

U.S. Published Book Author 5-Year Income Study (2023)

Executive Summary

The Authors Guild's 2020 report *The Profession of Author in the 21st Century*, which explored the results of our 2018 income study, began by saying, "The profession of author is changing." Our 2023 income study was designed to further explore some of those changes and to examine how authors' income may differ due to the genre they write in, their race, their marketing efforts, and other factors both within and outside an author's control.

The results of the 2023 income study, which asked authors about income earned between 2018 and 2022, demonstrate the uncertainty of compensation. Fluctuating incomes are unfortunately far from a new trend; in a July 1915 edition of *The New York Times* (which was reprinted in *The Authors Guild Bulletin*), a publisher cautioned authors: "*Don't Leave Your Job to Write.*" The reality then—and now—is that many authors are unable to fully support themselves with the income gained only from their writing.

Key findings from our survey of nearly 6,000 published authors include:

- **Income challenges persist**: Median total individual income dropped from $16,889 in 2017 to $13,500 in 2022, with significant disparities across demographics.
- **Racial income gaps require attention**: Black authors earned a median of $2,412 from their books compared to $10,985 for white authors.
- **Self-publishing shows strong growth**: Full-time self-published authors saw their median income nearly double from $13,700 in 2018 to $24,000 in 2022.
- **Genre significantly impacts earnings**: Romance authors earn substantially more than authors in other genres, with a median book income of $31,725. Literary and biography authors had the lowest median book incomes at $2,800 and $3,500, respectively.

These findings underscore that most authors cannot support themselves through writing alone, with half of all full-time authors earning below minimum wage from their book-related work.

Key Definitions

Book-Related Income: Advances, royalties, and fees from licensing and subsidiary rights—money earned directly from published books.

Non-Book Author-Related Income: Additional writing work including editing, blogging, teaching, speaking, book coaching, copywriting, and journalism.

Total Author Income: Book-related income and non-book author related income combined.

Established Authors: Writers who had their first book published in 2018 or earlier (73 percent of survey participants).

Newer Authors: Writers published for the first time between 2019 and 2022 (27 percent of survey participants).

Income Decline Accelerates

The survey data reveals that the median total income—both book-related income and non-book author-related income combined— for all participating authors was $13,513 in 2022, down from $16,889 in 2017. This means that the average author earns less than the federal minimum wage of $7.25/hour, which at 40 hours/week for 50 weeks/year would pay $14,500/year.

The plight of a modern author trying to earn a living writing is even more stark compared to the aforementioned 1915 article, in which the publisher noted that a short story writer could potentially expect to make $3,000 per year. Factoring in inflation, that $3,000 would amount to approximately $93,000 in 2024.

The reality is even worse for nonwhite authors—especially Black authors, who netted a median income of just $2,412 from their books in 2022, compared to $10,985 for white authors.

By showing the current economic state of writers and pointing out trends, we hope to equip authors to better advocate for their own interests and draw more attention to the machinations within the profession, with the aim not only to acknowledge and inform others about the economic realities of authors but to work to improve them.

Study Goals

This report will look at factors such as differences between primary income publishing modes, an author's publishing focus, primary writing-related occupations and more. It should be noted that some factors—such as marketing, genres, and whether to self-publish—may be within the author's discretion and control.

We will also look at other factors and their potential impact: for example, are certain demographics of authors relegated by industry or circumstances to certain genres or methods of publishing?

We will also look at successes and growth areas. Authors need to be aware of factors such as:

- What are the current sources of writing and non-writing income? Which sources are growing and which decreasing?
- Is there an income difference between traditionally published and self-published authors?
- What genres are more generally profitable?
- What types of marketing efforts seem to be more effective (e.g. book clubs, publicists, SEO, varied appearances, social media, etc.)?

There are also factors outside of an author's control that can affect their income, such as emerging technologies, which can expand authors' abilities to self-publish and market their work but can also allow for their works to be more easily pirated. Changes in the publishing industry—some of which may be attributable to the pandemic and social movements—can also make a difference to the types of work that appeal to the traditionally published marketplace. Authors who are aware of growing trends are in a better position to take advantage of them.

Background

This study is the largest published book author income study for authors in the United States, particularly with respect to those published in trade, education, academic, and other categories. It was conducted in February and March 2023 and asked about income in 2018–2022, reflecting a 5-year trend since the Guild's 2018 survey.

With a membership of more than 16,000 authors, the Authors Guild is the oldest and largest professional association of published writers of all genres, including historians, biographers, academicians, journalists, and other writers of nonfiction and fiction. Since its founding in 1912, the Guild has worked to promote the rights and professional interests of authors in various areas, including copyright, freedom of expression, fair contracts, and artificial intelligence. One of the Guild's primary purposes is to advocate for authors' ability to earn a livable wage.

