

2016 Novelist Income Survey Results

Collected and organized by [Jim C. Hines](#)

There's a lot of misinformation about the fabulous lifestyle of the working novelist. Everyone knows once you write a book, the money starts rolling in, right? There's champagne and movie deals and hanging out with J. K. Rowling and Stephen King and Rick Castle.

Or maybe you've heard the opposite extreme, how novelists live on water and Ramen, making more money from scrounging couch cushions than we do from the books we've poured our blood and souls into.

For nine years, I've been doing an [annual blog post about my writing income](#). I know a few other authors who've done the same. The main idea is to put the data out there to help build a more realistic picture of life as a working writer.

Those few data points are better than none, but this year, I wanted to go bigger. For roughly six weeks, from the beginning of January through mid-February, I collected data from novelists who had at least one book published prior to 12/31/2016. Thank you to everyone who participated, and everyone who spread the word.

An earlier version of these results was published online as [2016 Novelist Income Survey Results](#).



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The Respondents

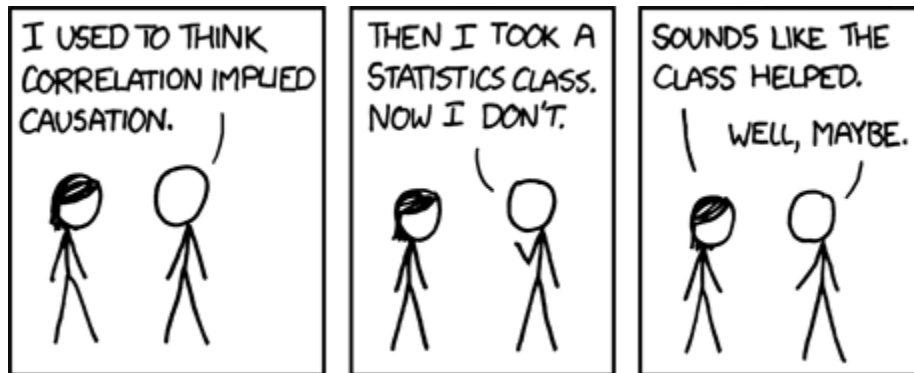
The survey received a total of 386 responses. Five of these were duplicates and were removed, leaving data from 381 individual novelists.

As we go through the data, please keep in mind:

1. This is not a truly random or representative sample. I have no way of reaching all the working novelists in the world, and not everyone who heard about the survey chose to participate. (That said, I think 381 is pretty darn good.)
2. Participants were self-selected. I was contacted by one author who chose not to respond because they made too little money in 2016, and another who chose not to respond because they felt like they made too much. (Both of these individuals and their data would have been welcome.) I have no way to measure the impact of this self-selection effect.
3. Correlation is not causation. The numbers might show that novelists with an agent make more/less money than novelists without. This doesn't necessarily

mean that having or not having an agent causes you to make more/less money.

4. I am not a professional statistician. I've done my best, and several commenters on the blog offered advice and suggestions, but any mistakes or shortcomings are my own.



[From xkcd.com, by Randall Munroe]

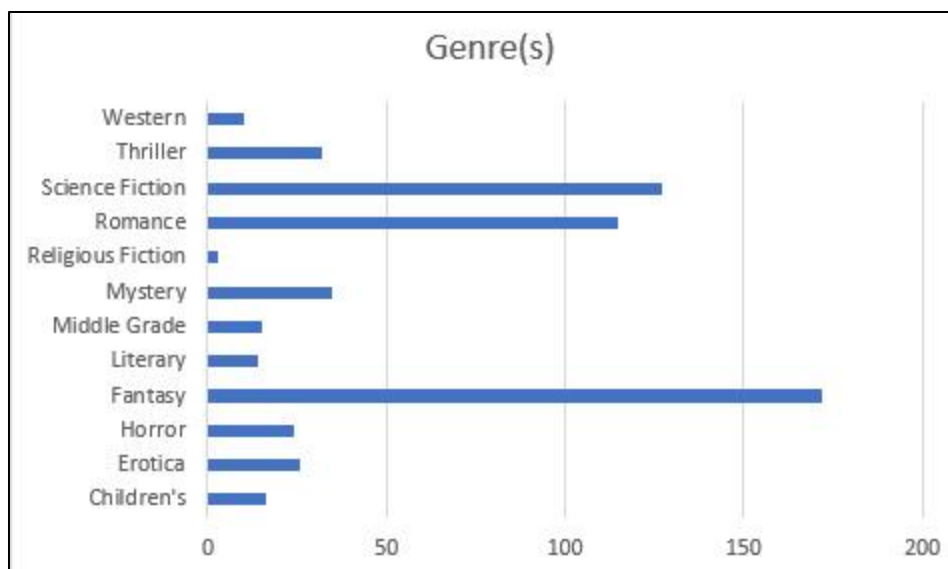
Genre Breakdown

I asked what genre(s) people published in during 2016. Respondents could check all that applied, with an additional field for "Other."

This meant I collected more accurate data about what people had published, but a lot of folks selected multiple genres, which made it harder for me to do much with the data. In the future, I think I need to ask people to choose their primary genre instead.

Looking at which genres were chosen, we can see that the data are slanted toward SF/F and Romance.

- Fantasy: 172
- Science Fiction: 127
- Romance: 115
- Mystery: 35
- Thriller: 32
- Erotica: 26
- Horror: 24
- Children's: 16
- Middle Grade: 15
- Literary: 14
- Western: 10
- Religious Fiction: 3
- Action & Adventure: 1
- Other: 1



As a SF/F person myself, it makes sense that my outreach on the survey would bring in a lot of my fellow SF/F authors. Basically, what this means is that the results and conclusions may not apply as strongly to, say, religious fiction as they do to fantasy or romance.

Large Press/Small Press/Indie

Disclaimer: the goal in looking at large press vs. small press vs. indie authors is not to settle the neverending argument about which route is "better," because that's a silly argument, and I'm not going to waste time on it.

Categorizing respondents this way was tricky. What qualifies as a large press vs. a small press? What about hybrid authors who choose multiple paths? And how does the self-selected nature of this study's participants skew results?

The survey asked how many books you published with a large publisher, a small publisher, and through self-publishing in your lifetime, and how many books you published with a large publisher, a small publisher, and through self-publishing in 2016. Respondents used their own judgement to decide what large/small/self-published meant with respect to their work.

