Novelist opens up about mental health and financial difficulties – and one thing you can't get a book deal without

Each Monday, our Money team speaks to someone from a different profession to discover what it's really like. This week we chat to Lancashire-born author Katy Regan, whose five novels have been translated into multiple languages.

People think my job is… Making up stories. They're right – but sometimes it feels more like crafting a very difficult embroidery in the dark, wearing ski gloves.

The most rewarding thing about my job is… Creating characters and a world that feels so alive and real that you miss it all when you've finished the book.

Money latest: Traders bet on pound dropping 8%

Writing fiction is a very financially unstable job… I had a job as a magazine features writer, and my first novel came from a column I wrote there. When I got a book deal, I started writing novels full-time and did that for 15 years but always supplementing it with freelance journalism. I found it impossible to write quickly enough and without stress enough to produce a novel per year, which is basically what you have to do to survive financially – especially as a single parent. Six months ago, I made the difficult decision to get a full-time job as a copywriter, and I now do that as well as novel writing and freelance journalism.

Book advances can be huge… But only for a minuscule proportion

of very successful authors. Most authors are what we call “mid-list”, they tick along, haven’t had a bestseller, but earn a living of sorts. The great thing about being a novelist, however, is you never know if the next book could be the one that makes it big – that’s inspiring. My advances have always been paid in three parts: on signature of the contract, on finishing and the publisher accepting your manuscript, and finally, on publication. So you need to be good at managing your finances to not spend it all at once. If you “earn out” your advance – basically make more money for the publisher than the advance -then you also get royalties, which are a percentage of the sale of each book.

Foreign rights sales… Can make great extra money for authors. I’ve had the most success in Holland and Germany. I have also had deals in the US which can be lucrative. Some authors are also lucky enough (very lucky indeed) to sell the film rights to adapt their novel for the screen.

It’s virtually impossible to get a book deal without a great agent representing you… They have relationships with all the major publishing houses so it’s very hard to get your work read without an agent getting it in front of those editors. My agent gets 15% commission and 20% for foreign sales. I would find out who represents authors whose books you really admire and are similar in feel and genre to yours and then approach those agents. Read the submission guidelines on the agent’s website.

You can’t write a novel without… Empathy. Being able to imagine how other people feel and especially what motivates them, is key for storytelling, in my experience.

Anyone can learn techniques for better writing… Things like the principles of the five-act structure, or the fact that in every scene there needs to be an “inciting incident”, or how to find your character’s flaw. In my experience, however, it’s a bit like knowing how to build a car but not drive one. There

are so many courses – and one excellent podcast I would recommend is called How to Write a Book with Elizabeth Day. Brilliant advice and exercises too.

Read more:
What it's like to be… a publican
'Do I need to pay a parking fine from five years ago?'
Should we be worried about the markets?
Top chefs pick favourite budget eats across the UK

When I get a bad review… I might go and look at the bad reviews on a book I have loved to remind myself that-every author/book gets bad reviews. People can be so brutal, it's funny. They write things like: "Well that's a whole day I'm never going to get back" and I think to myself, well it can't have been that bad if you persisted spending a whole day reading it.

Being an author can be very hard on your mental health… Especially when you're under contract and there are deadlines to meet. My own at times has been really badly affected: addiction problems, sleep loss, anxiety, and depression. Writing a novel is such a long, lonely job – you very easily lose sight of what you are trying to do and if it's any good. Keeping the faith is the hardest thing but the feeling of satisfaction when you complete it is huge!

I've discovered lots of coping mechanisms… 1/ knowing when a project isn't working and it's time to let it go. This is very freeing. 2/ Finding a writing partner or just someone to share your work with or talk to. The solitude of writing can be quite grinding. 3/ Get out and be part of writing life: book yourself on a little retreat in a B&B to just write, go on research trips, go on long walks to think, go to see exhibitions that may inspire you. Nobody can find inspiration sitting in their own four walls day after day.

There are perks…The freedom… if you're writing a novel set in

Italy, you can go to Italy and claim back on expenses. You also might get sent other authors' books to review, so that's lovely. Who doesn't love free books? The biggest perk though is that when it's going well, or you find the flow, it's one of the best feelings I have ever experienced in my life. Quite exhilarating!

I'll never be able to retire… I hope I'm like Jilly Cooper, still writing at 87 (and maybe with a fantastic TV series to my name). If I had been better with money when I'd had those great advances, especially from the US, I could have saved much more. Regrets there!

Katy's latest novel, How To Find Your Way Home, is out now