Participants

The Authors Guild worked with more than 40 author-related organizations and retail outposts. The Codex Group—which is known for being a leader in book-related research—gathered and collated the survey data from 5,699 published authors who participated—a more than 10 percent increase from the 5,067 authors who participated in 2018.

Established vs. Newer Authors

The majority of survey participants—4,183, or 73 percent—were considered established authors (those published in 2018 or before), and the remaining 1,517 participants (27 percent) were published for the first time more recently (between 2019 and 2022).

Race, Age, Educational Background

Racial diversity reaches new levels in survey participation. Nearly 20 percent of participants (1,100) identified as a race other than white, with 8 percent identifying as Black, 4 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), and 2 percent Native American. However, those identifying as white still make up over 80 percent of surveyed participant-authors.

Organization participation doubled, helping improve representation. The number of participant organizations doubled from 18 for the 2018 survey to more than 40 in 2023. Part of

this increase is due to a concerted effort by the Guild to increase the representation of authors of color in its survey and improve its data.

Survey participants represent diverse backgrounds across multiple demographics, including:

- Education, with more than 50 percent having graduate degrees
- Race and ethnicity, where more than 15 percent identified as non-white (though 81 percent identified as white)
- Gender identity, where 61 percent identified as female and the remaining identified as male and non-binary.
- Age, where 60 percent of participating authors are below the age of 65, and those above that age bracket testify to the potential for a long-term writing career.
- Work status, where participants largely identified as retired, self-employed, or full-time workers
- LGBTQIA+ identity, where 12 percent of participants identified as belonging to this group
- Geography: A range from across the country with a significant number of authors from each coast of the United States, specifically the Pacific (21 percent) and the Mid-Atlantic region (19 percent). The Southeast region follows at 18 percent.

The Harsh Reality: Most Authors Earn Below Minimum Wage

More than five decades ago, Toni Morrison, Authors Guild member, published her first novel — The Bluest Eye, while holding down a job as a book editor. And today, many authors hold down other jobs and have additional income streams to make a living as authors.

Part-time authors earn a tenth of what full-time authors make. Survey results show that the median total income (book-related and other author-related income combined) for part-time authors was just $2,000 compared to $20,000 for full-time authors.

Even full-time authors in commercial markets struggle to make ends meet. When looking at full-time authors whose books are in commercial markets (i.e., excluding academic, scholarly, and educational books), the median book income was $15,000 and median author-related income was $25,000.

This means half of all full-time authors continue to earn below minimum wage in many states from all their writing related work, and well below the federal minimum wage of just $7.25/hour from their books. It also tells us that most authors are earning half of their writing-related income from sources other than their books.

Overall author income remains devastatingly low. The median book income for all authors (including those who write part-time) who completed the survey (80 percent of whom consider

themselves professional authors, but only 35 percent of whom considered themselves full time), was just $2,000 for 2022, and the median total writing-related income was $5,000.

Racial disparities affect work status. Black and Native American authors were the most likely respondents to identify as part-time authors, followed by Latinx or Hispanic American authors.

Part-time authors of color tend to write in specific genres. Within the groups that self-identify as part-time, the books authored tend to focus on nonfiction trade, academic and scholarly, or literary. This suggests that African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinx Americans tend to write in a smaller set of genres and predominantly do so without the status of being a writer full-time. Despite this chasm, 80 percent of participants consider themselves to be professional authors regardless of work status.

Non-book income exceeds book income for most authors. The median book income for all authors (including both part-time and full-time) is a mere $2,000, whereas the median income for all author-related income was $5,000. Clearly, most authors are making more money from sources other than book income.

This decline represents a historic collapse in author earnings. The median author income of $5,000 is the lowest ever, representing an 18 percent decline from the previous low of $6,080 in 2018 and a 52 percent plummet from $10,500 in 2009.

Self-Publishing Emerges as the Bright Spot: Income Nearly Doubles

Self-published authors have seen significant income growth. The median income of full-time self-published authors in 2022 was $12,800 from books and $15,000 total from all writing-related activities. Full-time self-published authors who had been publishing since at least 2018 reported a median income of $24,000 compared to $13,700 in 2018, a 76 percent increase.

Self-publishing democratizes access to publishing success. Despite the overall dismal state of author income numbers, self-publishing as a publishing mode presents a bright spot. The data shows that authors tend to make more money via self-publishing and even more when they use a variety of self-publishing platforms.