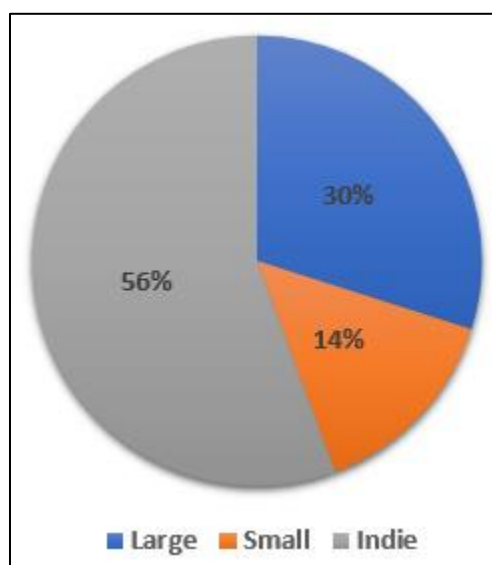
The majority of authors qualified as hybrid, with books in more than one category. So for this analysis, I looked at how each author had published the majority of their books during their lifetime. For example, with 12 books through large publishers, 1 small-press, and 1 self-published novel, my personal data went into the Large Publisher bucket. Someone with 4 large press, 5 small press, and 2 self-pubbed would be in the Small Publisher bucket.

(I also ran the same analysis looking only at 2016 publications, and the results were nearly identical. We lost some data there though, since a number of people had zero books out in 2016.)

As for the self-selection part? I cast my net as wide as I could, but that net went out mostly through writing boards and email lists and social media. Someone who self-published a single book as a hobby or for the fun of it would be less likely to hear about the survey. Likewise, authors who published a lot in the past but aren't actively writing/publishing today wouldn't necessarily be "in the loop" for this stuff. I can't say exactly how this affected the data; only that, as I mentioned yesterday, it isn't a *truly* random or representative sample. But with 381 authors weighing in, I still think it's a pretty good one.

Here's where our 381 authors fell on the large/small/indie scale:

- Primarily Large Press: 114 (30%)
- Primarily Small Press: 55 (14%)
- Primarily Indie: 212 (56%)



Again, keep in mind that deciding whether to try to publish with a large publisher, a small press, or to self-publish is so much more than just looking at the data from a single survey. Each path requires a lot of work, and I strongly recommend everyone do their research before deciding what's going to work best for them.

Agent vs. Unagented

Of our 381 respondents, 151 were represented by an agent, and 230 were unagented.

Gross Income

I started by looking at how much our authors made in 2016 before taxes or expenses. The total ranged from a few dollars to almost five million. Eight novelists made more than a million dollars (before taxes) in 2016.

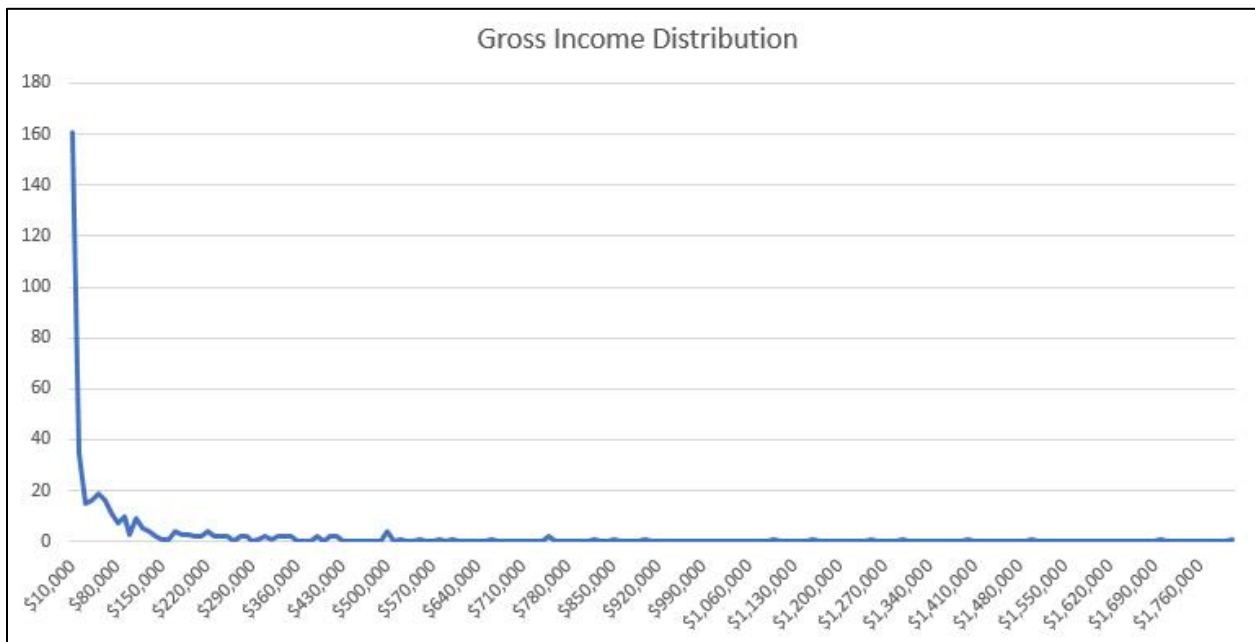
I admit, I was a little surprised by this, and wondered if maybe people were exaggerating or accidentally typed an extra zero. Fortunately, the survey also asked for an identifier (name or other) and an email address for anyone who wanted to be informed of the survey results. Looking at who was reporting these numbers, I believe they're accurate.

- **Average Income:** \$114,124
- **Median Income:** \$17,000

I think the median is more useful than the average, since the average is pulled up significantly by those very successful outliers.

