National Novel Writing Month and its Influence on Communal Authorship

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Abstract

This article investigates the role National Novel Writing Month plays in communal authorship. It considers the notion that writers are isolated individuals and argues that the benefits of a community and support network of authors outweighs any counterclaim of discrediting authorship.

Key Words

NaNoWriMo, communal authorship, writing theory,

Introduction

'Writing is a communal act… We are not separate from everything else. It's only our egos that make us think we are.' (Goldberg 2005, 86-87)

The romantic notion of a reclusive writer is perpetuated by many, both within and outside the publishing industry. In his memoir *Sometimes the Magic Works,* Terry Brooks says he believes "[w]riters live in two worlds – the real world of friends and family and the imaginary world of their writing" (2003, 5). This divide plays into the mythology of writers as isolated creatives, strengthening this claim of solitary genius that publishers often promote. By mystifying and isolating an author, one can buy into the belief that writing is a career pursued only by individuals blessed with an almost supernatural talent. Writing as a

developed skill honed by peers and mentors often goes unacknowledged, as too does the intensive editing work that will go into a manuscript before publication.

For amateur writers, it is accepted that they may start out in groups such as Oxford Writers' House (https://www.oxfordwritershouse.com), or even university degree courses in creative writing. Libraries and literary festivals may even host workshops for those who feel the creative impulse thrumming through their fingertips. Why then do we not see more professional writers working together, or openly discussing their time spent at support groups? Is it simply because they have an agent and/or editor on call for any crisis of confidence? Is it an overwhelming preference in the community? Or is there something deeper that lurks in the minds of those who would distinguish between a real writer and those who chose to join forces?

While publishers may have something to gain in promoting this idea of the naturally gifted recluse, there is merit in communal authorship. Events that bring authors together benefit all involved and can produce quality work deserving of recognition. To substantiate this claim, this article will examine the annual community-writing event National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) and consider the impact it has on writers and publishers. It will weigh the role of multiple writers (either as authors or supporters) on a project and investigate the influence they play in the creation and completion of a book.

Communal Authorship Outside of NaNoWriMo

Before we move into the case study of NaNoWriMo, let us take a moment to consider more familiar instances of communal authorship. Writers have been rallying against the idea of the solo genius for some time. In her landmark book *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg makes a plea for writers to "[k]ill the idea of the lone, suffering artist" (2005, 88). She argues that suffering is an unavoidable consequence of the human experience, therefore authors should avoid adding to their burden. As this article will demonstrate there is an alternative to suffering alone, namely in the long and fruitful history of communal authorship which frequently goes unrecognized.

Support comes in many variations, from co-authors to Facebook writing groups, the archaic to the ultra-modern. These days anyone can set up a Google document and begin to write as their co-author leaves comments in real-time. As a result of this, it becomes a case of finding what works for an individual. To use an example, Louise Voss and Mark Edwards found that their strength was in co-authorship. The pair wrote *Catch Your Death* and self-published it on Amazon as an eBook, where it went on to became a bestseller. Alison Baverstock claims that "working together gave them greater energy – and made them more resistant to the inevitable knocks involved" (2012, 45).

A more commonly known example of co-authorship is Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's 1990 novel *Good Omens*. Gaiman, who had written the first 5,000 words and sent it to Pratchett for feedback, reports that Prachett had called him and said "I think I know what happens next. Do you want to sell it to me? Or write it together?" (Gaiman 2014). Gaiman, of course, elected to join forces. He goes on to describe nine weeks of phone calls and a writing process that could be called disorganised at best. Yet in the end, after the re-writes and the footnotes and the footnotes of footnotes, they ended up with a manuscript that would go on to become a cult classic, adapted for radio, stage and (soon to be) screen.

Online, writing groups and beta readers reign supreme. Writing groups – nowadays mostly hosted on Facebook – are fantastic for writers in a slump. A person is never more than a keystroke away from advice and a manuscript can sit open on a desktop even as a writer bemoans the character arc online. In this convenience age writing has benefitted hugely by technology and social media. Websites dedicated to word sprints have popped up, urging writers to gather their friends into a chat room and tap away at their current project as a group-wide clock ticks down the seconds. In fan spaces, the concept of "alpha" and "beta" readers is now well established. Rebecca describes beta-readers as the proofreaders of fan communities (Black 2008), whereas alphas are those who take on more of an editorial role and get hands-on with another writer's draft. Though this type of support traditionally does not leave fan spaces, it is not unheard of for writers who got their start in fan communities to talk about their beta-readers.

