Arts & Culture

How I Managed to Write a Book without Going (Too) Broke

A grant, a small advance, a supportive spouse, and the $100 I found outside the library

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IN A CERTAIN SENSE, I have been an employee of the Canadian government for the roughly eighteen months during which I wrote my book, *How Artists Make Money and How Money Makes Artists*. Not in the sense of having job security or benefits or a pension contribution or a direct supervisor or a specific place to be or a title, but who's to say that those are what make a job (neither Uber nor the *New York Times* offers them)? In the important sense, though—the sense where they give me money and I provide them with tangible proof that I have been working along the parameters we agreed upon when I started—I'm basically a bureaucrat for good words, arranged intelligently. Because the bulk of the money that I have seen for this book—and, if we are to be realistic, will ever see for this book—comes directly from the Canadian government.

Though it's certainly not the case in terms of raw dollar amounts—not even the actual bureaucrats and administrators who shepherd these programs are pulling in hundreds of millions in compensation and bonuses, let alone stock options—in terms of actual number and geographic distribution of artists supported by it, government money is the current reigning world champion of keeping artists from literally starving. This is without getting cute with our borders: I am not counting novelists pulling pogey as a writer's retreat or the trickling implications of who exactly is paying for a tenured fine arts professor's salary when you get right down to it. In terms of direct, purposeful transfer, arts

funding is propping up an egregious amount of artistic activity. And the vast majority of that funding comes in the form of grants.

If you know someone who is not a household name but seems to be making a go of it as an artist, they are likely in whole or in part living at the grace of government-connected grants, whether from an arts council, a ministry of culture, or just the good old-fashioned tax break for charitable givings. If they are employed in any art form recognized as such when the Habsburgs were still a dynasty, or any kind of performing art that does not end up on multiplex or arena screens, then no matter what they say or what their personal background is, their career—from the buildings they need to access to their probably inadequate salary—is almost entirely thanks to government subsidy.

Here in Canada—though pretty much equally in any country that cannot rely on its status as the unquestioned global hegemon to lightly force its cultural projects down the throat of the available public—that is also true of the printed word and a hefty chunk of words broadcast in any form. Even if an artist can afford to turn up their nose at it, the entire structure that allows them to show, see, and otherwise participate in the arts is so enmeshed with government money that rejecting it individually is as meaningless as refusing to eat Madagascar vanilla to help with your carbon footprint. The world is still on fire, except in this case the fire is hot, hot taxpayer funds going to someone else's modern horror clown theatre experiment. The only art forms not substantially propped up by grants, breaks, and occasional infrastructure and event funding are those that have not yet successfully convinced the world they are, properly, arts. (Don't worry, their time will come.)

IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY, as the question of government funding for the arts started to bubble up, it's hard to overstate how little culture that could be considered Canadian there actually was, or how little of it was consumed with any vigour by Canadians. The Massey Commission, formed in part to study the question of funding for arts—it was also, more importantly to

the government of the day, tasked with figuring out post-secondary funding—surveyed a landscape that was truly dire.

It received written and oral testimony from arts and cultural organizations across the country, and the consequent list of facts and anecdotes could be easily repurposed into a series of devastating one-liners about the health of a cultural industry. The commission heard that Canada's National Gallery was in one tiny wing of what was then known as Canada's National Museum, and its annual funding was outdone by the Chicago Natural History Museum. It was pointed out that, in more than one year during the 1940s, the entirety of the Canadian publishing industry had managed to put out twelve novels written in English by Canadian authors, making an English-language Canadian novelist literally one in a million. The Book Publishers wing of the Toronto Board of Trade noted that, per capita, Canada consumed more foreign books and periodicals than any other nation on earth. Theatre companies admitted they would not advertise that plays were of Canadian origin, because audiences wouldn't bother buying tickets.

There are a few reasons to doubt the absolute bleakness of this testimony. For one, it was given almost exclusively by organized societies that were very actively trying to get government money for their causes, and they knew their audience. The Massey Commission was named after its chair, Vincent Massey, eventually Canada's first native-born governor general, and meanwhile the closest thing Canada had to an aristocrat: scion of a farming equipment dynasty, former high commissioner to London, and, most relevant, occasional writer of jeremiads about the threat posed by American culture on Canada, including 1948's *On Being Canadian*, which came out shortly before he took on the lead role in the commission. As far as the arts were concerned, Massey believed two things.

