

# Read Books All Day and Get Paid For It: The Business of Book Coaching

An excerpt from the book by Jennie Nash, CEO of Author Accelerator

The first book coach I ever had was my college roommate, Bridget. Fate put us together in a tiny room in a remote freshman dorm—me, a tennis player/English major from Southern California, and she, a cheerleader/political science major from Maine—and for most of the rest of college, we never lived more than a few steps apart. Senior year, I hatched a scheme to write a series of linked narrative nonfiction pieces as an honors thesis. The topic was friendship—*our* friendship. I had to make sure Bridget was OK about my writing about everything I wanted to write about, so I would turn in my typewritten drafts to her long before my advisor ever saw them. She would respond and react to them, reflect back to me what was working and what wasn't, explain when I had gone too far in sharing a personal detail about her life, help me figure out a way around the hole when I took it out, ask me where the pages were when the pages weren't getting written, and cheer me on as the stack of finished pages grew.

She was an editor, coach, critic, trainer, judge, mirror, cheerleader, fan. She helped me do my best work and helped me become the kind of writer who sold her first book at the age of twenty-five. She read every page I wrote, even after I had an agent, even after I had an editor at a Big 5 publishing house.

I often use an exercise in my writing classes that I call the Universe of Support. It asks writers to make a target with two concentric circles. This gives them three spaces: an inner circle, middle circle, and exterior circle. I then ask the writers to place friends and



family members in this universe according to exactly how much support each member gives to their writing. The only names that can go in the inner circle are the names of people who support the writer's work 100%.

What does 100% look like?

It looks like Bridget.

It looks like the boyfriend of one of my clients who was writing a moving memoir about being a gay phone-sex operator. After I'd been working with my client for about three months, his boyfriend called me. "I don't know what he is writing about or what you are doing to help," he said, "but I have never seen him so happy. I want to buy your coaching for him for six more months."

Sometimes people put their dogs in the inner circle.

Sometimes they put their dead mothers.

Sometimes they have no one to put in that sacred space, which is a tough realization, but also a good one because they can keep their writing away from the people who don't support it, and they can go out and find what they need: someone to support their writing life. Someone who wants them to succeed and helps them do their best work.

This is what a book coach does. Only instead of doing it for love, we do it as a professional in exchange for money.

Now it may seem odd that a writer would *pay* for this kind of support, when they can just get an awesome friend like Bridget—and that is, in fact, the subject of this book: How to be the person who gets paid to be like Bridget.

Or, as Ed Catmull says in *Creativity, Inc.*, how to wrestle with "the competing—but necessarily complementary—forces of art and commerce."

### **Recommended Reading**

If you haven't already read *Creativity, Inc.*, do it. This is one of my top recommendations for learning what it is like to systematize creativity—to develop a strategy around helping people do their best creative work. Each time I return to these pages, I learn something—how the Braintrust really works, what the rules for giving good feedback are, how not to crush the creative spirit, how a story develops over time in circular ways, and so much more.

## The Problem with Free Help

The fact of the matter is that it's relatively easy for writers to get free help with their writing. They can go to a writers' meet-up, or a workshop, or a conference and make writer friends, or they can ask their college roommates, or their sisters, or their neighbor who is a seventh grade English teacher to read their pages.

But here is the terrible truth: Free help is not always good help. It *can* be, on occasion, and writers who have found a smart, supportive, fair-minded, tough, and kind critique partner or writers' group should hold on as tight as they can.

But free help is, in fact, often damaging help.

In my work as a book coach and as the CEO of Author Accelerator, a book-coaching company, I see this damage every day.

I see people who are mistakenly convinced that their work is pitch perfect and ready for publication because their writing friends told them for years that it was soooo good.

I see people whose pages have been batted around by their writing group to the point where their work reads as if it has been written by a committee.

I see people who keep giving their work to family members and friends who are way out of the center of their universe of support, and who give such mean-spirited and judgmental critiques that the writers become paralyzed with shame or fear or both.

People are generally too embarrassed to talk about their own experiences getting burned in this way—it feels so personal—but I hear a lot of writers telling harrowing stories about writer friends. I recently received this note from a writer who heard me speak about writing group damage:

*"I just finished watching you [on a webinar] and what you said about writers' groups has always resonated with me--I've always avoided them because I think they're awful. But this last week, I started helping one of my writer buddies who went through a really awful experience last year with her critique group. It was horrible. It makes me so angry how mean people can be. She didn't tell me this until last week when I asked her how her writing was going and she said she hadn't written in a year. This is a friend with a whole finished first draft. And this experience crushed her. She stopped writing, revising, dreaming."*

What a book coach does is say to these writers, "You don't have to put up with that kind of abuse or lack of support. You are a good writer and you are worthy of this work. You can learn what

you need to learn. Don't stop dreaming. Let me help you raise your voice and write the best book you can."