Finally, there is the matter of anthologies and authors who write to a prompt without likely having discussed their work with their co-authors. This example is included for two reasons; first, whilst anthologies may not provide authors with the typical support system found in previous examples, it does have the perk of discoverability. *Rogues*, the Science fiction and Fantasy anthology that George R. R. Martin co-edited and wrote for, benefitted from his name appearing not once but twice on the cover. Whilst authors such as Gillian Flynn and Patrick Rothfuss may have been able to sell respectable numbers of the book without Martin, Bradley Denton likely could not draw such an audience.

The other benefit of anthologies for authors is the psychological drive to finish to a deadline, so as not to embarrass themselves or delay other writers. It is no secret in the publishing industry that not every writer will deliver on time, but a group of their respected peers looking over their shoulder and tapping their feet is sure to make an impact. Additionally, writers may try to outdo themselves, aware that readers will almost be forced to compare the prose of the authors present in the book. Whilst great for sales, not every story can survive the scrutiny of a reader whose standard has been set by reading George R. R. Martin moments beforehand.

Faults aside, communal authorship has been present alongside writing for longer than records can tell. It is considered acceptable for a person to seek out the mentorship of others, even though publishers still promote the idea of their unsociable writers. In some ways, these support networks are treated like the proofreaders and copy-editors of traditional novels, who will be lucky to get a nod in the acknowledgments page. With much of this support taking place in private or offline spaces it can be hard to ascertain the persons responsible for each plot twist.

This all changes with the open accessibility of NaNoWriMo.

A Background on National Novel Writing Month

At the peak of the dot-com boom, 1999 was a year that Chris Baty recalls as a period of possibilities and potential. The seemingly limitless nature of the world (and the ambitious

perspective of an American man in his mid-twenties) led Baty to propose the idea of writing a novel in a month (Baty 2014). He confesses to thinking of writers as "an enlightened subspecies endowed with an overdeveloped understanding of the human condition" (14), yet with no creative education or experience of any kind under his belt, he set out to join the ranks of his heroes. In doing so, he recruited his friends and set out the rules of his venture. Little did he know the impact he was about to have.

What followed in that month of July 1999 was a frenzy of twenty-one novice writers setting out to reach 50,000 words. Baty reports that they "met in coffeeshops […] each night to add another couple thousand words to our literary creations" (16). He references writing games and mini goals they would aim to reach each night. Outwardly, the friends joked about the quality of their prose, privately, they each strove for the rough draft of America's next masterpiece. By the end of the month, only six would achieve their word count goal and thus became the first winners of what would soon be fondly known as NaNoWriMo.

Since then the event has gone global; becoming a non-profit movement, moving to the month of November, adding several new programs to its calendar, and contributing hundreds of books to the world. Currently, over 400 books that started as NaNoWriMo projects have been traditionally published. These include Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*, Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus* and Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*. According to NaNoWriMo an additional 271 novels have reportedly been self-published since the event began.

From these numbers, we can see a measure of success in the hectic affair Chris Baty has created. Though the means are not conventional, the output remains the same as any other writer. That being said, has Baty altered our definition of authorship? After all, there is a proud history in the literary theories that dismiss the importance of an author. Since writing has become more widely conceived of as a communal activity, perhaps it is acceptable to suggest that the role of authorship has been elevated beyond previous bounds. NaNoWriMo makes writing almost democratic, giving anyone with internet access the power to propose

changes to an author's draft. With this in mind, it would be useful to touch on the theories of authorship.

The author that Roland Barthes wages war on in his essay *The Death of The Author* (1967) is a selfish creature, demanding and controlling of all authoritative voice in his narrative. Nowadays, this author does not seem to exist (at least not in significant numbers). Authors familiar with Barthes' ideas may even refrain from making too many "Word of God" comments about their narrative outside of canon. Prior to Barthes' essay the author was a solitary being dictating the interpretation of their text. Post-Barthes, it has become the reader who determines a text's true meaning. Still the idea of individuality remains, but no longer in the context of authorship.

With regard to the support network of NaNoWriMo, are those involved considered readers or authors? Could they even be seen as editors? In truth, it depends on the level of input an individual has. There will be authors on both end of the spectrum, from those requesting no help to those who ask for entire plots.

