

Want to Earn Six Figures as a Writer? Try Ghostwriting.

Shifts in the book industry have been a boon to writers who work quietly behind the scenes

By Jacqui Shine

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At the Gathering of the Ghosts conference in New York, 172 attendees traded advice on the business of ghostwriting. PHOTO: DOLLY FAIBYSHEV FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Reality stars don't typically pride themselves on their literary prowess. Sandy Yawn of Bravo's seafaring series "Below Deck" is no exception. "I'm not a writer," the superyacht captain said. "I was kicked out of 11th grade, and I went into the maritime industry."

She does, however, consider herself a storyteller. So when "the fans started asking for a leadership book," Yawn said, she hired Samantha Marshall to help.

Marshall spent weeks interviewing Yawn about her life. She learned about the time Yawn's ship caught fire in the Red Sea and the motorcycle crash that led

Yawn to a kidney cancer diagnosis. And where details were foggy, she spoke to Yawn's family members and crew. "Sandy is the type of person who looks forward more than backward," said Marshall, a former Wall Street Journal reporter.



Sandy Yawn of 'Below Deck' worked with ghostwriter Samantha Marshall on her book, 'Be the Calm or Be the Storm: Leadership Lessons from a Woman at the Helm.' PHOTO: PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

Their book, "Be the Calm or Be the Storm: Leadership Lessons from a Woman at the Helm," was published in 2023 by Hay House Business. Marshall is credited on the title page.

Ghostwriters have long been part of the world of publishing. Yet their profession remains maligned, the imagined province of writers without ideas, working for clients without talent, trading, perhaps worst of all, in deception or dishonesty. *Who really wrote the book?*

But that world is changing. Ghostwriters are making six-figure salaries and negotiating more complex deals as demand increases for their services. Some are even getting credit as genuine collaborators.

Madeleine Morel, a literary agent who represents only ghostwriters at her firm 2M Communications, said that while few people can make a living as authors, "lots of writers can make their careers on ghostwriting."

In a November survey of industry salaries by the American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA) and literary services firm Gotham Ghostwriters, 269 ghostwriters shared how much they make. One in three ghostwriters reported earning more than \$100,000 a year on ghostwriting projects. Twenty-five

percent reported charging at least \$100,000 for their last nonfiction manuscript.

Kevin Anderson, the CEO of a ghostwriting and editing company, said that his company regularly charges between \$300,000 and \$400,000 per project. That fee includes ghostwriting, editing and other publishing services. He said his company is involved in “just shy of 500” projects a year, including books that have yet to be sold.



Daniel Paisner is a ghostwriting veteran with more than 80 titles under his belt. PHOTO: DOLLY FAIBYSHEV FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

As major publishers face consolidation and slumping sales, self-publishing and “hybrid publishing”—where authors receive no advance but may earn a greater share of sales profits—are growing. This has helped propel the ghostwriting business too.

“The barriers to entry to publishing have changed,” said Daniel Paisner, a ghostwriting veteran with more than 80 titles under his belt. “So more and more successful people are able to direct their publishing journey on their own without the gatekeepers at the Big Five publishing houses.” That often includes hiring ghosts to help.

At the Gathering of the Ghosts, a conference hosted in January by Gotham Ghostwriters agency and ASJA in Manhattan, 172 attendees traded business advice: on advertising one’s rates (use the phrase “starting at”); mentioning

royalties in contracts (“royalties are almost nonexistent,” said Catherine Whitney); and deciding whether to sign a nondisclosure agreement or a confidentiality agreement (the latter is more flexible).

During a panel titled “The Money Dance,” Michael Levin, who got into the business in 1990, offered blunt advice: “Whatever you’re charging now, double it and add 20%.”



Panelists Michael Levin, Marcia Layton Turner and Catherine Whitney and moderator Kevin Anderson participate in a panel titled ‘The Money Dance’ at Gathering of the Ghosts. PHOTO: DOLLY FAIBYSHEV FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Michele Matrisciani of Bookchic LLC, which offers literary services including ghostwriting, editing, proposal writing and book coaching, is credited on the cover of Gypsy-Rose Blanchard’s new memoir “My Time to Stand,” about years of childhood abuse and her conviction for second-degree murder in the death of her mother. She came to the project because she had published a book with Melissa Moore, the creator and executive producer of Lifetime’s six-episode documentary “The Prison Confessions of Gypsy-Rose Blanchard.” Moore befriended Blanchard while she was in prison, and when Blanchard asked Moore if she thought she could write a book, the two turned to Matrisciani for guidance.

They based a proposal on Moore’s initial interviews. Matrisciani then interviewed Blanchard, still incarcerated, extensively. “I literally would be at baseball games with my sons, and I would see the call, Chillicothe Correctional Center, come on my phone, and I would just leave the field, go to my car and just



Michele Matrisciani is credited on the cover of Gypsy-Rose Blanchard's memoir, along with Melissa Moore. PHOTO: BENBELLA BOOK

to be the writing.

In the past, she said, there was some discomfort about co-authoring nonfiction books, but today “the stigma is completely removed. Why not say ‘I worked for two years with a partner, with a writing collaborator’? What’s wrong with that?”

Videos

sit there and just type,” she said. When Blanchard was paroled a year ago, Matrisciani and Moore traveled to Missouri to meet her.

In an email, Blanchard said that in addition to helping her organize her story into a narrative, “there was a creative component that I also found healing beyond processing my past.”

All three women share cover credit (and any resulting royalties). For this reason, Matrisciani doesn't think of it as ghostwritten. “No one is pretending that we could have ever made this book without each other,” she said. “We're bringing our specialties to the project in equal weight.” Hers just happened