"Stand Out from the Crowd!": Literary Advice in Online Writing Communities

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Background to Literary Advice Online

In the digital age, aspiring writers can draw on advice from a wide range of online sources, including social media platforms, fan communities, and crowdfunded publishers. The support offered can range from writing prompts in the form of tweets or GIFs to blog or vlog posts examining specific questions of form or genre. Writing formations found online can similarly range from informal or ephemeral "affinity groups" (Gee and Haynes 2012) coalescing around hashtags (#writersofinstagram) to long-standing Facebook groups or dedicated forums where the social bonds forming between participants may extend to the offline world and include support and advice extending beyond writing to lifestyle and life choices (Thomas 2011a). Online spaces can also disrupt and challenge how advice is traditionally dispensed and filtered to allow for the emergence of new kinds of cultural intermediaries and new "hidden forms of mediation" (Wright 2014, p. 191) drawing on automated data and algorithms. Much of this advice may be unsolicited and may have very little

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perceptible impact on individual writers or their writing. Nevertheless, it contributes to a contemporary climate hailed as democratic (Pugh 2005) where the roles of writer and reader are more fluid and interchangeable, and where writing is archived, curated, and shared among users. While some established writers and critics have queried the perpetuation of the myth that "*anyone* can write a book" (Harris in Flood 2015), and that demands on the expertise of professionals can be made without any kind of boundary or limit, writing emerging from these platforms can gain mainstream commercial and critical success, sometimes also lending itself to adaptation and spreading across media.

Previous periods, particularly the end of the nineteenth century and the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, have been claimed as key turning points in relation to the democratization of writing (Hilliard 2006), with magazines, writing clubs, and literary guidebooks making transparent the "secrets" of good writing. More recently, fanfiction communities have been recognized for nurturing aspiring writers, particularly through the mentorship of "beta-readers" and the practice of publishing in installments, to allow writers and their readers to engage in dialogue throughout the constantly updated writing process (Thomas 2011b). Moreover, in the specific context of the affinity groups and networks of online fan communities, Campbell et al. (2016) argue for a distinctive kind of "distributed mentoring" where advice and support comes from many different sources, and where expertise may also be variously distributed. According to Campbell et al., this results in a richer experience for those involved and necessitates a broader view than focusing on individual pieces of advice or the relationship between individuals and their mentors. However, in the case of fanfiction, the culture has been predominantly one of writing for self-enrichment and pleasure, participating in a "gift economy" based on barter and exchange (Davies 2017), where labor is freely shared rather than engaging in marketing and promotion strategies increasingly expected of professional or commercial authors. A notable exception is China, where fanfiction sites often distinguish between free content and paid-for stories, sometimes housed in "VIP" areas or rooms.

Nevertheless, the creative industries have increasingly recognized and, some would argue, exploited fan cultures and their creative outputs, while high-profile authors such as E. L. James and Cassandra Clare have not only profited from their tutelage as fanfiction writers, but have also

demonstrated the potential for the worlds they create to generate trans-media stories. This has led to ongoing debates around the concept of "fan labor," the rise of the "fantrepeneur" (Carter 2017), and the extent to which seemingly participatory practices are in fact symptomatic of neoliberalism and its emphasis on individualism (Marwick 2015). All of this in the context of what many see as the narrowing of the focus of traditional publishers on "marketable" authors to the neglect of new authors or midlisters (Bold 2016), and attacks on mainstream publishing for its lack of diversity. Thus, online spaces are hailed by some for performing "the admirable service of discovering audiences where traditional publishing hadn't the resources or interest to explore" (Danaher 2014). Alongside this, digitization has led to a proliferation of opportunities for writers to self-publish, and to challenge the snobbery and elitism that has tended to look down on these practices in the past. Increased access to data on reading from online platforms (Bold 2016) also provides opportunities for writers to map and respond to trends and preferences among their potential readership.