## The Rise of the Book Coach

Book coaching is a profession that has emerged as a result of the changing forces in book publishing over the last decade. When mainstream publishers had a death grip on the means of production and distribution of books, when they were the gatekeepers and curators of every book that was made available to the public, the work of a book coach was done "in-house" by employees of the publishers. There was time to get each project ready for primetime, and time to nurture a writer's career.

Editors often purchased book projects that were not fully cooked. If a book and a writer showed promise, they would buy the book and then work with the writer to do what had to be done to get it into publishable shape. As a result, deep bonds formed between editors and writers, as the editors shepherded the writers' work to fruition—think Maxwell Perkins guiding F. Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway, or Ursula Nordstrom guiding Maurice Sendak and E.B. White.

### Recommended Reading

If you want a sense of what those days were like, read *Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom*. It takes you inside the famous editor's relationship with her famous writers—the day-to-day support she gave, the guidance, the tough love. It's a beautiful book.

The point of all this is that, back in the day, a writer's job was largely just to write. The myth of the lone genius in the attic or the garret was deeply entrenched in the lore of what it meant to be a writer, and the editor was the person who did everything else: got the work ready to publish, worked with the sales and marketing people, worked with the money people, worked with the cover artists, fielded requests for interviews, told the writer where and when it was time to speak to the public, and so on. Publishing was a business built on the hunches of these editors. Each "product" was a totally new thing, unlike, say, toothpaste or cars, which could be mass-produced. So the editors were charged with discerning what the reading public would buy. A blessing from them could turn the book into a mass-market hit and make the writer's entire career. They had absolute power to curate which books saw the light of day. Writers who were not chosen had no other option but to set their work aside and try again or take up some other creative endeavor.

Well, that's not entirely true. A person with enough money in the bank could go to a "vanity publisher," who would produce their book for a fee. These books were frowned upon by the entire industry because they had not been vetted and chosen.

This paradigm of the publishing industry was still largely in place when I graduated from college in 1986 and took a job working for two editors—one fiction and one nonfiction—at Ballantine Books, a division of Random House. Writers were still submitting their typed manuscripts through the mail. We had stacks and stacks of rubber band-bound manuscripts in manila padded envelopes in the office, towering so high they threatened to topple. I typed up the rejection letters my editor bosses had written by hand on yellow legal pads, typed out the writers' addresses on the envelopes, and took them to the mailroom.

That world is long gone.

Today, the majority of editors at traditional houses don't have time to nurture their writers. They juggle a huge number of titles in a fast-paced world hungry for the next hit. One former Big 5 editor I know told me she typically was responsible for thirty books every month. It's no wonder that editors and agents alike seem to be looking for projects that are fully baked and ready to go to press—with a built-in buying audience to boot.

That's why we see so many books by celebrities, Instagram stars, and prominent people from other industries: those books are guaranteed to sell. Writers wishing to compete in this environment and get a traditional deal must come into the process of pitching with highly polished work.

The advent of self-publishing has also made it possible for writers to skip the whole process of trying to get selected by agents and publishers and take their books directly to readers. This massive change means more opportunity for more writers to reach an audience, but the onus is on the writer to do all the work of a publisher. This means they either must work with a hybrid publisher who will take care of all the production details (for an upfront fee the writer pays) or they must assemble their own team of pros to get their work ready for primetime, which includes everything from cover artists to proofreaders.

Savvy writers in both the self-publishing and traditional publishing realms turn to book coaches to help them nurture their projects and their careers and to ensure that the writing they are doing is the best work they can do.

## The Cost of the Dream

Why are writers so willing to invest in their writing life, when there are so many other pressing needs for their hard-earned dollars?

There are three main reasons I see come up over and over again:

1. The primary reason people give for wanting to write a book may surprise you. It's not to make money or make an impact or a name for themselves. It's not to impact an audience

or spread a message. It's that *they don't want to die before they write their book*. They want to prove to themselves they can do it and prove to the naysayers that they can do it. They want to accomplish a thing that so many people *say* they want to do but so few actually *do*. It matters to them, deeply, which is why they are willing to invest in professional guidance to help them get there, even though they realize they may never make that money back.