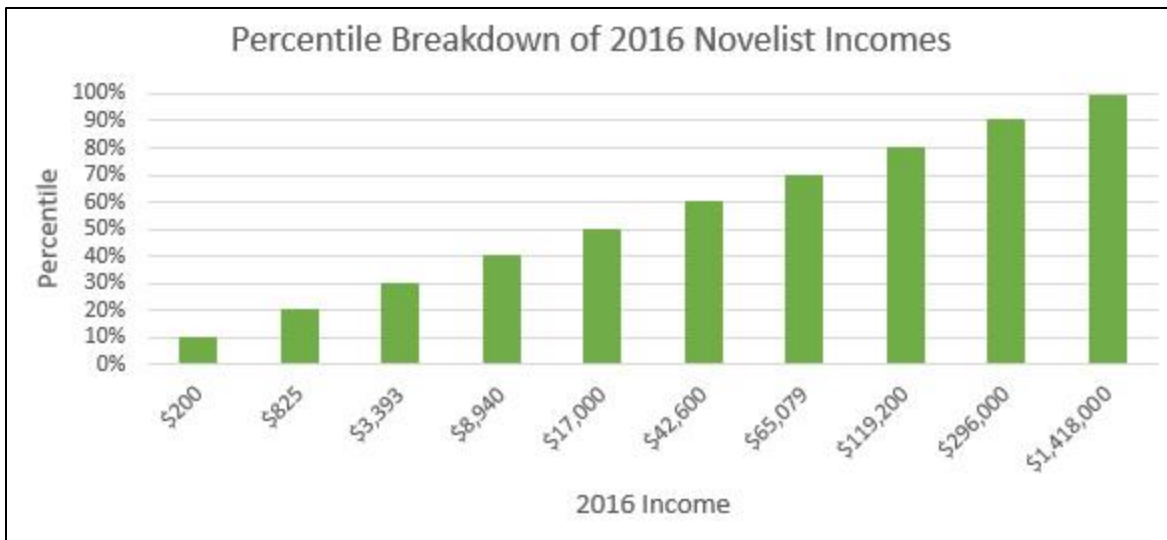
Distribution

As you might have predicted, the distribution is weighted heavily toward the left side of the graph. I removed one far-right outlier for this graph.



Percentile

Here's a percentile breakdown showing the same data in another way.



In other words, ten percent of all respondents earned \$200 or less last year. *Before* taxes and expenses. Twenty percent made \$825 or less. Thirty percent were \$3393 or below, and so on.

If you earned at least \$296,000, you were in the 90th percentile. And if your writing brought in \$1,418,000 or more, you are officially the 1% among novelists.

Gross Income for Different Categories

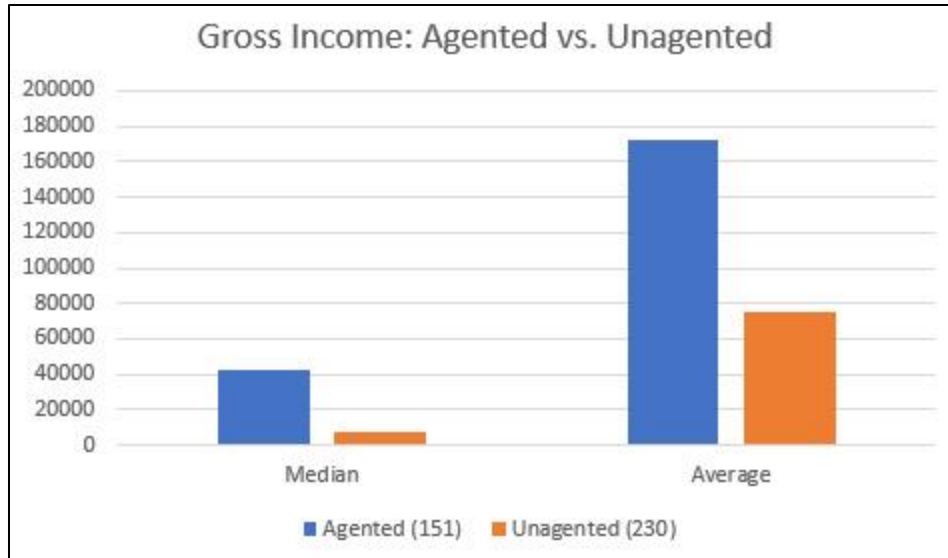
Let's play with those numbers a bit more. What happens if we separate agented and unagented authors, full-time vs. part-time, and so on?

Agented vs. Unagented

There's a significant difference in the income for these two groups, but be careful about drawing too many conclusions. Does having an agent mean you make more money? Or does making more money mean you're more likely to want an agent? Maybe it's easier for already-successful authors to get an agent. Or it could be a combination of any or all of the above.

- **Median Income for Agented Authors:** \$42,000
- **Median Income for Unagented Authors:** \$7,000

Looking at the eight authors who made a million or more, five were represented by agents and three were unagented.



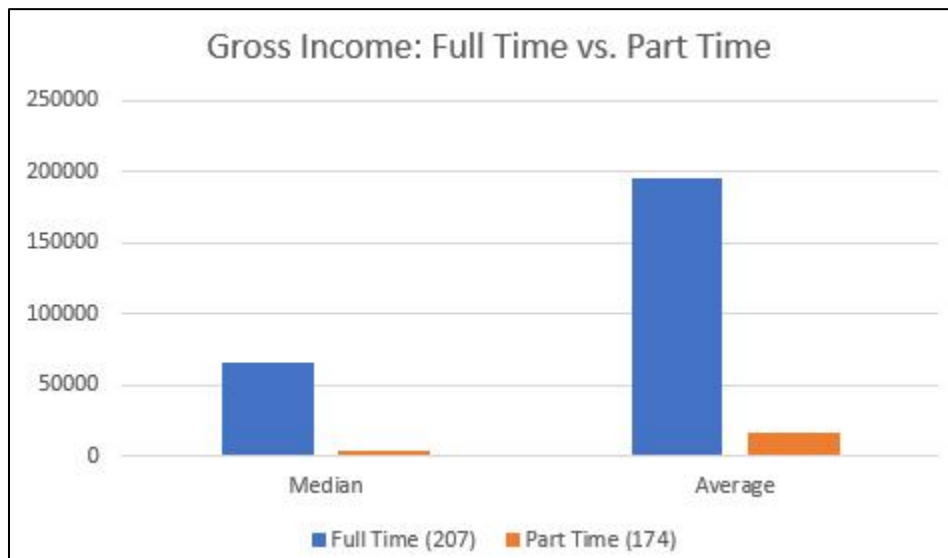
Full Time vs. Part Time

We see a similar pattern here. Disclaimer: the question on the survey asked if writing was “your primary, full-time job” during 2016. I probably could have worded that one a little better, as it’s possible we had writers working 40 hours/week on books and also working full-time elsewhere. But in general, I think the data here are pretty accurate and reliable.

- **Median Income for Part Time Authors:** \$3,050
- **Median Income for Full Time Authors:** \$66,000

All eight of our \$1,000,000+ novelists were full-timers.

Does this mean quitting the day job will magically increase your writing income by 22x? NO! Bad reader! Back to logic and statistics class for you!



