The Road Less Traveled
MAKING IT WITHOUT AN MFA By Thomas Mullen

WARNING: I do not have an MFA, teach creative writing, or live in New York City. For these reasons alone, you should probably ignore any career advice I offer. Best turn the page to another story, quickly.

Still here? Then I should also note that I’m a novelist, with five published novels so far, and have been a full-time writer for eight of the past twelve years. That may seem like an unbelievable plot twist, but I’m here to inform you that it’s possible to make it as a writer without an MFA. As application season draws near, and you’re debating whether or not to attend grad school, you should know that going without an MFA has serious downsides—but so does taking out big loans for an arts degree in today’s economy. Obstacles abound on either side of this choice.

I never set out to be an exception to any rules. At first I didn’t even realize there were rules to being a writer. Like so many others, I was convinced I would be published in my early twenties. Yet as my twenties passed and the rejection letters and failed manuscripts piled up, I worried I’d made a fatal error. I realized a little late that MFA programs, once rare, have become commonplace and that a Standard Road for Writers had been blazed: college, MFA, publication, teaching job. I had unknowingly ventured down a less trodden path rife with thorny underbrush, snakes, and occasional mudslides. An MFA had not been an option for me. I graduated college in 1996 with double the average amount of student loan debt. My father’s business had gone under during my junior year; my parents declared bankruptcy and our family lost our house, so I was lucky to even graduate. Given this frightening financial insecurity, I couldn’t consider going into further debt so some writing professor could teach me about irony.

While I knew that MFA scholarships existed, I didn’t want to risk the heartache of applying, being accepted, and then finding out I couldn’t swing tuition.

Besides, the prouder part of me argued, as a writer I feel duty-bound to avoid clichés in my prose, and the idea of enrolling in grad school or moving to Brooklyn would seemingly make my very life a cliché. How could that be a good thing, for me or for my writing?

Still, as I toiled on my manuscripts at night and on weekends while holding down jobs that helped me pay off my debt and feed myself, I noticed that the words “attended graduate school” appeared in the bios of all my favorite young writers. They’re learning all this stuff I’m not learning! I began to fear. They’re being given the secrets to success while I type in my apartment alone! My goal had always been to write novels, not to teach, yet the two appeared inextricably linked in a way that felt deeply unfair. The deck was stacked, the game rigged. Every time I sent an unsolicited query letter to an agent, I feared that I was showing up to a gunfight with a knife.

That fear lingered until the day my agent told me that my first novel was going to be published. Suddenly the lack of an MFA didn’t matter so much.

I’m hardly some antiestablishment, academia-hating populist. I attended a New England prep school and a private liberal arts college. I loved being a student. I am the son of an art teacher, and I have many professor friends who love their jobs. What I’m saying is I might have enjoyed an MFA program. I might have even been a natural for grad school and academia. If you’re filling out an application right now, I am in no way hoping to dissuade you.

But I also know plenty of disillusioned survivors of MFA programs who don’t enjoy teaching and are suffering through it—some of them adjuncts locked into low earnings and very little stability—either as a perceived penance for failing to score that big book deal or because they feel that they’re trapped on a certain career path. And I know many people who earned graduate degrees and now toil outside academia, unable to land tenured jobs and nearly suffocating beneath the weight of student loan debt, which forces them to delay other life decisions. As someone who knows what it’s like to literally run out of money, I assure you there is nothing romantic or artistically noble about being broke. Writers should make smart financial decisions about their futures.

If you’re considering diverting from the Standard Road, wielding your machete to hack your own way through the writerly jungle, you’d best brace yourself for blisters on your hands and the
occasional snakebite. But it can be done. You can make your own path. I did, and here's what I learned along the way.

There are downsides to going without an MFA.
First, let's be honest: There are serious drawbacks to not taking the Standard Road. You probably won't even know about (or, in some cases, have the academic credentials required for) fellowships that can make it easier to write your first book. You'll feel cut off from the world of academic writers and their journals and conferences, and you won't have the access to agents that the best MFA programs provide. One award-winning novelist and professor recently thanked his research assistants in the acknowledgments of his new book, and I'd like to break it to you now: You won't have any research assistants. It's also unlikely that you'll be a writing professor down the road.

While some writers without MFAs do get hired to teach, this rare occurrence is typically reserved for a select few—namely, those who have published a number of big, critically acclaimed books. So instead of summers off and sabbaticals to focus on your books, you'll get three weeks' vacation, if you're lucky.

Another advantage an MFA provides is a ready-made peer group that's more likely to hold influential positions in the publishing and academic industries. The friends and colleagues one meets during a graduate writing program become professors who know about job opportunities and fellowships; they get editing jobs at literary magazines and publish their friends' stories; they become published authors, happy to blurb their friends' books. Forgoing an MFA means forgoing this built-in community. Which means that you'll just have to build your own.