2. Another reason I see come up again and again as a motivation for writing is that people want to raise their voice. They have been silenced by parents and partners and bosses, and they are tired of it. They want to stand up on a soapbox and speak their truth—whether their truth is about a topic they are expert in, or a story about dragons. Raising your voice is, again, not about selling books. It's about speaking up and speaking out, at long last, and it matters enormously to many writers. It is also a terrifying reality for them. When people are scared to finish or to publish, or when they are worried no one will like what they have written, it is often straight up fear of being seen and heard.
3. The third most common reason people want to write is that they want to make an impact. They are not writing for themselves. They don't want their words to end up in a drawer or buried on a hard drive. They want to connect with people, to change them, to influence the conversation. I like to say that connecting with a reader closes the loop for the writer. It completes the circuit. Without a reader, a writer is shouting in the dark. We want to *matter*—and that means having an impact on a reader.

To give you an idea what these reasons look like in real life, here are some examples of what Author Accelerator writers have said about working with their book coaches:

*“‘You’ll never be Shakespeare,’” my mother often told me as a girl. That, and dozens of other complicated cautions, kept me drawing safely within the writing lines for years. When I decided to write my first book, I needed a coach who would not only know the writing and publishing business inside and out, but also understand, deeply, what drives people to write in the first place. I found that ideal combination in [my coach]. I was reminded of the value of these gifts this morning when I received notes back on a new chapter. I was writing about how my mother constantly reminded me that I would never be Shakespeare. ‘If she had only lived to read this book, she’d be eating her words,’ [my coach] replied. I laughed out loud and then cried for 15 minutes. Here was that ‘Yes, you can!’ encouragement that my ten-year-old self needed. And no, not to try to write like Shakespeare, but to continue to wholeheartedly write just like me: to write myself into the truth.”*

*“It's absolutely invaluable to have feedback on your story as you're writing it. It helps silence those little voices that say, ‘Is this story worth writing? Am I the right person to write it? Have I completely lost my mind?’”*

*“For so many years, I wanted to write. I DID write, albeit sporadically. Not until I [started coaching] did I take up writing as a \*practice\*—and that has made all the difference in giving me a mindset as a writer.”*

What a book coach offers a writer is far more than just editorial support. We help them achieve a lifelong dream. It is critical for you to understand this. If you think you are only just helping a writer make their sentences prettier and their story or argument stronger, you are short-changing your contribution, and, as we will see later, that means you might also be short-changing your value and the money you are capable of making.

You are helping your clients complete a *transformation*. You are showing them how to go from someone who wants to write a book, who talks about it, who dreams of it, to someone who has created a book they are proud of.

That transformation is worth an enormous amount to a lot of writers. If you are going to open and run a business to help them do that, you need to first believe in the value yourself—and that you are capable of delivering it.

## The Business of Being a Book Coach

In this book, I am going to guide you through the business of being a book coach. We are not talking here about *how* to do it—I have an entire program for that: the Book Coach Certification program at Author Accelerator. This book is about how to set up a successful, sustainable coaching business that will serve your stated audience, and bring you good money and a sense of satisfaction. It is designed to help people new to book coaching as well as people who are already running a coaching practice and want to level-up their game.

I have been a book coach for more than ten years now. I make multiple six figures a year from this work and I also run a book-coaching company that offers a lot of other coaches good, satisfying work. But I am never going to promise you that you can make as much money as I do, or that you can make enough to quit your day job, or put your kids through college, or even buy a great new pair of shoes, because running a business of any kind does not come with any guarantees. It takes hard work to build a business, to sustain it, to grow it. It takes an entrepreneurial mindset—and maybe you don’t have that inborn sense of hustle.

I see so many offers on the internet from successful business, career, or life coaches who promise you can make what they are making, and these offers make me crazy because they feel so manipulative. Can a mom with a full-time job who is working part-time as a book coach expect to make six figures her first year as a coach? Of course not. Can someone who doesn’t want to be on social media, doesn’t want to optimize their website, doesn’t want to invest in their success make six figures? Of course not.

What I *can* promise you is that I will share what I have figured out along the way about running a successful coaching business and teach you what I have learned in my own business and as CEO of the coaching team at Author Accelerator.

## Want to Be Matched with a Book Coach?

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