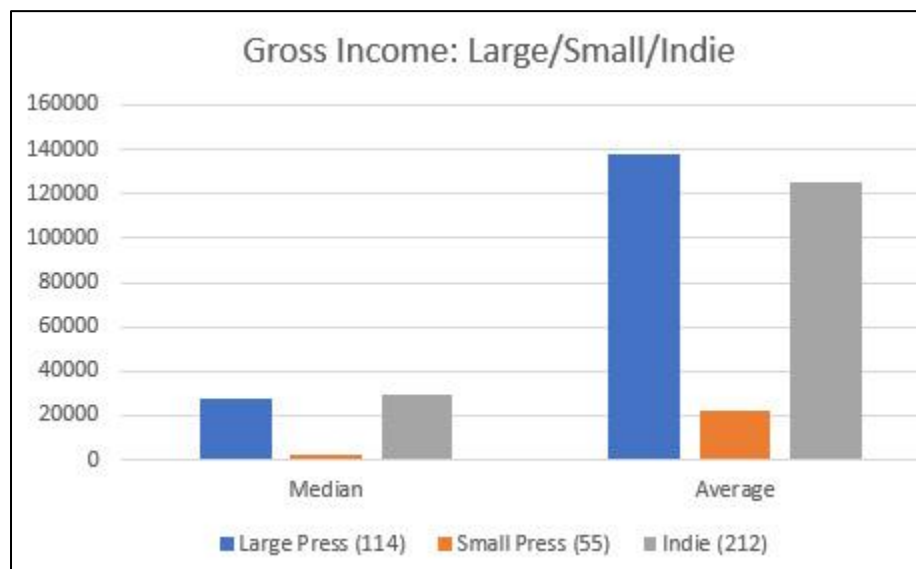
Anecdotally, I started trying to write full-time at the end of 2015. 2016 saw an increase of about 10-15% in my overall income. But much of that came from a deal I signed *before* going full time. What does that mean? Heck if I know...

Large/Small/Indie Authors

As before, I think the median is the most useful figure here, since the very successful outliers tend to skew the averages. Median gross income for each category was:

- Large Press: \$28,000
- Small Press: \$2,400
- Indie: \$29,000

Average income followed a similar pattern.



I don't think those numbers should come as a shock to most people. But of course, they're not the whole picture, either. This is before taxes and expenses, which could vary significantly from one group to another.

Gross Income: Conclusions

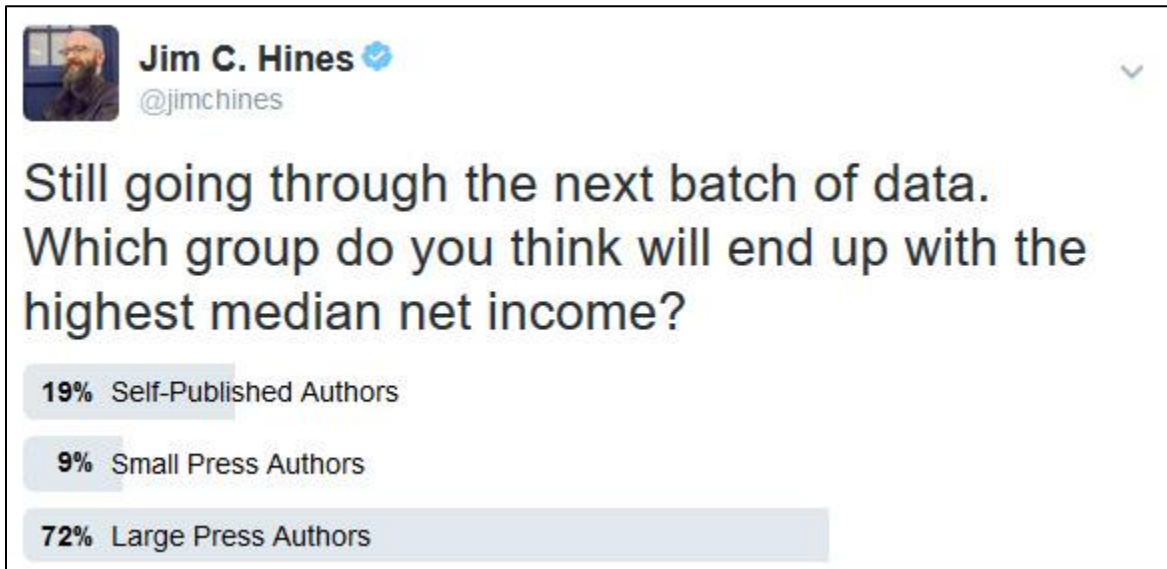
1. It is possible to make a *really* good living as a novelist...but most of us don't.
2. It is possible to make a million or more as a novelist, with or without an agent...but again, most of us don't.
3. About 80% of novelists make less than \$100,000 a year. Half of us make \$17,000 or less.

Let's take a look at the *net* income. I.e., the amount of money authors walked away with at the end of the year after expenses.

Net Income

I posted an informal poll on [Twitter](#) while I was working on this section. I was curious which group people thought would have the highest net income: large press authors, small press authors, or indie authors.

Here's what 154 folks on Twitter thought: 74% of people expected Large Press authors to be the biggest money-makers. Self-published came in second place, with 17%. Small Press was at 9%.

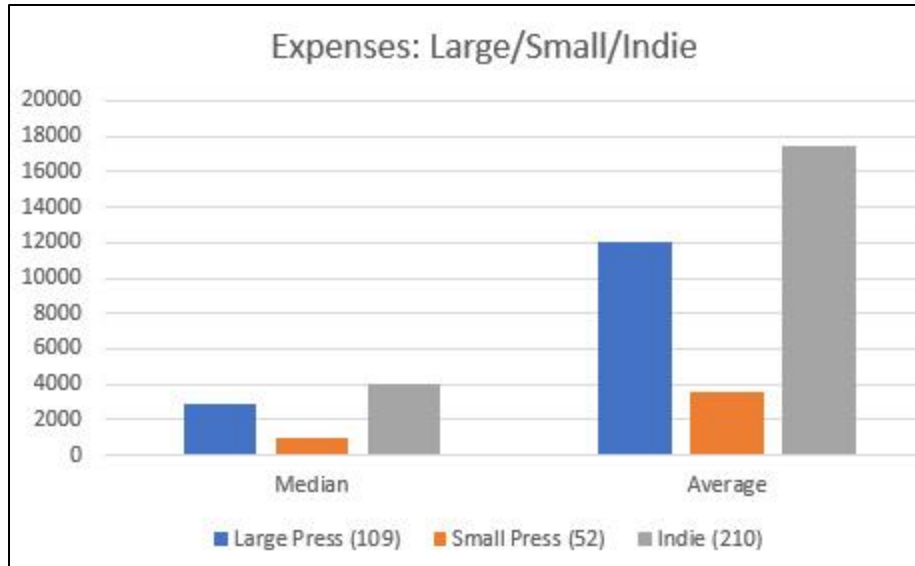


Expenses

I asked authors about their writing-related expenses for 2016. A handful of people left this question blank. They've been omitted from this part. If someone reported a 0 for this question, they were included.