Find your community.
We writers tend to be shy, introverted oddballs, but don't let yourself become a hermit. If you aren't in an MFA program, you'll need to find a way to build your own community. This might mean breaking out of your shell a bit: Join writers groups, take a workshop at a local writing center, go to readings and events. You'll have to seek your people out, but they might not be so hard to find. One of the things I loved most about my last full-time day job, at a marketing agency, was that I hung out all day with designers, illustrators, programmers, and other writers: people like me who love to create. Now that I'm a full-time novelist again, I make an effort to schedule regular lunch and coffee dates with novelists, journalists, designers, professors, and other oddballs with unconventional jobs and flexible schedules. Whatever your work situation, find some fellow travelers with whom you can share your
writing, discuss your artistic challenges, compare notes, laugh, and stay (reasonably) sane. The more you put into your community, the more you'll get out of it—even if none of you have MFAs.

No, a writing job won't kill your desire to write. If you won't be teaching, how will you support yourself while you work on your first (or even your fourth) novel? Unless you're truly fortunate, book advances and royalties will last only so long, so a day job or reliable freelance career is necessary for all but the very few. You absolutely must have a backup plan, some way to earn money while you write. The best plan is one that can lead you up another career ladder so that if, God forbid, you never do land that book deal, you'll still be earning a living.

You've probably heard the conventional wisdom that it's best to have a non-writing day job so that you can magically save your writing energy for nights and weekends. This is perhaps the worst advice I've ever received. But I followed it, in my early twenties, suffering through right-brain jobs like consulting and nonprofit medical research. I needed a “real job” so I could pay the rent and my big loans, but I was afraid that more lucrative and faster-paced fields like law or advertising would suck up my nights and weekends. So I toiled unhappily in these dry workplaces, hiding my writing life like it was some superhero secret identity. I felt out of place, and because I wasn't using my best skills, I didn't advance and wasn't making much money by the time I hit thirty.

The fact is, all jobs take time and energy. Whether you will in fact have the desire and energy to write at night has nothing to do with your day job. No matter what you do, you are going to be tired at 6 PM. You might as well get tired doing something you're actually good at, because at least that way you'll be in a good mood when you open Microsoft Word at 7 PM. And you're more likely to be promoted, make decent money, and feel good about the work you're doing while collecting those rejection letters.

For my last day job I worked as a marketing copywriter, a field I didn't enter until I was in my thirties, during a dry spell between novels. I wish I'd chosen it years earlier. Advertising and marketing agencies actually want creative people, especially if you can write fast; I enjoyed the work and felt invigorated by it. Was it as fun as writing novels? No. But it was far better than my previous jobs, which treated creativity like some suspect character trait, or sign of insanity.

Avoid the mistake I made in my twenties and find a job that allows you to take advantage of your gift rather than hide it. It won't in any way hinder your writing. You will not run out of desire to write your novel just because you wrote
marketing copy for a bank all day. Trust me.

Finding time to write will be your greatest battle. When I was in my twenties, sometimes I had to invent excuses for why I couldn’t go out with my friends on Saturday night and instead stayed home to write. Later, when I was married and childless, I sometimes had to tell my wife that I loved her but, no, I couldn’t go to that museum exhibition with her on Sunday because I needed to write. These decisions may not have pleased my twenty-something friends, or even my amazing and supportive wife, but they were the choices I needed to make to carve out writing time. If you aren’t in a graduate writing program that gives you that time, you’ll need to make some hard, and potentially unpopular, decisions.

And if you plan to have kids, this will only get harder. As the fortysomething father of two little boys, I can assure you the “I need to stay home and write” line doesn’t work once you’ve reproduced. Kids’ ears simply don’t hear it, and hardworking spouses shouldn’t have to tolerate it much either. I wrote nearly all of my fourth novel, Darktown, on Sunday evenings after the kids went to bed, as both my wife and I had full-time jobs. Was it ideal? No. Would I have loved more free time on the weekends to focus on the book? Of course. But if you choose to have kids, and you don’t have sabbaticals or summers off, you won’t have that luxury. Even if you don’t have kids, life will still do its best to get in the way of your writing. Whatever your path in life may be, you’ll need to make sacrifices and find ways to squeeze writing time in whenever you can.

Here’s the good news: Of my first four novels, the two that sold the best and received the most acclaim were the two I wrote while holding down full-time jobs (the other two I wrote as a full-time novelist, living off advances and options). This is probably more of a coincidence than anything, but it shows that having lots of free time to write is no guarantee that your work will be better.