Among the many start-ups that have attempted to build writing communities and cater to the needs of aspiring authors, Describli (2012–2017) specifically pitched itself as a space where writers could learn to "stand out from the crowd". Set up by Laura Fredericks and using platforms such as Indiegogo to generate income, the "data-driven marketing assistant" for writers specifically addressed itself to self-publishing authors and focused on helping them connect with their "perfect" audiences. The fact that Describli did not manage to survive as a sustainable business model is itself testimony to the vagaries of the "attention economy" described by Davenport and Beck (2002). Nevertheless, the Internet and social media platforms continue to provide new and competing sources of advice and support for writers.

One of the biggest and most successful of online writing communities, instantly recognizable from its distinctive orange branding and in-group terminology, is the Canadian-based Wattpad, founded in 2006 by Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen. In this chapter, following Campbell et al. (2016), I will provide a broad view of the kinds of advice to writers available to users of Wattpad by exploring various sources both on- and off-site. In addition, I will focus on the ways in which this exposes and addresses age-old tensions between literariness and commerciality, and between the myth of the author as undiscovered solitary genius and the practical business of writing as a collaborative process reliant on multiple agents. I will also

focus on how the notion of success in writing is measured by "Wattpadders," and the extent to which the community can foster diversity and innovation.

The Rise of Wattpad

Wattpad's oft retold origin myth is that it was born "on the back of a napkin" at Vancouver airport by the two entrepreneurs (Cuccinello 2018), with the explicit intention of setting its sights on "the walls" erected by media companies to reserve stories for the "elite few" (Wattpad HQ "About"). Since its inception, Wattpad's mission statements have continued to reinforce the idea that the company is built on freedom, honesty, and inclusivity. Yet its business model is explicitly reliant on building a "captivated audience," and on demonstrating that the data it produces can provide "deep engagement" for businesses of all kinds with Millennials and Gen Z consumers (Wattpad "Press").

The origin story, and the founders' backgrounds as "people of color, who are also immigrants," is mentioned in the company's Diversity and Inclusion report as evidence of their "commitment to diversity" (Lakhani 2018). In the same report, we learn that 56% of the workforce is female, but the percentage of the 65 million global users who are female (and under 30) is assumed to be much higher based on Wattpad's "reputation for being the reading site of choice for 13-18-year-old-girls" (Davies 2017, p. 55). Wattpad allows users to choose which language they want to use to navigate the site and which language they want to select for the stories they will read and write. While not entirely comprehensive (my first language Welsh does not feature), and with some languages only having limited content, the very fact that this is an option again suggests a commitment to inclusivity and supporting marginalized voices. In addition, Wattpad's openness is reflected in the fact that it understands writing and reading stories as existing in a convergent media landscape where the boundaries and divides between creators and consumers, as well as between genres and media platforms are constantly being eroded. Not only do many of the stories produced by users refer to characters, worlds, and tropes from a range of media, but the site also explicitly locates writing success in the context of producing content that can be reproduced and adapted across media, most explicitly with its Wattpad Studios program, which aims to link the most popular writers with media executives.

Often described as a "YouTube for Stories," with 90% of its activity taking place on mobile devices (Davies 2017), Wattpad provides "access to an audience of millions" as an "on-the-go experience" with the promise that "if you can't find exactly what you are looking for, you have the power to create it yourself" (Wattpad "About"). Images on the "About" section of the main website, largely group shots of young people from different ethnic backgrounds, place the focus on sociality and inclusivity. However, they also speak to the need to be "captivated" and "immersed" with an image of a solitary female seemingly absorbed in creating content on her smartphone, and a link to a video where we see the female subject engaged in composing her story in and around her daily activities. We then watch as the story she creates, "Escape the Grind," is published and shared with others as a counter registers the number of views, likes, and comments that the story attracts. The story concludes with the author experiencing the ultimate thrill of meeting one of her readers "IRL" (in real life) as he leaves his phone open on the front cover of her story as he buys a drink in the coffee shop where she works. In many ways, this fictional version of a writer's Wattpad journey encapsulates its powerful but also contradictory ethos of supporting diversity and individual tastes while also constantly focusing on popularity and success, continuing to perpetuate myths of authorship while also purporting to break down barriers between authors and readers.