The median expenses for each category were:

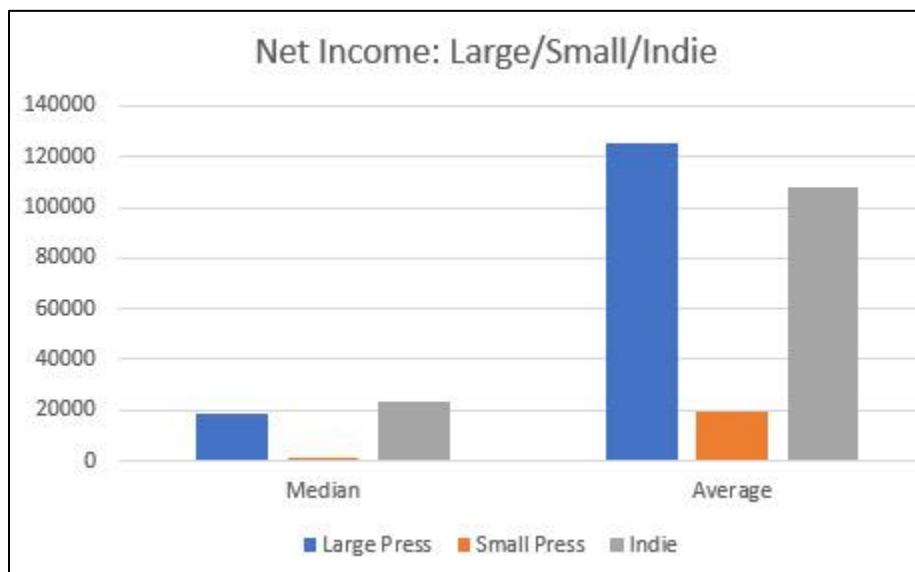
- Large Press: \$2,900
- Small Press: \$1,000
- Indie: \$4,000



What's included in those expenses? It varies from one author to the next, and could include everything from postage to paper and printer ink to marketing and publicity to conventions and other travel to a wide range of research. For self-published authors, there's the costs of things like cover art, copy-editing, and so on.

Subtracting expenses from gross income gives us the following numbers, with median first and average in parentheses.

- Large Press: \$19,000 (\$125,021)
- Small Press: \$975 (\$19,166)
- Indie: \$23,050 (\$108,210)

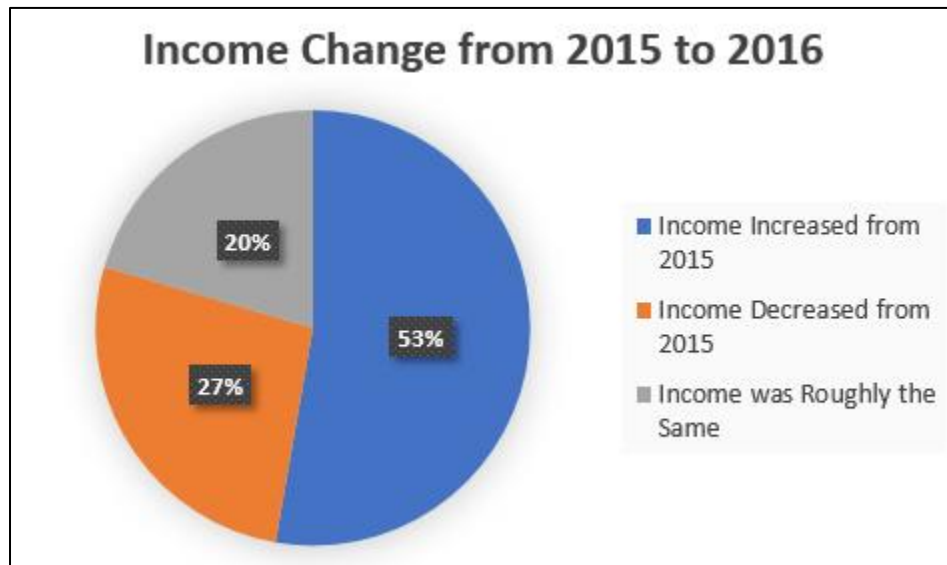


Indie authors still have the largest median income, which was predicted by only 19% of the folks in our Twitter Poll. Large press authors once again take the

highest average. (I think this is mostly because of one large press author whose income was *significantly* higher than any others.)

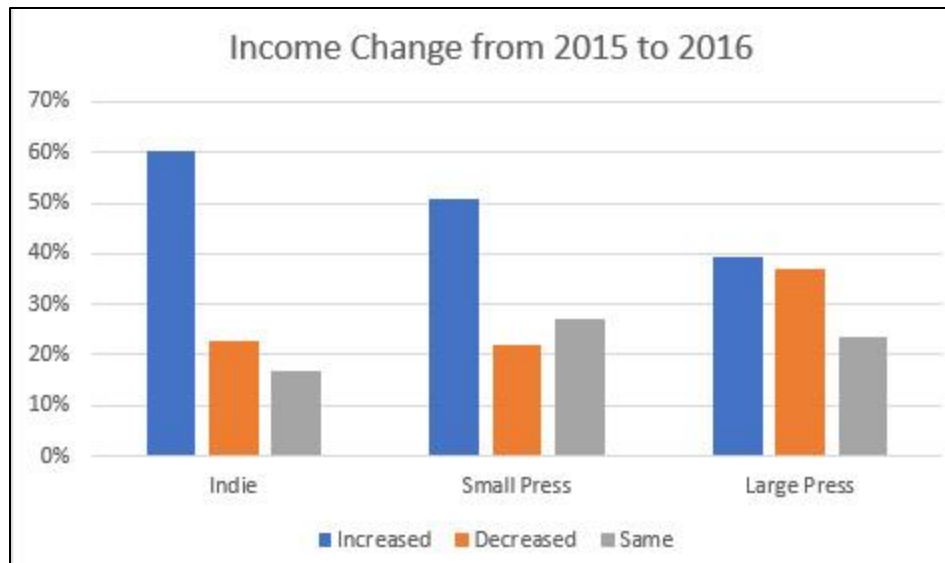
Change From 2015

One of the questions I asked was whether people's writing income had increased, decreased, or stayed roughly the same from 2015 to 2016. I think it's encouraging that 53% of all respondents saw an increase, with another 20% reporting that their income remained roughly the same. Writing novels tends not to be the most financially stable profession, but only 27% reported seeing their income decrease.



The next question was whether these changes were spread evenly over different types of authors. Maybe indie authors are seeing more growth than large press? Maybe small press is surging forward?

60.4% of indie authors saw an increase in earnings, compared to 50.9% of small press and only 39.5% of large press authors. Only 17% of indie authors saw their earnings decrease, compared to 27.3% of small press and 23.7% of large press.