Newer authors find more success through self-publishing. Self-publishing has the ability to open doors: Among established authors (those who had their first book published before 2018), a majority had been traditionally published; however, newer self-published authors (those who published books between 2019 and 2022) outnumbered their traditionally published counterparts and reported higher incomes.

Established self-published authors now out-earn traditional authors. Here, it is observable that the separation in income between the two groups closes while broadening the economic advancement of self-published authors, so much so that established full-time self-published

authors' median income surpasses that of traditionally published authors, showing added growth in median income at 110 percent.

Income growth dramatically favors self-publishing. Further, there was quite a jump in book-related income for this segment. Established full-time authors who traditionally publish saw an 11 percent increase in book-related income from 2018 to 2022, but full-time self-published authors saw a nearly 100 percent increase over traditionally published authors at 110 percent--with their median income more than doubling from $9,040 to $19,000.

Self-published authors "out-publish" all other modes. Self-publishing democratizes publishing to some extent, lowering entry barriers, and authors who self-publish appear to be able to publish more new books and updated editions. 84 percent of self-published authors reported publishing new books compared to 61 percent of traditionally published authors at commercial presses and 37 percent of traditionally published authors at academic and educational presses. 66 percent reported publishing a new edition or format, compared to 27 percent and 32 percent, respectively. In a significant way, self-published authors are "out-publishing" all other publishing modes.

Platform monopoly leaves concerns. While the survey highlights self-publishing as a bright spot, we must acknowledge that one enterprise is said to control 85 percent of the self-publishing market, which can (and probably does) impact market conditions.

Multiple platforms lead to higher earnings. Whether they're trying to avoid depending solely on one company, trying to reach a broader audience, or a mixture of both, authors who use more than one self-publishing platform had a higher median book-related income than authors who use one platform exclusively.

Genre Analysis: Romance Writers Earn 9x More Than Literary Fiction Authors

Romance dominates genre earnings by a massive margin. Full-time authors of romance and romantic suspense had the highest median income from their books, out-earning mystery, thriller, and suspense writers by over three times and literary fiction authors by a staggering nine times. They reported a median book income of $31,725 and a median total income (book and non-book author-related income combined) of $37,000.

Graphic novels claim second place in genre earnings. Graphic novelists ranked second, earning a median book income of $15,000 and a median total income (book and non-book author-related income combined) of $25,000.

Mid-tier genres show moderate but consistent earnings. Mystery, thriller, and suspense authors had a media book income of $10,000 and a median total income (book and non-book author-related income combined) of $15,010.

Literary and biographical works struggle financially. Literary fiction authors earned a median book income of $5,000 and a median total income (book and non-book author-related income combined) of $13,500. Biography authors reported a media book income of $3,500 and a median total income (book and non-book author-related income combined) of $9,200.

Literary works show the lowest financial returns. Lastly, authors focusing on literary works had a median gross book income of $2,800, and their overall income, inclusive of other author-related sources, was $10,100.

What causes genre disparities? In addition to the popularity of certain genres, some of this may be due to the ways algorithms and certain marketing tactics can favor genre writers.

The Equity Crisis: Black Authors Earn Less Than a Quarter of What White Authors Earn

The racial income gap is staggering and persistent. Full-time Black authors earned a median of only $2,412 from their books, compared to a median of $10,985 for white authors.

Total writing income shows disparity but less severe gaps. When looking at book and non-book author-related income combined, full-time Black authors earned a median of $15,250 and white authors a median of $20,000.

Part-time authors face even wider racial income gaps. When comparing all full-time and part-time authors combined, Black authors had a median book income of just $800 and all authors identifying as non-white combined had a median book income of $1,200. White authors had a median book income of $2,000—150 percent higher than Black authors and 67 percent higher than non-white authors.

Publishing access and marketing investment favor white authors. Interestingly, participating white authors appear 36 percent more likely to be traditionally published than Black authors (38 percent vs. 28 percent, respectively), and on average spent nearly two and a half times more (personal funds) on their book marketing in 2022 than Black authors ($7,658 vs. $3,182). And on average, white authors spent 90 percent more on personally funded marketing than authors identifying as a group as non-white.

How can publishers begin to address this equity gap? Some ways in which traditional publishers can shrink this gap are:

- **Increased support for Black authors:** Traditional publishers should increase budgets and provide more resources for publicity outreach and author communities.
- **Investment in marketing:** Successful BIPOC authors often invest their own time and money in targeted marketing, focusing on underserved audiences. This is something publishers can focus on supporting more actively.

- **Community engagement:** Building relationships with niche online book communities and independent bookstores that cater to marginalized groups is crucial for effective word-of-mouth promotion.
- **Longer sales cycles:** Publishers should recognize that books by authors of color may have longer sales cycles and view their support as a long-term investment.
- **Cross-promotion strategies:** Collaboration across imprints and titles can help expand the readership for books by Black and marginalized authors.