First, he was firmly committed to the secular-humanist idea that the arts were among the chief edifying forces of contemporary life: he described the

commission as being "concerned with nothing less than the spiritual foundations of our natural life." Equally, he wanted to ensure that Canada maintained and expanded upon its distinct identity. Well, distinct from America, anyway; he was enough of an anglophile to have been a trustee at both Tate and the British National Gallery.

As Paul Litt described it in his 1992 history *Muses, Masses and the Massey Commission*, Massey oversaw a group that "represented a reactionary elitism geared towards preserving the establishment culture and values of a bygone day in a new era of cultural pluralism." This was the country's elite codifying the trappings of their social class as the national interest; as Litt later points out, "Most of the commissioners were friends-of-government insiders who belonged to the same quasi-academic cultural elite and were more concerned about national culture than the arts per se."

This was reflected in the form the Canada Council for the Arts eventually took. The Massey Commission came out strongly for some form of public subsidy, but the concept was controversial enough that it took eight years and the windfall estate taxes from a pair of Canadian industrialists for things to take shape. Once the money was flowing, though, it flowed overwhelmingly to well-established artists and especially to well-established institutions; until the turn of the millennium, arts funding in Canada was split about 80–20 in favour of organizations, which, in addition to supporting artists, also had a tendency to support sizable administrations. It was, in short, as much a broad industrial subsidy as an arts program.

However one may feel about the fairness of that particular set-up—and the Canada Council has since worked to change it: since 2017, it's been much closer to a 55–45 split in favour of the big organizations—it did solidify a homegrown industry, even if it did not change the majority of Canadians' level of excitement about explicitly Canadian content. From the land of twelve novelists, there are now roughly 200,000 people, according to government

employment surveys, who primarily spend their time making some form of art. The Canada Council funded only 1,125 major projects last year, so it's fair to assume that a pretty good number of those people have found some way to do it without cashing government cheques or, anyway, without *only* cashing government cheques.

At the risk of looking my own gift horse too squarely in the mouth, the degree to which this program actually works is a bit harder to establish. By the measure of how many people in the country are able to piece together a living as artists, the Canada Council has done its job. Not only are artists able to sustain entire careers, there exist artists who don't even need to directly access the funding to get buoyed by it: they get by with their artistic or sideline outputs, while the galleries or book publishers or film equipment rental companies they use pay their bills with both direct and downstream grant money.

There is some market and appetite for Canadian creations, and so a meaningful tranche of people can devote themselves entirely to creating Canadian culture. As industrial policy, it's hard to argue with government grants: they do sustain industries that artists rely on in all sorts of ways, even if these artists never fill out a grant application themselves. By the Massey Commission's own logic, and the de facto stance of the Canada Council to this day, things are far murkier. The goal was not only to have more artists working, it was to build a distinctly Canadian culture, in particular one that could withstand the overwhelming cultural assault from the United States. I don't know to what degree that would have been possible, but it plainly hasn't worked. Canada bleeds potential artists to the US at staggering rates—or did from the time of the founding of the Canada Council to the second Donald Trump term—and true financial independence in our country often relies significantly on cracking through in that market, even if you physically stay within our borders.

The esteem for Canadian art among the general public has not appreciably improved, even if we do have a few more cultural icons we can cling to (cultural icons who, outside maybe Gord Downie and Québécois culture, largely earned

that reputation beyond our borders). The best that can be said is that art made by and for Canadians has not been wiped off the map. Perhaps that's the best we could have hoped for, but it still leaves us a branch plant, even in our artistic endeavours. Maybe we'll get better at it as our neighbour declines and we try to find ways to define ourselves beyond just opposition to it. In the meantime, I guess, the prospects of being a Canadian artist are a bit better now than in the late 1940s, though we may not be any further ahead on figuring out exactly why the "Canadian" part of that term is expressly relevant. Unless you're filling out a grant application, of course.