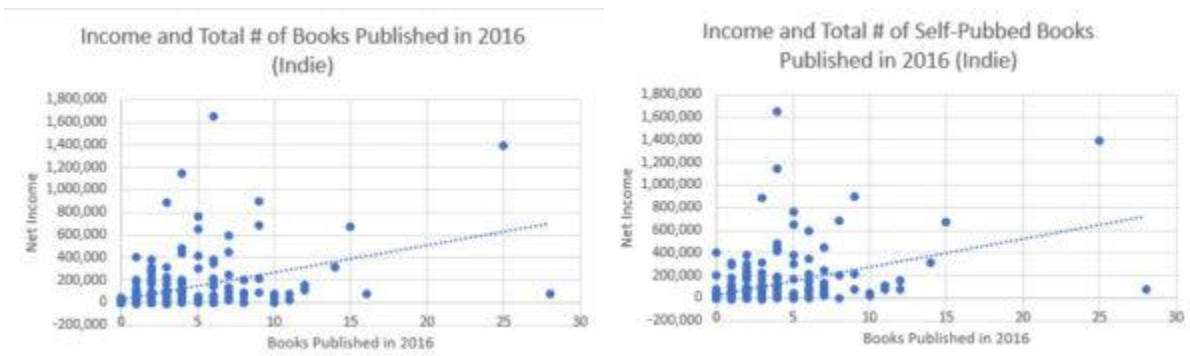


I'd be careful about drawing broad-sweeping conclusions from any of this, but it's certainly an encouraging sign for my indie author friends. Realistically, though? Given the economy, the fact that all three groups saw more increases than decreases is a very good thing.

Number of Books Published in 2016

A number of people have asked how the number of books published in 2016 correlates with income, particularly with indie writers. Is volume one of the secrets to success, and is it a greater factor for indie writers than traditionally the published?

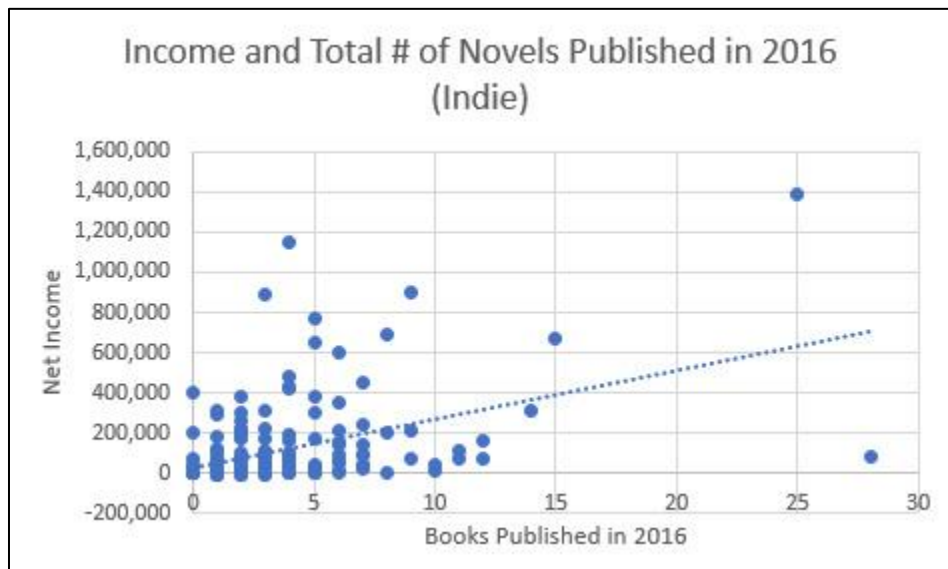
Three survey questions asked how many books respondents had published in 2016 through a large press, a small press, and through self-publishing. This brings me to my first data quandary. When I'm looking at the indie authors, do I count *just* the number of books they self-published, or the total number of books? Because a lot of our authors are hybrid, those numbers won't be the same. So I graphed the data both ways, and found that the results — particularly the trend line — looked pretty much identical.



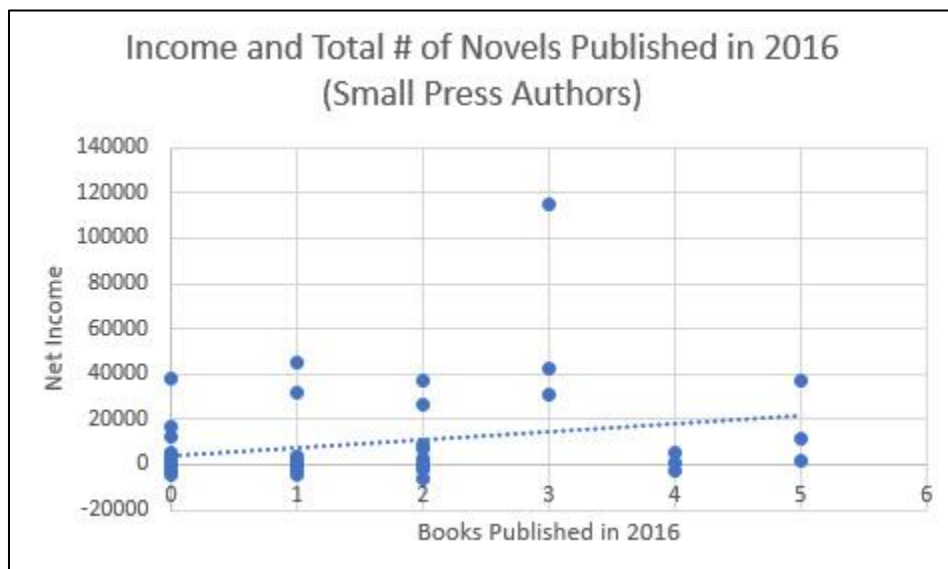
I decided to go with the total number of books published in any category, and to see how that number affected income for authors who were primarily indie, small press, or large press.

I removed the highest outlier from each graph below, both because it appeared to be disproportionately influencing the results, and because it threw off the scale and made it harder to see the rest of the data points. Because this was using net income, I also removed the handful of authors who didn't report any expenses, since I had no way of calculating those net incomes.