The Culture of National Novel Writing Month

Let us take a moment to better understand how NaNoWriMo works for the average writer. Probably the biggest draw for any writer to the event are the website's forums, which are open all year round for support leading up to November. Threads pop up all over the website, asking for suggested character names, seeking out experts in unusual fields and debating the merits of planning vs. "pantsing" (meaning to write a novel by the seat of your pants, no prior planning included). When November finally comes around, writers can upload metadata of their project on their user page, normally the title and genre. It is also possible for writers to update their word count here for all to see. A user's current word count is displayed below their avatar in the forums, allowing anyone who views their comments to immediately see how much progress an individual has made. Respect is almost unanimous for those who reach 50,000 words within a week, or users who surpass this recommended total within the month.

For many users, achieving 50,000 words in a month is difficult enough. They can look for support in the "Life During NaNo"-forum-category, which features sections such as "Reaching 50,000!", "Word Wars, Prompts, & Sprints", and "NaNoWriMo Ate My Soul". Each provides users with a different type of support during the writing process, from mini-challenges to reach daily word goals to personalised pep talks. Moderators (who also participate) keep everything on-topic and family-friendly.

As well as online support, NaNoWriMo also provides the opportunity for writers to meet up offline. Typically, this takes the form of allowing users to display their home county or state on their user page and automatically adding them to the local forum for that region. Writers can then organize a meeting amongst themselves and either have face-to-face word sprints or simply discuss plot holes over coffee. The benefits of this can be a feeling of companionship, as well as practical aid with a writing dilemma. There should be no understating the value of a new pair of eyes on a project, as while too many cooks spoil the broth, two heads are better than one.

After the month is over, writers continue to engage with the forums year-round for advice and a whisper of that sense of community that builds over the winter months. George Anders puts it best in his article for *Forbes Magazine*, "By having access to so many peers, thousands of people were going to emerge from [NaNoWriMo] with better stories — and better ability to navigate past writing snags — than they would have enjoyed otherwise" (Anders 2013). Whilst NaNoWriMo only runs during the month of November, there is no need for users to abandon its free forums during the rest of the year. Writers, like many less pleasant creatures, are hard to get rid of.

Involvement of the Industry

In 2016 over 500,000 writers from more than 100 countries took part in NaNoWriMo (Farrington 2013). On the run up to November social media bursts into life with the #NaNoWriMo hashtag cropping up on feeds everywhere. The event has reached a point

where websites from *Buzzfeed* to *The Bookseller* produce regular content and seek to keep their readers in the know.

As positive as this is, what happens after November? Specifically, what sort of impact does NaNoWriMo have on the publishing industry once a new wave of writers have completed their manuscripts? Light investigation will turn up a common rumour heard on the NaNoWriMo forums, namely that "publishers close their doors on 1 December to keep out unpublishable NaNoWriMo manuscripts" (Murphy 2011). This rumour is further expanded on in a less reliable *Salon* article, where Laura Miller claims editors and agents take to Twitter in early December to pre-emptively put-off would-be clients (2010). "Leave NaNoWriMo out of the cover letter" urges an uncited tweet. "Worst queries I ever received as an agent always started with 'I've just finished writing my NaNoWriMo novel'" says another. If that is truly the case, then there are clearly some NaNoWriMo winners who can be seen as putting a strain on the inboxes of industry professionals. While this may be fair criticism of some, it is naive to paint each of the thousands of participants with the same brush.

Regarding those conveniently unsourced claims, people did speak out against Miller and her controversial sources. Graeme McMillan, writing on the *Time* website, points out that authors are perfectly capable of revising and editing their drafts between finishing NaNoWriMo and moving on to the query stage. He says, "The implication seems to be that, because the NaNo writers were allowed to write without fear or concern of poor quality, the quality will inevitably *be* poor" (2012).

Outside of the previous disagreement, NaNoWriMo continues to make headlines inside the publishing industry. In an article written for the FutureBook 2015 BookTech Awards, Molly Flatt interviews the creators of the writer-discipline tool Write-Track (2015). As a commentator notes, what Write-Track has created is a formalised system that many authors already employ in their day-to-day writing habits. The startup was inspired by NaNoWriMo and can be used to set writing targets, track progress and connect via the built-in social network. In many ways, it sounds like the forums of NaNoWriMo, minus the focus on one

specific month of activity. Perhaps this is what prevented it from winning the BookTech Award?

