

When does a writer become a writer?

By Betsy Morais, Atlantic

A 48-year-old high-school biology teacher from France, Alexis Jenni, won the country's top literary prize this year, the Prix Goncourt. When he received the honor earlier this month, Jenni told reporters, "I didn't even think that I would be published, so I could hardly dream of the Goncourt. I was a little resigned to anonymity."

Jenni's winnings are, officially, a symbolic check for 10 Euros, and, unofficially, a boost in sales for his 600-page novel, *L'art français de la guerre* (The French Art of War). In the recent past, Goncourt winners have gone on to sell around 400,000 copies of their books. But Jenni, a father of three, said he has no plans to give up his day job as a science teacher at Le Lycée Saint Marc in Lyon. He intends to remain, as he has been, "a Sunday writer."

The astounding honor that plucked Jenni from his humble weekend scribbling to rank him among the French literary elite—past Goncourt winners include Marcel Proust, Marguerite Duras, Simone de Beauvoir, and Georges Duhamel—is the rare acknowledgement of a former "nobody" as a "somebody." Since completing his education in his twenties, Jenni had been writing this and that. He sent a manuscript off to some editors, and they all rejected it. Another he did not send at all. *L'art français de la guerre* was mailed only to one publisher, Gallimard, which decided to give it a go. Upon Jenni's receipt of the prize, Le Lycée Saint Marc posted félicitons on their website under the banner: "Un Prix Goncourt au Lycée Saint-Marc." It was, perhaps, their win as much as his own.

It's the stuff of dreams: proof that those evenings spent hunched over a desk, typing furiously might, just might, not be in vain; that Paul Giamatti's character from *Sideways* does not represent an undiscovered middle-aged writer's inevitable fate. Or, as Jenni put it, "It's not because you don't do concerts that you can't play the piano."

In the Alexis Jenni school of thought, a writer may be someone, anyone, with a compulsion to scrawl or the conviction of having something to say. A writer is not defined by his career, but the simple act of writing regularly. And authors who found success through the muck of making ends meet have taken that approach for some time now, in practice at least.

Franz Kafka was a legal secretary at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague (later: In the Czech Lands), where he wrote reports like "Accident Prevention in Quarries," and rose to a top office position, Obersekretär. Though his bureaucratic labors bore literary fruit—providing context and imagery for his fiction writing—Kafka came to feel bogged down by the daily grind. "Writing and office cannot be reconciled, since writing has its center of gravity in depth, whereas the office is on the surface of life," he wrote to his fiancée in 1913. "So it goes up and down, and one is bound to be torn asunder in the process."

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