

Ed Smith Left Field

From Michael Lewis to Montaigne, the best writers first live an interesting life



A most unusual kind of jealousy settled over me this week: envy for the life of an 18th- or 19th-century clergyman. Fortunately, I can explain. What do the following thinkers have in common? Thomas Bayes (Bayesian probability), Thomas Malthus (over-population), Edmund Cartwright (who invented the power loom), George Garrett (who invented the submarine). They were all parish priests.

The point, fortunately, is not that we have to enter the priesthood to think better. It wasn't necessarily God that inspired them; it was autonomy. The Church inadvertently protected them from the need to "pursue a career" with their inventions and scientific research. Their research was self-directed, guided by personal whims and passions, rather than restricted by the rules of academic disciplines. They were hobbyists not "professionals". We should remember their example.

That is one of the brilliant arguments in *Antifragile*, Nassim Nicholas Taleb's new book. Taleb himself started writing when he was still a trader. His day job bought him freedom, time and autonomy to follow his intellectual passions. He wrote as he chose. Taleb is not alone. Stendhal was a diplomat, Trollope worked as a civil servant for the Post Office, Kafka was employed by an insurance company.

Just do something

Taleb's argument makes me feel better about the awkwardness I suffer when I am asked how to pursue a "career" in writing. I've always wanted to say this: "Don't! If you really want to write, then do so. Just don't view it as a pre-arranged career, a battle campaign to be planned. Writing isn't like that. Perhaps you need to do something else first."

How many of your favourite writers, whether they are journalists or novelists, mapped out a career plan, ticking off all the available credentials and qualifications as they moved towards their prearranged destination? If your answer is more than none, then you clearly like different writers from me.

Let me give three examples. They are all writers I greatly admire, drawn from very different

genres, all of whom experienced life outside the literary world long before they paid the bills with their pens. Michael Lewis is probably the most widely read and influential journalist in the world. Following his series for *Vanity Fair* about the crisis in the eurozone, the *Economist* argued that "Europe trembles before Lewis's gaze". Lewis started out as a banker at Salomon Brothers in the 1980s. Being inside finance, rather than viewing it with contempt from the vantage point of the media or academia, did more than provide a grasp of financial detail. More importantly, Lewis understood the nature of the beast. What he had seen, felt and lived as a banker formed the insights of his books—even though they were written long after he had fallen out of love with finance. Lewis did not pursue "contacts", he lived his life.

How many of your favourite authors mapped out a career plan?

As a poet, calligrapher, librettist and novelist, Vikram Seth's work could not be more different from the urgent relevance of Lewis's writings. But the idea of Seth studying "creative writing" is as unlikely as Lewis taking a further degree in finance. At school, Seth was thought more likely to be a politician than a writer. After studying PPE at Oxford, he pursued macroeconomics at Stanford. The real world fascinated him first; the means of artistic expression came later. After Seth made an epic voyage through China, Tibet and Nepal, his father urged him to write up his travel notes. They became *From Heaven Lake*, his first book. Nor did Seth "plan" his books; he was too busy writing them. He wrote *A Suitable Boy* (over 1,400 pages) in full before submitting it to publishers.

If Lewis is a champion of middle-distance running, and Seth leads the field over the marathon, Matthew Parris is one of our greatest sprinters, master of the 1,200-word essay. He was an MP before finding his voice as parliamentary sketch-writer and columnist for *The Times*. Public life came first, then the writer's life. The practical realm gave way to reflection.

The careers—or, better, the lives—of Seneca and Montaigne follow the same pattern.

Reflecting on all this led to a startling realisation. For 13 years, I was a professional cricketer. In my conscious mind, my ambitions in cricket were very simple and obvious—to play for England, to improve as a batsman, to succeed as a captain and so on. My friends often questioned why I carried on so long, even after I'd dropped out of contention for the England side. I can now see that the answers I gave—"I'm batting better this season... a breakthrough is round the corner"—were honest but incomplete.

Away from the crease

The untold story, which I didn't understand, let alone acknowledge, is that cricket informed the rest of my life. First, it provided rich experience. A day lived in a position of leadership teaches you more than a year spent studying leadership in others. Later, when I withdrew into the writer's world, I already had a deep well of emotions and experiences with which I was still grappling.

Secondly, cricket gave me freedom. For seven months a year, I had a reasonably secure job (albeit a very demanding one). In the other five months, I could write exactly as I wanted—whether books or journalism—without having to pretend to be someone else to please an editor or publisher. For five months a year, I could live as a self-tasking academic, only without any papers to mark or research proposals to submit. I could follow any intellectual threads that interested me, no matter how obscure or unconnected to my "career". In the process, I developed a love of freedom and autonomy that stayed with me even when writing replaced cricket as my main job.

Aristotle's definition of the free man is one who is free with his opinions—as a side effect of being free with his time. The Church provided that freedom to the 19th-century parson. Cricket provided it for me. How back-to-front we get things. I used to think my vain, childish obsession with sport had taken up far too much time, preventing me from more serious pursuits. Now I feel only deep gratitude. ●

Ed Smith's *"Luck: What It Means and Why It Matters"* is published by Bloomsbury (£16.99)