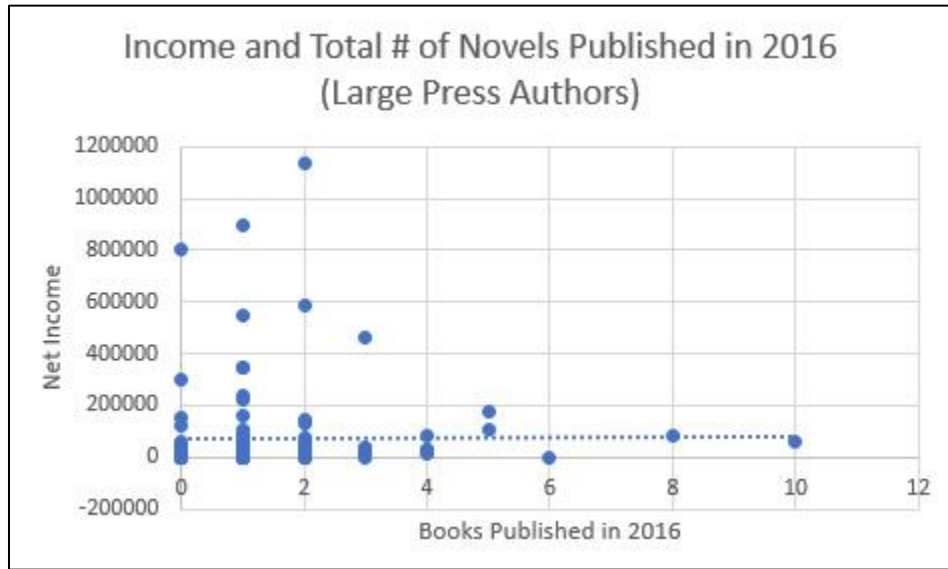
Indie Authors



Small Press Authors



Large Press Authors



Everyone's clear on the correlation \neq causation thing by now, right? That said, the trend lines on the three graphs are pretty striking. For authors who are primarily indie, the graph suggests a correlation between number of books published and overall income. The correlation for small press is significantly smaller.

But most fascinating to me is that for large press authors, the line is essentially flat. The authors with 8 or 10 large press novels in 2016 made roughly the same as the average author with 1 or 2 large press books. Excellent news for the one book/year folks with big publishers.

Median and Average Books/Year

As I was wrapping up this section, it occurred to me that I should compare how prolific the different types of author were. This turned out to be interesting as well, though not too surprising.

Books Published in 2016: Median (Average)

- Large Press 1 (1.2)
- Small Press 1 (1.3)
- Indie Press 2 (3.1)

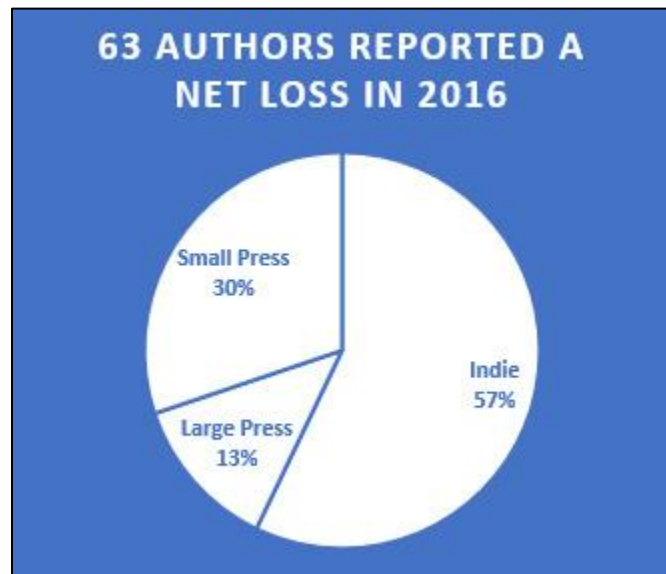
While the median large and small press author published one book last year, the median indie published two. The difference in the average numbers is even stronger.

There are exceptions to everything, of course. I know some ridiculously prolific and successful big-press authors. But overall, I think this supports to the idea that success in self-publishing depends more strongly on how many books you can put

out. It also shows that indie authors are following that approach and getting more books out there.

Net Losses

One last note. (Or maybe just one last excuse to post a pie chart.) 63 authors reported a net loss in 2016. 36 of those were indie authors. 19 were small press. 8 were large press.



Intuitively, this makes a kind of sense. Self-publishing *requires* the author to invest in the up-front production costs, as well as marketing. But I'd want to collect a lot more data than I have before coming to any firm conclusions.

Impact of Marketing and Promotion

For this part, I wanted to look at whether the hours spent on marketing, promotion, and outreach correlated at all with how much money our authors made last year.

I used net income again, which means I removed data points where the authors hadn't reported their expenses. I also eliminated two data points where respondents said they spent over 1000 hours/week on promotion and marketing. (If I'm wrong and those two authors have been using a TARDIS, I'd ask them to email me. And also to let me borrow their TARDIS.) Finally, I removed the largest remaining outlier from each of the net income and hours/week categories.

This left us with data from a total of 370 authors.



I used Excel's correlation function to test the correlation between hours and net income. A correlation of 1.0 would be a perfect positive correlation. Likewise, -1.0 would be a perfect negative correlation.

Excel gives a **correlation of 0.19**. In other words, this analysis suggests a very weak positive correlation between the time a novelist spends on promotion and their net income.

Subgroup Results

Let's look at the correlation scores between marketing/promotion and net income for different groups of authors. Once again, I removed the highest-income outlier in each category. I also removed a single outlier who reported 100 hours/week spent on marketing/promotion.

- Large Press: 0.13
- Small Press: 0.01
- Indie: 0.30

The largest correlation between promotion/outreach/marketing and net income is for the indie authors. Which shouldn't really surprise anyone.

On the other end, the amount of time spent on marketing and promo had no noticeable correlation to net income for small press writers, and only a minimal correlation for large press authors.

It's worth noting that a correlation of 0.3 is considered a weak correlation. In other words, even for indie writers the connection between marketing and money isn't as strong as some might expect or believe.

Marketing/Promotion: Conclusions

Does this mean the time and money I spent last year as a large-press author traveling to signings and conventions and doing online promotion was completely wasted? Not *necessarily*. We're looking at overall trends, and any individual data point might buck a given trend. (And remember, correlation \neq causation.)

There's also the question about how you're spending that time. The 20 hours I spent standing outside a bar at 2 a.m. wearing a **BUY LIBRIOMANCER!** sign probably wasn't as effective as my 20 hours spent researching reviewers and sending out targeted review copies of my book.

That said, I think the data supports the general wisdom that if you're self-published, it's more important to spend time on marketing and promotion. Whereas if you're with a small or large press, there's a good chance your marketing efforts won't have much of an impact on your bottom line.

Who Lost Money in 2016?

Of the 371 people who provided gross income and expenses data, 63 ended up with a net loss in 2016. In other words, roughly one out of six published novelists lost money last year.

17 of these respondents identified as full-time writers, with the other 46 being part-time. Looking at the overall numbers, part-time authors were disproportionately more likely to end up in the red.