Both in terms of the kind of experience offered to users and the content that dominates the site, Wattpad clearly draws on fanfiction models. The word "community" is used liberally across the site and the language throughout emphasizes reciprocity and the ethos of sharing. However, since its inception Wattpad has continued to develop and evolve, often risking alienating some of its core users, and like many social media platforms and networks, constantly seeking out new business models and ways of monetizing content.

In April 2019, in a move reminiscent of the development of fanfiction in China (Feng 2011; Rochester 2019), and sites such as Patreon and Ko-fi which rely on fans or patrons funding creative projects, Wattpad introduced a "Paid Stories" option for users. By using the site's own pseudo-currency system, "coins," this unlocks additional content, offering exclusivity and "seamless reading" experiences for purchasers, while at the same time stressing the benefits that this "support" offers writers. Paid Stories (developed in beta as "Wattpad Next") thus provides a contemporary version of literary patronage where the transaction between reader

and writer appears direct and unmediated, and where the emphasis is on mutual benefit. Alongside Wattpad's introduction of a publishing imprint, Wattpad Books, and Wattpad Studios, which "works with media executives to single out stories that have a great chance of commercial success," this marks a clear shift away from the gift economy of fanfiction. It also further exposes the hierarchies and divisions existing within the so-called community, between those who subscribe to the Premium (ad free) service and those who either cannot or will not pay for content, as well as the less overt differences which may exist between those with the time, pre-existing knowledge, and expertise to maximize their chances of success and those who are less experienced, less well-resourced, or less confident in promoting their writing.

How to Get Ahead on Wattpad

Wattpad relentlessly exhorts users to engage with and create content (#JustWriteIt) with a strong focus on spontaneity ("Don't Think, Write!") and lots of exclamatory and directive language ("Get Reads"). However, the language of the site additionally seems to assume users already have pre-formed tastes and preferences, promising to cater to "whatever you're into," and claiming content is based on "everything you love about storytelling." As with fanfiction, content is primarily categorized according to established and familiar genres ("Horror"; "Mystery"; "Romance"), although in the case of Wattpad, the categories also reflect current online trends like the horror-related "creepypasta" and the push for diversity in categories like "Diverse Lit" and "LGBT+". Advice to writers on the site includes specific sections on genre while the annual awards, the Wattys, have bespoke categories such as romance writing ("The Heartbreakers").

The focus on genre and familiarity sits alongside a commitment to uncovering new voices, with the tension between inclusivity and unearthing new talent extending to the often explicit, but sometimes covert, ways in which the site erects hierarchies among users. The Editors' Choice section, much like the section in many bookstores, invites users to "Check out the latest and greatest stories hand-picked by our team" although the criteria used for judging these selected stories, or even who the Editors are, remains a mystery. However, the idea that not all users are equal is perhaps most explicit with the Wattpad Stars program, which provides the site's most popular writers with paid writing jobs

and other tools for monetizing their stories. Wattpad Stars are selected or "tapped" based on proving themselves through positive community-member engagement (ideally by growing their base of readers) and by regularly updating their content. Likewise, the site's "Ambassadors," who "volunteer" to "support the community" through various activities including organizing content and answering questions, must fulfill certain criteria, which include being active on the site for at least six months and being prepared to dedicate at least four hours per week to their duties. In addition, they have to be seen to uphold community guidelines and Wattpad values, including altruism and open-mindedness.

In many ways this is a departure from the practices established around beta-reading in fanfiction communities, where anyone is free to offer their services to other users, and where no overt signs of differential status in relation to users are made beyond the fact that a particular beta reader might be named and thanked by those she/he has helped. This reflects the ways in which Wattpad is more overtly oriented toward the commercial and also the broader changes affecting online cultures, with increasing acceptance of the need for more recognition and reward for contributing to communities, while at the same time pursuing individual success.