Industry involvement takes another form – that of the published authors who write pep talks and send them directly into the inboxes of participating writers. Past pep talks have been written by Maggie Stiefvater, Jenny Han, Neil Gaiman, and Lemony Snicket. There is something about receiving an email from an author such as Gaiman that thoroughly blurs the lines between writing professional and writing hopeful. The words of encouragement that arrive with a cheerful ping on an author's mobile phone will help to bring comfort to even the shyest of writers.

Writing as an Isolated Activity

The controversial Patrice Sarath says "Writing is a solitary effort that pays off when you pay close attention to what you are doing" (2009). Sarath was speaking out against NaNoWriMo specifically in this case, urging fledgling writers to avoid the glitzy attraction of community write-ins and meet ups. This section will explore the argument some make against the project, focusing on the belief that writing is not an experience to be shared.

While NaNoWriMo is not the only writing event on the calendar, it appears to be the largest – and growing still. It seems that hundreds of thousands have subscribed to the old adage that everyone has a novel buried within them. If that is the case, can it also be said that any common labourer can sit down to write the next *New York Times* bestseller? Is a certain level of training required, or is natural talent enough? Malcolm Gladwell proposes a 10,000 hour rule, whereby anyone who has performed a task for 10,000 hours will gain mastery of it (Baer 2014). This theory has since been disproved, but the question of talent vs training remains.

Perhaps we are losing something by moving away from the idea of the author as a solitary figure. There is a risk of foregoing introspection and cultivation, especially when a cyberworld of strangers lies ready to nit-pick your creation. Writing is becoming something

more dependent, something that only achieves value when it is read by someone other than the author.

Yet "[a]ccording to [Grant] Faulkner, only about 15% of NaNoWriMo's initial entrants make it to 50,000-words in the allotted time" (Anders 2013). The evolution of a culture takes time, so it will be some time before this style of authorship becomes commonplace, if indeed it ever does. Publishers keeping track of this event will be able to adapt for the better, guiding authors and protecting manuscripts from the valid concern of rush-jobs. As far as communal authorship goes, this may not be a trend that is likely to slow any time soon. If authors are in fact are moving towards a future where they are no longer viewed as divine beings of solo genius, then it will open up an environment where novice writers will not feel a choking pressure to debut with a bestseller. The literary landscape as a whole is currently intimidating for the uninitiated, preventing the arrival and development of the next generation's greats. We would not begrudge the Brontë sisters acting as each other's support network and so the same should apply to those who harness the full potential of NaNoWriMo. By receiving the aid of similarly-minded folk, authors can overcome their fear, polish their prose and query with confidence.

The publisher Candlemark and Gleam speculated that the criticism NaNoWriMo tends to face is more likely to come from people's horror at the idea that anyone can write a novel. Erica Jong made a similar point when she said, "Everyone has talent. What's rare is the courage to follow it to the dark places where it leads" (2017). I propose then that we abandon the notion of a gifted writer and begin to discuss writers as those of us brave enough to grab a torch and head into the dark plot holes of our novels.

Conclusion

This article set out to investigate the role that NaNoWriMo plays in communal authorship, examining the history of the project, impact on the industry and argument against it. What we have discovered is that writing, like any creative expression, is not something that a

person either can or cannot do. It is an ability that will improve based on their support network, willingness to learn and the opportunities afforded to them.

Fundamentally, it is something that can be cultivated with the encouraging words of a co-author, a beta-reader or a stranger on a forum. Regardless of the size of the role another writer plays in one person's manuscript, the effect will be felt and the original writer will grow from it. As Julia Crouch says, "It's this social aspect that really makes NaNoWriMo work. Whether you meet up with other people in November or not, you realise you are not alone" (Missingham 2011).

Perhaps the truth of the human condition has never been in what writers say, but what they do. The nurturing of new writers is crucial in order to bring about the next wave of literary greats. If NaNoWriMo is the conduit for that encouragement, then the writing community could do far worse.

In the words of Chris Baty, "The biggest thing separating people from their artistic ambitions is not lack a of talent […] Give someone an enormous task, a supportive community, and a friendly-yet-firm due date, and miracles will happen every time" (Baty 2014, 19).

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