How did those 63 authors break down in terms of indie/small press/large press?

- Indie: 36
- Small: 19
- Large: 8

We can also look at the percentage of novelists who lost money in each category, which is perhaps a little more illuminating.

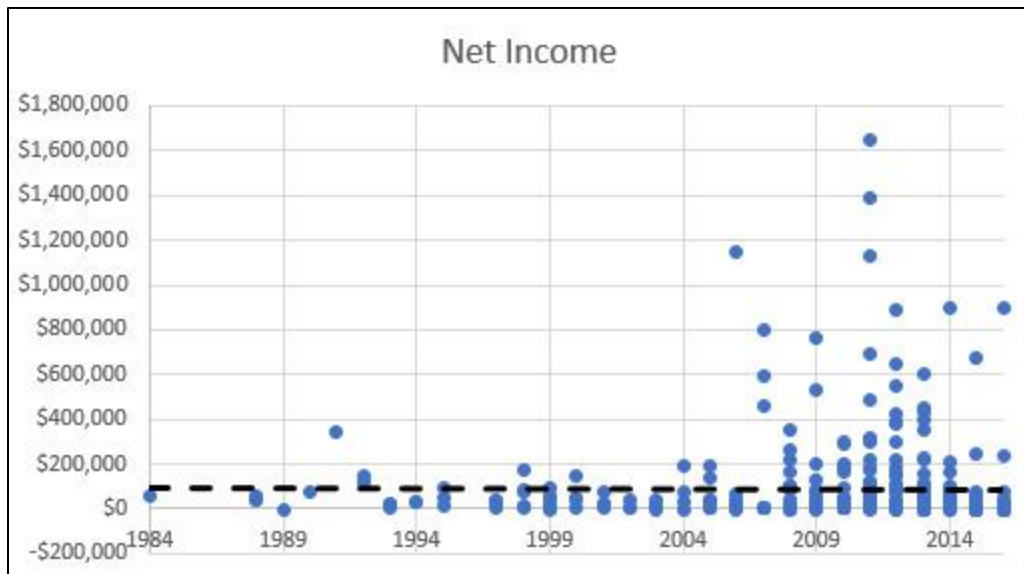
- Indie: 17%
- Small: 37%
- Large: 7%

As always, be careful about drawing too many conclusions from this.

When Did You Publish Your First Book?

What happens when you plot net income against the year the author published their first book?

I removed one outlier — an author who made close to five million, and whose first book came out near the middle of the range. The results were not what I expected.



That trendline is pretty much horizontal. Running the correlation function in Excel gave a correlation of 0.01.

I can see several ways of thinking about this. One is that you can spend 30 years writing books, and it doesn't mean you're more likely to be financially successful. Which is depressing as hell. But maybe it just means financial success can come at any time. Or maybe writers who broke in a long time ago aren't as prolific these days, which is why their income was comparable to newer authors who might be more active?

It's also possible there's a relationship here, but it's more complex than a simple linear correlation. I honestly don't know, and I suspect you'd need a lot more analysis — and probably a lot more data — to draw any firm conclusions here.

Conclusions

Sadly, writing and publishing novels is not a guaranteed get-rich-quick scheme. Median author income before taxes and other expenses was \$17,000. That said, it's certainly possible to make good money as a novelist. Roughly twenty percent of our respondents made at least six figures.

I wish I could reach into the data and pull out a clear, straightforward path to joining the six-figure club. Marketing might help, but the correlation there wasn't very strong. If you're an indie author, publishing more books might give you a boost, but again, the correlation there is pretty weak.

For now, I think I'll be sticking with the approach I've followed for two decades: write the best books I can, do my best to get them in front of readers, and hope for the best while working on the next story.

Download the Data

If you'd like to see the raw, anonymized data for yourself, you can [download the responses in Excel format](#). Some cells have been adjusted to protect the anonymity of respondents. (For example, if someone published 23 books in 2016, that cell has been changed to >20.)

Related Reading

- [What I Made in 2016, by Kameron Hurley](#). An award-winning SF/F author looks at her 2016 writing income.
- [Musings on Income, by Annie Bellet](#). Bellet talks about crossing the six-figure writing income mark in 2015.
- [The Wages of Writing](#). Results from the Authors Guild 2015 Member Survey.
- [EC Urges Fairer Author Contracts After New Study Shows Average Earnings of £12,500](#). Results of a May 2015 study of UK author income.
- [Australian Authors Earn Only \\$12,900 From Their Writing, a New Report Says](#). Results of a 2015 study of more than 1000 authors.

About the Author

[Jim C. Hines'](#) first novel was *Goblin Quest*, the humorous tale of a nearsighted goblin runt and his pet fire-spider. Actor and author Wil Wheaton described the book as "too f***ing cool for words," which is pretty much the Best Blurb Ever. After finishing the goblin trilogy, he went on to write the Princess series of fairy tale retellings and the Magic ex Libris books, a modern-day fantasy series about a magic-wielding librarian, a dryad, a secret society founded by Johannes Gutenberg, a flaming spider, and an enchanted convertible. He's currently working on *Terminal Alliance*, book one of the Janitors of the Post-Apocalypse. Jim's short fiction has appeared in more than 50 magazines and anthologies.

Jim is an active blogger about topics ranging from sexism and harassment to zombie-themed Christmas carols, and won the Hugo Award for Best Fan Writer in 2012. He has an undergraduate degree in psychology and a Masters in English, and lives with his wife and two children in mid-Michigan. You can find him on Twitter as [@jimchines](#).

Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. How many novels have you published through a large traditional/commercial publisher during your career?
2. How many novels have you published through a small press during your career?
3. How many novels have you self-published during your career?
4. How many novels did you publish during 2016 through a large traditional/commercial publisher?

5. How many novels did you publish during 2016 through a small press?
6. How many novels did you self-publish during 2016?
7. How many shorter stories (any original work of fiction shorter than novel length) did you publish during 2016?
8. What was your writing income, before expenses or taxes, for calendar year 2016?
9. Approximately what percentage of that income came from your novels, as opposed to short stories, non-fiction, or other writing-related work?
10. How does your 2016 writing income compare to your 2015 writing income?
11. Approximately how much did you spend on writing-related expenses in 2016?
12. What genre(s) did you publish in during 2016?
13. During 2016, were you represented by a literary agent?
14. For 2016, was writing your primary, full-time job?
15. In what year did you publish your first novel?
16. In 2016, approximately how many hours per week did you spend writing?
17. In 2016, approximately how many hours per week did you spend on marketing, promotion, and outreach?
18. What country do you live in?
19. If you are traditionally/commercially published, what country is your primary publisher located in?