Wattpad's most high-profile success stories reflect these inherent contradictions, as they both perpetuate the idea that anyone can succeed as a writer while at the same time subscribing to the myth of the undiscovered genius. Thus Anna Todd's backstory of selling waffles and writing to occupy her time as her boyfriend served overseas, or Beth Reekles's journey, juggling her career as a writer with studying physics at university in the UK, provides inspirational role models for the millions of young writers (a majority of whom are women) hoping to follow in their footsteps. In particular, Reekles has produced a TEDxTeen talk (2014) recounting her "journey" from writing in secret to feeling "validated" by the responses her stories received on Wattpad. She also reports on how young writers seek her advice, and echoes the Wattpad mission statement in exhorting others to "write the book you want to read." At the same time, both Todd and Reekles have undoubtedly gained authority and credibility through traditional print publishing, and Wattpad has also benefited from the endorsement of established writers such as Margaret Atwood who has expressed her enthusiasm for the ability the platform offers writers to "guinea-pig yourself and to stretch the boundaries" (Atwood 2012).

Off-Site Sources of Advice for Wattpadders

Perhaps unsurprisingly because of Wattpad's sheer scale, the tensions and contradictions underlying its ethos, and the constant pressure to "stand out from the crowd," a number of books, websites, and blogs have emerged to cater for those keen to learn more about the community and how to maximize their chances of success. Alongside the endorsements of high-profile Wattpad success stories, accounts of user experiences, good and bad, are readily available. Negative experiences include accounts of individuals who have been adversely affected by the need for constant validation, or from those who have felt addicted to the platform as a result of heavy usage, as well as the effect that the competition to be noticed and gain readers can have on personal relationships. Others report leaving Wattpad to try their luck with smaller writing communities, while parents of younger Wattpadders have voiced their concerns about access to adult content and the potential for grooming and abuse accompanying any online forum.

Advice from experienced Wattpadders sometimes focuses on practical matters such as navigating the site's interface (Jones 2017), choosing categories to "game the system" (Biel 2017), and ensuring that your stories get noticed. According to Benet (2013), for other Wattpadders, the key is understanding that the site is a social network and that there are no short cuts when it comes to joining in and cultivating relationships. From the perspective of Myron (2014), who experienced Wattpad first hand, one of the attractions of the site, particularly for "old dogs" trying to gain new audiences, is that the relationship between author and reader results in a distinctive kind of self-discipline born out of a sense of duty or obligation to keep posting new content, thus guarding against the "meandering" that can inhibit writers and prevent them from completing projects. Blog posts and articles on Wattpad tend to be written by "old dogs" who have been pursuing writing careers for some time and who have come to Wattpad after trying other routes to success. Of course, off-site advice may also be readily found via anecdotes or discussions on social media and good old-fashioned word of mouth, as in the case of Beth Reekles, who recounts how a friend first recommended that she should give the writing community a try.

On-Site Advice and Support

Even if they are not lucky enough to be enrolled onto the Wattpad "Stars" program with its structured system of coaching, aspiring writers can access advice from multiple sources across the site, including informal settings such as The Café or The Pub, or bespoke groups such as the "Under 5 k Reads Club". Users can seek out more specific and "expert" advice from the Story Services section, where they will find posts advertising writing buddies, editorial services, which are often but not always for free, and services offering help with selecting covers and graphics for stories. As well as being able to access user profiles and statistics to ratify the credentials of potential mentors, Wattpad uses a system of badges to identify "Stars" and "Ambassadors," and to reward "Feedback Gurus" for posting helpful comments.

