

LIFE as a WRITER

An EXCERPT from DAVID'S DIARY

by David Skillan

Can you remember where you were in the spring of 1969? I can. Soon to be 30, I was in England, busy writing a book. People often tell me I should write a book, or ask whether I have written one. As a matter of fact, I have. A long time ago.



I always knew I could write, even from an early age. The only school subjects I really enjoyed and was good at were reading, spelling, and writing lengthy compositions. And later, when I had the odd girlfriend, thanks to my romantic nature, I wrote long, rambling love letters.

In April of 1969, shortly after completing my marathon odyssey and personal journey of discovery (which unbeknownst to me when I'd set off would develop into a world tour of epic proportions), I sat down in the small spare bedroom of my parents' home in Hampshire, on the edge of the New Forest,

and spent the best part of six months, morning until night, copying notes and impressions from my diaries. I wrote and rewrote about my far-flung adventures and experiences—everything I had witnessed and everything that had happened to me, whether fascinating, arduous, harrowing, dangerous, unique, or extraordinary, over the several years I had spent travelling the world.

Then, as if living it and then writing about it all weren't challenging enough, came the really tough part: finding a publisher. I duly sent the manuscript that represented a good portion of my life thus far, entitled *For Those Who Dare: Around the World in 80 Months*, to various publishing houses in England, then waited with bated breath. Alas, although most who read it admired my resilience and mission, and professed to like my writing and the way I portrayed myself (as a quietly confident world traveller), one by one they declared that it was not suitable for their lists. A polite way of saying they didn't want it. After all that time and effort, rejection was upsetting, to say the least.

It turns out I shouldn't have taken it so personally. Many fine writers have had their work regularly rejected, some dozens of times. Indeed, I was to learn that many publishers are notorious for having missed some of the best manuscripts. There are endless stories of good manuscripts never seeing the light of day. (The late Jack Kerouac faced rejection 100 times before his book *On the Road* was published!) But at the time, that was of little consolation to me. I was experiencing one of the greatest disappointments of my life (and boy, I've had a few). I'd put my heart and soul into writing what I considered the makings of a fine book, only to have it turned down—and it hurt a lot.

But too bad. It wasn't the first time I'd faced rejection or had my work overlooked, excluded, or underestimated, and it wouldn't be the last. So after trying a number of British publishers, then both American and Canadian publishers with the same result some years later, I gave up. I was down, but not out. I had to make a living, so, not one to let grass grow under my feet, I put my manuscript in a drawer—where to this day it remains, unpublished—and moved on.

In due course, I put my writing and other newfound skills to use in other ways—producing newspaper travel articles and ads, radio commercials, public slide shows, and videos . . . and of course organizing, promoting, and leading my African safaris and worldwide tours. Shy or not, I was determined to be successful one way or another, and to make the most of my hard-won international experience, both in Europe and later in my adopted Canada.

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In retrospect, I suppose it was unrealistic of me to expect a publishing company to take on a thick, lavishly illustrated book by an unknown author. However, I remain convinced that with professional help, my manuscript would have done well and, no doubt, changed my life, as books have done for many authors. It might have opened doors that otherwise remained closed to me. As it was, I took the longer, slower route to success.

It's ironic that, though I am by no means prolific, writing has remained an important part of my life. Indeed, much of my livelihood has come through writing. My regular travel newsletters have long attracted clients. After years of keeping diaries and copious notes, I now have enough material for a couple of books. Who knows, perhaps some of my best and busiest writing years are still ahead!

Not long after my 1976 arrival in Canada, I wrote a number of travel articles that were published by *The Vancouver Sun*. The late David Wright, then the travel editor and, like me, British born, recognized my ability, befriended me, and gave me a chance. I also had a few articles and photographs published by *The Vancouver Courier*, *North Shore News*, *The Province*, *The Toronto Star*, *San Diego Union*, *Western Living*, and *Vancouver Magazine*. But I soon realized that unless one is very prolific, one must be on staff at a large newspaper or magazine to make a decent living at it. Indeed, I discovered that some travel writers are as poor as church mice. But I enjoyed writing pieces about a number of topics and places—climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, the massage parlours of Bangkok, memoirs of a tour leader, sailing up the Inside Passage, travelling through Afghanistan, motoring through Malaysia, and more. It was a thrill to see them—and my name—in print.

Writing is a lonely job and a solitary process. Most of the time you're alone with just your thoughts, and inspiration and ideas don't always come quickly or easily. Writing can be difficult and challenging. I've developed an everlasting respect for full-time writers. Besides guidebooks, which are always useful and which I usually read before, during, and even after visiting places, I've always found a good book the ideal travelling companion, helping to relieve the monotony of airport waits and long flights and helping me nod off at night.

We owe a great deal to all writers, not just to book authors, who—through their individual thoughts, ideas, and hard work—educate us about things we might otherwise know nothing of and transport us in our imaginations to places we might otherwise never go.