Marketing That Actually Works: Kindle Unlimited Beats Social Media for Author Success

Kindle Unlimited and subscription programs lead marketing effectiveness. The most effective marketing channels identified by respondents were Kindle Unlimited, other subscription programs, ebook discounts or promotions, and author email newsletters. Kindle Unlimited was particularly effective for self-published authors, who earned 67 percent more income from the platform than traditionally published authors.

TikTok shows promise for specific genres despite low overall usage. While social media and blogging were typically rated least effective overall, TikTok was a particularly effective platform for romance and romantic suspense authors as well as authors of African American fiction, poetry, YA fiction, and new adult and erotic fiction.

Audiobooks remain dramatically underutilized. Audiobooks are underused by both traditionally published and self-published authors, with only 45 percent of traditionally published authors and 35 percent of self-published authors having at least one book published in audiobook form.

Self-published authors invest heavily in marketing. Self-published authors don’t just publish more books than traditionally published authors—they also tend to spend far more money and time marketing those books. In fact, self-published authors spent more than three times as much on marketing as traditionally published authors.

Traditional marketing methods are still used most. Participating authors spent the highest percentage of their marketing resources (money and time) on their author websites, Facebook pages, and email newsletters. Among the least used strategies were library events and readings, virtual author talks, and TikTok.

The TikTok paradox: BookTok popularity doesn't translate to author adoption. Interestingly, despite the popularity of BookTok, only 20 percent of participating authors reported using TikTok for marketing. Of those who reported using TikTok, less than 18 percent believed it was an effective marketing tool.

Kindle programs prove twice as effective as TikTok. Those who used Kindle programs found them to be much more effective: 43 percent of respondents said publishing on Kindle Unlimited

was very or highly effective, 40 percent discounted ebook promotions, and 34 percent free ebook promotions.

The Hidden Threat: How Book Piracy Is Stealing Authors' Livelihoods

Piracy has evolved but remains a persistent threat. It is difficult to discuss author income without addressing the ever-present threat of book piracy. Piracy has taken many shapes over the years, rather over centuries. In its earliest iteration, the same publishing ecosystem constraints witnessed today, plagued those times. Because books were controlled by a few, "book pirates" emerged. Today, while book publishing is controlled by a few, piracy has taken a different shape—namely digital and with the use of eBooks.

The Authors Guild has successfully shut down major piracy sites. Since the last income survey was conducted in 2018, the Authors Guild has worked (successfully) to have two prominent and pernicious book piracy websites shutdown, including Kiss Library.

Recent piracy sites demonstrate massive scale of income theft. Most recently though, a site known as "BooksVooks" made available thousands of pirated books—including a significant amount of Guild authors' works—by way of PDF to anyone who wished to download the copies from the internet. It ranked the books and included a ticker to denote the number of downloads—what seemed to be a showing of its accomplishment in the piracy market.

Quantifying piracy's impact remains challenging but significant. It remains tough to quantify the impact of such sites on author income, but the impact is there no less. At bottom, it means that authors do not get compensation for their work.

Individual authors lose hundreds of thousands in potential income. Returning to the counter on the website, if it is held as true, some individual book downloads ranked in the several hundreds of thousands. Simply, that means that an individual author missed out on income, several hundred thousand times, which directly impacts author royalties.

Self-published authors face disproportionate piracy impact. For authors who self-publish, this fact becomes worse as self-published authors mostly make their works available online. In considering this, it is important to also acknowledge that the surveyed participants show self-publishing as being a publishing mode where they receive less income (as a publishing mode) than that of traditionally published authors. In fact, the number is almost half at 46 percent compared to professional authors at 80 percent.

Piracy may impact diversity and access in publishing. This may also impact the disparity in income and representation shown amongst less established and younger authors, compared to that of older, established authors. This may further dovetail into the "popularity" of certain genres amongst particular writer groups in terms of breaking into the industry and overall access.

Conclusion

The data in this report reflects a profession under strain. Author incomes have dropped by more than half since 2009, racial disparities in pay and opportunity persist, and piracy continues to erode the fragile economics of writing. At the same time, there are areas of growth: Established self-published authors have nearly doubled their earnings, and those who diversify across platforms, invest in marketing, and use tools like Kindle Unlimited and email newsletters are finding ways to sustain their work.

Still, the challenges facing writers will require collective action across the industry by publishers, policymakers, and platforms alike to ensure writing can remain a viable livelihood. The Authors Guild will continue advocating for fair contracts, stronger copyright protections, and an ecosystem that values the people who make it possible.