Elsewhere, the Wattpad Help Center has a section on "Writing" with detailed advice about how to create and publish a story, as well as advice on promotion tactics and analytics. Including buttons for common options such as "Promote Your Story," a "support bot" is also on hand to answer any questions not covered elsewhere. Content guidelines give advice on how to rate stories for elements such as "mature" content, to ensure a "respectful" space for users, and lists prohibited content such as images of self-harm and non-consensual sexual content. Advice also consists of generic blog-style posts from users and videos which range from topics titled "About Writing" (in the form of a video) to "Get Inspired" (a section which features tips from multiple Wattpad users). The videos in particular work to provide personalized, rich, and sometimes entertaining content for those who may be less interested or stimulated by advice in the form of books or articles.

From the main website, the "Write" tab takes the user to a section called "Writer Opportunities," with further tabs on "Resources," and "Programs & Opportunities" as well as motivational messages, and Writer FAQs on Rights, Copyright, and Monetization. Once again, the language focuses on connecting and "reaching out," but coupled with a sense that this must be purposeful and directed at the "right readers." The "Resources" section also explicitly refers to the idea of a writing career, with reminders of the site's connections with the creative industries, references to "entertainment partners," and quotations from publishers.

The "Resources" section has three subsections: "Get Inspired," "Sharpen Your Skills," and "Build Your Audience." In turn each of these

subsections is further broken down into subsections and posts combining exhortations and motivational language (Write On!) with advice, tips, and prompts on a wide range of topics. Thus under "Stay Motivated" users can find sections on overcoming writer's block and even a "Mental Health &Wellness Toolkit," countering the constant calls to action with at least some acknowledgment that the community needs to consider the well-being of users. This section features general advice about common conditions such as anxiety and depression and specific issues likely to face Wattpad users including "writer burnout" and "fan pressure." Although implicitly the advice offered here suggests that the feelings may be caused by the nature of the activities taking place on Wattpad such as "pressure to keep up" and "the constant need to appease fans/followers," recommending pursuing alternate activities to alleviate the pressure, the site also hints that these suggestions are temporary measures, easily achieved and remedied. At no point is there any admission of liability, and the user is directed to external resources exclusively for teens and youth.

As suggested earlier, in addition to this focus on well-being, the "Resources" section also departs from literary advice models more familiar from print cultures in the amount of attention focused on audience-building and promotion. While the well-being sections clearly demonstrate an acknowledgment of the link between the pressure to succeed and anxiety and stress, as previously suggested, there is no escape from the constant focus on winning, standing out, and becoming popular in terms of the resources on offer. WattCon is mentioned repeatedly throughout the section and has its own dedicated space in "Programs & Opportunities." Likewise, the language of the "Build Your Audience" section is uncompromising and unapologetic about becoming a "Writer-preneur" and developing a personal "brand." With phrasing like "Hook Your Reader" and "A Writer's Weapon," readers are imagined as resources to be won or prey to be tracked down by the writer-hero, and although the talk is still centered on engagement, the idea of community and reciprocity somehow seems to have been lost.

Sections like "Sharpen Your Skills" provide more familiar advice for writers on aspects of craft including characterization, point of view, and dialogue, expanding into subsections on editing, revising, and "Writing for Genre and Preparing for Publication." Some posts, for example "How to Become a Better Writer," offer a range of exercises as well as guidance on grammar and active/passive voice. Again, users can check out the profile of the author of the guide (Tonya Snow-Cook) and the number

of reads it has had (300343k as of 17/4/19) if they want reassurance about the credibility of the advice. Other posts are not explicitly linked to specific authors or users but carry the Wattpad logo and reflect their corporate ethos ("Writing Diverse Characters").

In addition to the section on Resources, the "Writer" tab has a drop-down menu for "Programs & Opportunities," including information on the Wattys, Paid Stories, and Wattcon. In the case of the Wattys or the Stars program, some of the advice about how to "Become a Wattpad Star" or "Win Awards" may be more aspirational than practical. Nevertheless, the provision of these programs and opportunities is relentlessly presented as something accessible to anyone and helps reinforce the idea that self-improvement and following prescribed programs are the ways to ensure success.