The origin of a thing isn't necessarily its truth. To whatever extent nationalist drum beating is part of the unspoken logic that justifies continued support of the arts, the practical concern of artists—and, by and large, the panels and bodies that distribute the money—is making sure we can all keep getting by. It should go without saying that, like virtually every artist I know who has received some form of government grant, I'm not particularly driven by enhancing Canadian cultural prestige. I suppose, in a certain way, I am trying to foster an understanding of a unique Canadian identity, although only in the oblique sense of trying to understand general human culture with the limitations and perspectives of someone who has lived in the country my entire life. (And I should hope it is extremely obvious to any future granting authority that, despite what I have said here, my true beliefs are whatever I wrote in the application, especially if fervent patriotism is now an important consideration.) All of which is to say that, practically speaking, I'm not currently too fussed about why the money is there, I just need it if I'm going to keep doing this.

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VIRTUALLY EVERY GRANT, even if it's explicitly pitched to the delicately titled "emerging" artist, requires a fairly substantial investment of time and, by implication, resources well before anyone even begins an application. For our emerging friends, that is going to be something like a specific degree, almost certainly post-secondary if not outright graduate level. Unless you have an absolute knockout reference from a professor or artist with a pretty direct connection to the degree-granting body—personal connections are explicitly guarded against in public grants, but it's a lot easier to fudge if the funding is private—you will need not just a portfolio but also some proof that someone somewhere other than your school thinks your work is worth something: a group show, publication in a literary magazine, choreography or performance for some other company. But not too much, because then you're not emerging anymore, and you have to compete with the regular artists.

Standard artist grants might require less explicit credentials in exchange for more proof of work. And the work may have to be clearly related to what you're claiming you're going to do, unless the grant promotes "exploration" or skill building—and that usually means a different technique or subject, not a medium. Someone who is primarily a photographer is going to be hard-pressed to get their series of paintings funded, let alone a book that's primarily words (well, maybe a memoir), unless they've been consistently showing and publishing in those mediums too. Prior to my first book, I had about fifteen years' experience writing journalism, criticism, and essays, most of which could easily be described as literary in both intent and venue—most of it for national publications—and I was politely but pointedly discouraged from applying for most grants, since my experience was professional but not, you know, the right kind of professional. It was only after researching, writing, and publishing my first book that I would even be considered for a grant.

Now, as hoops to jump through go, even I wouldn't call these grossly unfair: anyone can claim they're anything, and given the rather restricted pool of funding, it makes plenty of sense to ensure the person you're giving money to can prove that they can and will do the thing they're getting money for, to say

nothing of establishing that someone other than them thinks they have some merit or talent for what they're making. But these hoops take money and time to clear well before any money is distributed; even to the degree that grants seem like some kind of wasteful public largesse, they are as much a laurel for making it this far as they are a meaningful support system.

Which brings me to the back end of that sentence, about what I "need" to "keep doing this." Having wiggled my way through all the necessary qualifications, and then written an absolute banger of an application, I was awarded just shy of $25,000 by the Canadian government to complete my book—$24,808, to be exact, which was the submitted number because I thought it made my calculations look more honest. At the time, $25,000 was the maximum amount an individual could get for one piece of work; it has since been raised to $60,000. Though you can combine grants from multiple funding bodies (each requiring its own separate application) or grant streams, this is essentially the most an individual can get from the Canadian government for creating any lone piece of work. And many grants either let you apply once a year or won't approve another grant until your previous project is confirmed completed, so concurrent funding is hard to pull off.

Between initial research, grant application, actual research, writing, and rewriting, this book took me a little over two meaningful (though not, as we'll get into, uninterrupted) years of work to complete. Even if I did it all in the thirteen months I foolishly promised I would do it in, the roughly $25,000 I got would still not count as a livable, let alone minimum, wage for my labour (at least in Canadian terms; even with the exchange rate, I'm beating the American rate by a cool $2). Not only did I not meet that timeline, I have a wife and two children who I'm fairly committed to not actively starving; astute readers will have noted that even with the maximum amount of money I can get from the national program explicitly designed to support the creation of artistic work in Canada, I presumably needed some other money to make this work.

