

## Writers and the financial world

**Antonio González Estévez**

Head of the Customer Care Service for the Insured at the Consorcio de Compensación de Seguros

The purpose of these brief notes is to talk, from a merely informative point of view and with no further aspirations, about the relations that have existed between writers and the financial and insurance worlds. Given the Latin adage, “carmina non dant panem” – song, poems do not put food on the table – it is clear that both in the past and present, very few writers make or have made a living solely from literature, save a few exceptions, which confirm that aphorism. In that sense, the poet, journalist and Cervantes Prize winner Juan Gelman said it is not the poet who feeds journalists, but journalists who feed the poet.

Professor and writer Daría Galateria (Rome, 1950) tells in her interesting work “Forced Labour. Writers’ other Trades” (Ed. Impedimenta 2011) the various trades or professions some writers have had to engage in to survive and, in short, to carry out their literary work.

In any case, the varied and even unsuspected professions or trades some writers have had to take on are highly arresting, activities which may prove as disparate as that of postman (Charles Bukowski, William Faulkner); lawyer (John Grisham, Lorenzo Silva, Ildefonso Falcones); doctor (Anton Chekhov; Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Mijail Bulgakov, Arthur Schnitzler); diplomat (Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz); policeman (George Orwell) and even, among other activities, slave trader, like Voltaire, who was one of the richest men in France on his death. Some, like the current literary phenomenon, Haruki Murakami, who runs a jazz bar with his wife. Nevertheless, nothing is more reasonable for a writer than the profession of librarian (Jorge Luis Borges, Lewis Carroll, Rubén Darío, Marcel Proust). And of course, we can also find university teachers (Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Umberto Eco) and civil servants too (Bram Stoker, Nikolai Gogol, Naguib Mahfuz, Juan García Hortelano, Antonio Muñoz Molina).

In the financial field, we can begin with mention of Italo Svevo, his real name Ettore Schmitz and his best-known work “Confessions of Zeno”. Svevo worked for more than eighteen years in the Trieste branch of the Union Bank of Vienna. He did however eventually end



up running the business of his wife's family, which meant that he learned English. His teacher was a young Irishman, James Joyce, author of "Dubliners", "Portrait of the artist as a young man" and, above all, "Ulysses", a fundamental work of contemporary literature.

Franz Kafka, born in 1883 in the Prague of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and one of the most influential authors of universal literature, linked to existentialism and expressionism ("The Trial", "The Castle" and "Metamorphosis"), began work in the Generali General Insurance Agency in Prague. He was admitted because of his knowledge of German, Czech, French and English. This shows how knowledge of languages was already valued last century when it came to finding a job. He was subsequently hired by the Occupational Accidents Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia, where he was to work virtually all his life.

The poet and 1948 Nobel Literature laureate Thomas Stearns Eliot, author of a prolific oeuvre, including outstandingly "The Waste Land", "Four Quartets" and "Prufrock and other observations", was born in the United States in 1888, eventually taking British citizenship. Eliot began work as a university teacher and eventually left his brilliant academic career at Harvard to work at Lloyd's of London bank. He said that while poetry had not aided him in his banking career, his work at the bank had allowed him to write his poetry. The fiftieth anniversary of his death is commemorated this year and it can be said, without any doubt, that he was one of the most important poets and literary critics of the last century.

Another who carried on his working life in a bank was the French writer Jean Giono, author of "The Hussar on the roof" and "A king without diversion", novels which were made into films. During his lifetime André Malraux considered him one of the greatest French writers. He worked for more than eighteen years in a bank, until becoming a famous author, ending up publishing his work with the prestigious French publishing house Gallimard.

Bohumil Hrabal, born in Brno (Moravia), and author among other works of "Closely watched trains", made into a film by Jiri Menzel and winner of an Oscar in 1967, and "I served the King of England", practiced a multiplicity of trades, won a Doctorate in Laws and, after the Second World, ended up working as insurance agent in the Artisans and Traders Retirement and Disability Fund.

At the beginning of World War II and as a result of the German army's invasion of Poland, the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz was

forced to move to Buenos Aires and went to work in the banking world, in a branch of the Polish Bank in Argentina. In one of his most significant novels, "Trans-Atlantyk", he told of his vicissitudes as immigrant and bank employee.

The United States poet Wallace Stevens ("Late Poems", "The rock", "Auroras of autumn") who won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1955, worked virtually his entire life as a lawyer in an insurance company, Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, eventually becoming its Vice-President.

In the first third of the twentieth century, mention may be made of the renowned and acclaimed Spanish playwright Pedro Muñoz Seca ("Don Mendo's revenge", "La pluma verde", "Los extremeños se tocan"). He studied Philosophy and Law at Seville University and then moved to Madrid to practice law: in 1908, he was appointed Head of Department in what was then called the Offices of the Commissioner-General of Insurance in the Ministry of Development.

On the other hand, writers as distant as José Luis Sampedro and Francisco Ibáñez have in common that both worked in banking, Sampedro in Banco Exterior de España and Ibáñez as portfolio and risks assistant in a bank, until he decided to give himself over entirely to the publication of cartoon strips ("Mortadelo y Filemón", "Rompetechos", "El botones Sacarino").

The Portuguese writer José Saramago who won the Nobel Literature Prize in 1998, author of a very wide-ranging literary output ("Memorial of the convent", "The year of the death of Ricardo Reis", "The stone raft", "Blindness", "The Cave") engaged in various professions including social security agent, literary critic, employee of a publishing house and journalist, and also worked for a time in an insurance company.

A recent author, Tom Clancy, known worldwide, creator of the character Jack Ryan and who died in 2013, began his professional life as an insurance agent. His novels were authentic blockbusters and many of his works were made into films, to great commercial success, including "The Hunt for Red October", "Clear and Present Danger", "Rainbow 6 Patriots" and "The Sum of all Fears".

To conclude, and linking the seventh art with the insurance world, mention must be made of the film "The Fortune Cookie", directed by Billy Wilder in 1966 with Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau in the lead roles, telling the tale of an attempt to defraud an insurance

company following an accident suffered by a sports journalist knocked down by a player during an American football game broadcast. The journalist's brother-in-law, lawyer, seeks to turn what was no more than a slight mishap into an accident with major injuries for which the journalist has to pretend to be significantly immobilised, conduct which amounts to insurance fraud with major consequences for the life of the injured journalist who eventually dismantles the entire farce he had originally entered into. This is criminal activity for profit, of fraudulent nature which, in today's society, encounters less social reproach and so fewer criminal consequences, such fraudulent conduct favoured when compared with violent actions which are, both socially and criminally, more censured. Deception, sufficient, in the words of our Criminal Code, takes shape as the fundamental and essential element of the swindle, here an insurance swindle, as it is the insurer, victim of the crime, which must be induced by that deception, ploy or scheme, to dispose of assets to its own detriment, that is to pay an indemnification for a loss which did not in fact happen or did happen but to a degree far less than that fraudulently sought.