User Comments

Online writing communities make it possible for users to follow the development of a story from inception to completion and to interact with the author and other readers to offer encouragement and suggestions for improvement (Thomas 2011b). On Wattpad, for each installment of a story, users can leave both inline and end comments. While inline comments tend to come at the end of paragraphs or lines of dialogue, the number of comments left does not always correspond directly to obviously significant matters such as plot or character development. Sometimes comments consist purely of emojis or affective responses to the actions depicted ("Aww"), and as Thomas (2011b) notes in relation to fanfiction, comments may be expressions of support and encouragement rather than suggestions for improvement. However, occasionally comments may pull up writers on lapses in grammar or ask for clarifications or expansions. Sometimes commenters post remarks before they have even started reading ("so excited") and continue commenting throughout the story to its completion, while others only comment once. Opening lines and titles tend to receive a lot of comments, particularly where the author has clearly aimed for dramatic impact. Comments tend to come in clusters, offering the opportunity for users to respond to others' opinions, or perhaps providing some camouflage for less confident or experienced users. Even where stories are heavily commented on, however, these only represent a fragment of the readers viewing and liking the story.

Authors may explicitly refer in their notes or prefaces to revisions and improvements undertaken over the course of writing and may interact directly with other users through the "Conversations" tab on their profiles. This can provide a space for authors to explicitly seek out encouragement and advice from readers (such as "Where do yall (sic) want the book to go?"), and to report on struggles with writing or to announce that more stories are forthcoming. It can also allow authors the opportunity to impart advice and encouragement to followers, or to respond to queries about themselves or their work.

Peer-to-peer advice undoubtedly helps to mitigate against some of the more corporate and success-oriented language of the general advice sections. While the emphasis may be on providing encouragement and support rather than detailed advice or feedback, where suggestions for improvement are given, these are often qualified or hedged ("I don't have a lot of experience," or "I will see what I can do!") rather than offered from a position of absolute authority or expertise. As with fanfiction sites, on Wattpad aspiring writers not only build audiences, but also can build their own informal networks and communities through the reciprocal act of reading and commenting on the work of others, and by becoming active members of forums or community groups. Although Pugh's 2005 study of fanfiction sites suggested that in fact authors rarely changed stories in response to reader feedback, interactions between authors and readers contribute not only in terms of relationship-building and community growth, but also in terms of creating the sense of participating in the narrative as an ongoing process rather than finished product (Thomas 2011b).

Conclusion

Close inspection of the language of much of the advice available to writers on Wattpad's main website might raise questions about the extent to which it can genuinely support diverse voices in the way it suggests, and certainly the tensions between discovering and supporting success versus providing a sense of community are very apparent. Writing is very much conceived of as a business, competition between writers is encouraged implicitly (and sometimes overtly), and perhaps what the arrival of "coins" and "Paid Stories" demonstrates most clearly is that as in every other era and sphere, success and popularity may be very much driven by resources and experienced by only very few of the millions of users. What

perhaps distinguishes Wattpad from previous examples of literary advice which focus on the commercial and professional aspects of writing, is the sense of urgency that is conveyed, and the linking of success with personal popularity.

Nevertheless, taking a broader view of the range of advice offered both on the website and from other sources presents a more complex picture. As with fanfiction, the criteria for success in writing on Wattpad may be quite different from mainstream and literary publishing, particularly in terms of how quality or originality are understood (Thomas 2011a), and in terms of how the relationship between author and reader is conceived. In addition, as with fanfiction, Wattpad may be argued to provide interesting insights into the processes of writing and reading (online), as well as important correctives to prevailing and emerging myths around the creative process. Whether or not Wattpad will produce memorable works of literature, and whether or not it will survive as competitors emerge, and disquiet surrounding changes made to the site persists, it offers a new iteration of what fan communities have been providing for a generation, through its overt espousal of a commercial ethos and through its facilitation of easily accessed advice and support on-the-go.

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