Let's see if some radical, memoirish honesty is enough to earn me my artist badge here. I won't paste in the budget spreadsheet I fret over monthly, but for the time I spent writing this book, my family decided we needed a little under $8,000 a month, after taxes, to set our table. This puts us pretty much dead on the average household family in Alberta, where we live, although a cool $13,000 above the median per year. My instinct, having grown up underneath that mark, is to start sputtering off mealy-mouthed justifications about how thoroughly unworthy I am for any sympathy or financial support, but I'll admit to being someone with a healthy sense of self-worth / artistic ego and say a roughly average income doesn't seem like an unreasonable expectation for, well, any job at all, frankly. But definitely not one as culturally white-collar-coded as a writer. And extra-definitely not for me!

Much as I love to indulge my feelings and justifications on the matter, they're ultimately pretty much moot: my wife is doing all the heavy lifting here. Since I started writing books, she has contributed somewhere between 60 and 70 percent of our income, depending on precisely who wants to give me money for my little words in any given month. If her stated justifications for why she accepts this arrangement are to be believed, I owe this largesse to a mutual embrace of the tenets of feminist division of household labour ideas, and to the fact she thinks I'm a special little guy. I also have her family to thank for a down payment on a house, which I can say from experience unlocks a whole lot of tolerance, understanding, and interrelational progressivism, in addition to the more obvious financial security.

My wife is an even more profound benefactor when you consider that her earned money and family money granted me the other major source of my income, such as it was, during this whole book project: savings. I spent about eighteen months, before the grant was deposited, conceiving of this book, budgeting for the probable time it would take me to create it, applying for various grants, and waiting for news about whether I would actually get those grants, during which I was able to squirrel away about an extra $6,000 to supplement my grant. And I was able to raise this amount only because I spent

the majority of this time doing advertising work for a freelance wage exorbitantly higher than anything I could ever dream of charging for the journalism, criticism, and essays.

With the $5,000 I pulled aside from the sale of our previous house, I was almost set up to cover my monthly $3,000 contribution to the family finances for a year or so of writing. Added to the half of the $5,500 advance I got for signing the contract for this book, eighteen months' worth of freelance gigs that amount to another $4,000, $104 worth of royalty from my previous book, $100 I found outside the library while researching this book, and steady but unrelated payments from the Canada Child Benefit and Carbon Rebate programs, I was able to piece together enough of a buffer to allow for fourteen months of time focused mostly on putting this book together. When it became obvious that that wasn't going to cut it, I got various other jobs, which served only to slow things down further. In fairness to the grant program, that's on me.

What the grant was, then, was necessary but not sufficient. And maybe it's not even fair for me to call it necessary: I had savings, and support, and skills that allowed me a flexible enough day-ish job. Perhaps I could have pieced those things together and shown more steel between the doing-this-because-I-gotta-eat work, and the raising of children and attempting to be a decent partner to the person who supports me, and the helping of in-laws and parents who have also supported me, and the trying-to-carve-out-a-sense-of-self time. But if some of the point of trying to be an artist is to know thyself, I can say I could not have done this without a grant.

I need a constant source of external validation, which a jury of your peers represents. I am constitutionally incapable of devoting meaningful brain power to more than two important things in a day, and most days it's all I can do to give it to one. But most importantly, these things require time, and whatever my advantages, I need to buy it back from the world's demands in bulk. I had sort of hoped that by this point I would have written my own cheque for that purpose,

but here we are. In every future I am comfortable picturing, I will be applying for these things until I'm dead—creatively if not literally.

Where I land with my personal grant is roughly where grants exist altogether: necessary but not sufficient. Unlike more personal forms of patronage, grants emerged as an ancillary to a much more important force defining art: the market. Whatever our thoughts on the importance of cultural meaning or the inherent worth of artistic pursuit, by the time grants came into being, both concepts were subservient to the idea that, if it's worthwhile, people will pay you for it without any intermediary. Until a more fundamental societal shakeup, grants are only ever going to be a consolation, another recognition that you get to call yourself an artist but not necessarily feed yourself off that fact.

About David Berry (View All Articles)

David Berry is a writer and cultural critic in Toronto. His work has appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, *Hazlitt*, *Toronto Life*, and elsewhere, and he was an arts and culture columnist for the *National Post* for five years.