You don’t have to publish stories first. Because so many who take the Standard Road study short fiction in their MFA workshops and start out by publishing the collection they’ve polished in class, one can get the false impression that stories are a necessary stepping stone to publication. MFA programs tend to perpetuate this belief, with most fiction workshops focused on the short story form. But if your goal is to publish a novel, you should write a novel. Getting a story published is almost as hard and merely a fraction as lucrative (if it pays anything at all), so pursue short stories only if you actually enjoy writing them.

It’s true that many agents do read
literary journals, hoping they'll find a gem of a story, then contact that author to find if he or she is also working on a novel. But those same agents read unsolicited queries every day (or their assistants do, at least), and if yours intrigues them, they'll want to see your book. I wasted a few months trying to write and publish stories, sending them on to journals only to be rejected months later. I was trying to be something I wasn't. The fact is, nearly every idea I've ever had has been a novel idea. If you enjoy writing short fiction, go for it. But don't do it out of a sense that you must. If your goal is to publish a novel, your lack of published short stories will not be a hindrance. Nothing trains you for writing a great novel like writing a few bad novels first.

You'll need to be motivated. Many writers, especially younger ones, have a hard time getting started, so the discipline of an MFA program and the community of writers in a like-minded pursuit helps tie them to the mast of their keyboard. If you have trouble getting motivated, you might benefit from grad school. If you can't swing tuition, sign on with a writers group to keep yourself accountable and on a schedule.

You'll need to read, read, read—on your own, without a syllabus (though some helpful reading lists can be found online). I'll leave the can-you-really-teach-writing debate for someone else to argue, but regardless, if you aren't benefiting from the wisdom and guidance of a professor or mentor, you'll need to be that much more driven to read, learn, experiment, respond to criticism, and learn from mistakes on your own.

Target your agent pitches perfectly. Pitching is soul-crushing and time-consuming, yes, and it took me years to finally land an agent. If you aren't in an MFA program and aren't benefiting from occasional visits from New York City agents—a perk for student-many of the top programs—it's doubly important that you pitch wisely. For all the advice you find in magazines, this one on how to write a strong pitch research which agents represent who writers, take any feedback graciously and never, ever give up.

I finally found an agent when I was pitching the right ones. As agents always say in their rejection letters, this is taste-based industry and everyone has a different opinion. They're not lying. Over the years I'd pitched to pretty much any agent who represented writers who books I'd liked, which in some cases meant novelists like Amy Tan, Jo Irving, or Michael Ondaatje. In retrospect, the manuscripts I was writing had little resemblance to the work of the authors, so I made little headway. Thirt the New Yorker published its now-famous "Future of American Fiction" iss
featuring twenty short stories by young writers. I read every story. If I particularly enjoyed one, I sought out and read a book by the author; if I liked the book and felt it was similar to my style and tone, I pitched that writer’s agent. I sent six pitches and got three requests to see my manuscript: a .500 batting average exponentially greater than my previous rate. That’s how I landed my agent, Susan Golomb, whose up-and-coming client Jonathan Franzen was included in that issue. She loved my work and took me on as a client—and she didn’t care that I don’t have an MFA.

Maybe it’s just because I’d been writing for years and had finally written something worthy of publication (which I did partly by following the advice of some of the people who had rejected my earlier work). Still, the lesson is to think of pitching your book to agents like a micro-targeting advertiser, going after only the agents who have demonstrated a taste in the particular kind of book you’re writing. Otherwise you’re wasting your time.

Embrace that chip on your shoulder. The Standard Road for Writers is well paved. I often find myself, at conferences or parties, standing in a circle talking with a half dozen writers and realizing, as they talk about a fellowship or summer writing seminar, that I’m the only one who doesn’t teach. This is a weird feeling. These are supposed to be my people, yet I feel like an outsider, someone from a different world than them.

This feeling never goes away, but you can use it to your advantage. I’m a huge sports fan, and I love how even the most successful athletes always remember that one time they were snubbed. In 2000, Tom Brady was famously the 199th draft pick out of college. As a sophomore, Michael Jordan didn’t make his high school varsity team. Neither got over it. Writers need motivation, and I confess that not being part of the academic club adds to my competitive nature. I didn’t choose to be different, but that’s the road I was placed on by financial circumstance, and I’m determined to succeed regardless.

After all, we artists are supposed to do things differently. We are predisposed to choose the road less traveled, to consider the undervalued perspective, to argue the case that others would rather ignore. What does it mean for an art form if its practitioners increasingly come from a certain background? When the paths they’ve taken inevitably merge onto that one well-paved road? What happens when art becomes the last stop on an academic assembly line?

Twelve years after my first book deal, I’m happy to report that no editor has ever asked me if I have an MFA. What matters to publishers is the book you write, not the path you took to get there. ☹️