emphasis on romance
- * Ringdom offers adventurous, high-concept fiction with strong characters
- * Slash caters to LGBTQ+ stories and readers

Stary focuses on episodic or serialized stories but posts “exclusive” content behind a paywall for

¹ Since publication of the Winter–Spring 2022 *Bulletin*, we have become aware of terms in the Dreame/Stary app contracts that put authors using those apps at a serious disadvantage. As these contracts are not public and are only sent to authors solicited by Dreame/Stary, they were not accessible to our team at the time this piece was written. The objectionable terms include a grant of rights provision that allows developers to adapt and commercialize the stories into any form, including film, television, graphic novels, and games. We have also become aware of concerns about the lack of transparency in Dreame’s payment processes. We are adding this note as a caution to authors who are considering using the Dreame/Stary apps. As always, you can send in your contracts to our legal services team for a full evaluation.

which authors earn 30 percent of the sales price. It claims to host more than 300,000 original stories reaching more than 100 million users.

How it works: Interested authors log on to www.starywriting.com, post at least 3,000 words, and then must apply for a contract. Only content and writers exclusive to Stary are eligible for tiny advances (\$40–60) and bonuses.

How authors make money: Licensing and contract terms were not available on the website, though there is a section touting the many bonus dollars that Stary writers can make. These bonuses apply only to writers who have signed an exclusive contract with Stary for new and original stories as follows:

- * New Story Bonus: Writers receive a \$50 bonus for every signed story once more than 30,000 words have been posted
- * Daily Update Bonus: Writers can earn \$150 if they publish a new chapter daily in a calendar month, posting a total of at least 50,000 words.
- * Completion Bonus: The amount of bonus varies depending on the total word count of each completed story: 60,000–99,999 words, \$50 bonus; 100,000–199,999 words, \$150 bonus; 200,000 or above, \$350 bonus

Pros

- * Huge reach internationally
- * Publishes stories in many languages, including English
- * Anecdotal evidence that some authors have been recruited off Radish with small advances

Cons

- * Operates out of Singapore and, depending on what nation's laws the contract is governed by, it may be difficult and expensive to sue for breach of contract
- * Payment is by PayPal only

SUBSTACK ASPIRES TO GROW BEYOND THE STANDARD NEWSLETTER INTO A SERIALIZER OF NARRATIVE STORIES.

- * Many writers on Reddit and elsewhere report questionable practices and suggest this app is not trustworthy
- * Authors must sign away their digital copyright for three years. Contract terms are not publicly available

Substack

Founded in 2017 in San Francisco, [Substack](#) provides publishing, payment, analytics, and design infrastructure to support online subscription newsletters. Substack aspires to grow beyond the standard newsletter into a serializer of narrative stories, given the recent deals it has made with well-known authors including Salman Rushdie and Chuck Palahniuk. This vehicle also attracts many established freelance journalists and political pundits.

How it works: Substack provides writers with a content management system (CMS) for creating email newsletters, integrated payments through Stripe, and a website that can host free and subscriber-only content. Most Substack writers begin by posting newsletters for free until they attract enough regular followers to charge for a monthly or annual subscription. While almost anything goes when it comes to subject matter, all writers must conform to its [content guidelines](#).

ROMANCE, MYSTERY, FANTASY, AND OTHER GENRE FICTION WRITERS MAY BENEFIT FROM SERIALIZATION . . . BUT READ THE PLATFORM TERMS, CONTRACTS, AND LICENSING RULES CAREFULLY. . . .

How authors make money: The payment structure is straightforward. Authors set the subscription price they wish to charge readers on a monthly or yearly basis. Subscribers pay authors through Substack with a 10 percent commission going to the platform for each subscription sold. A writer with 1,000 subscribers each paying \$5 each month would earn \$54,000 per year after Substack takes its cut.

Substack also recently launched a monthly Writer in Residence program designed to give established writers a place to experiment, share knowledge, and inspire other writers and readers on the app. Substack compensates Writers in Residence for their work and time spent supporting other writers. No information was posted about how to be considered for this program.

Pros

- * Easy to navigate with a simple payment and commission fee structure
- * A better-paying alternative to Medium
- * Provides authors freedom to experiment with different writing forms and craft “edgy” stories without the editorial oversight that a traditional publisher demands

- * Actively seeks journalists, media, and political writers and so is a good forum for nonfiction authors
- * Can post images, illustrations, and charts
- * Authors can set the subscription price for their content
- * Also offers subscriber-based podcasting

Cons

- * On top of the 10 percent commission, Substack charges a processing fee for credit card payments
- * [Only big-name writers/celebrities score advances](#), so most authors work for free until they attract a reasonable number of subscribers
- * Lack of editorial oversight raises the potential for abuse such as sharing false or inaccurate information

The bottom line: Romance, mystery, fantasy, and other genre fiction writers may benefit from serialization, particularly for novellas or other stories of odd lengths, but read the platform terms, contracts, and licensing rules carefully before you leap. Of the platforms described here, Substack seems to provide the most equitable author terms and offers significant opportunities for nonfiction writers and journalists, but without a large dedicated fanbase, your earning potential may be limited.

We will continue to look out for new income-generating opportunities for writers of all types.

Sandi Sonnenfeld is a published fiction and creative nonfiction writer and works as a communications consultant for The Authors Guild.