

Before They Were Famous: The Oddest Odd Jobs of 10 Literary Greats

BY ALEX PALMER

Plenty of acclaimed and successful writers began their careers working strange—and occasionally degrading—day jobs. But rather than being ground down by the work, many drew inspiration for stories and poems from even the dullest gigs. Here are 10 of the oddest odd jobs of famous authors—all of them reminders that creative fodder can be found in the most unexpected places.

#1 KURT VONNEGUT managed America's first Saab dealership in Cape Cod during the late 1950s, a job he joked about in a 2004 essay: "I now believe my failure as a dealer so long ago explains what would otherwise remain a deep mystery: Why the Swedes have never given me a Nobel Prize for Literature."

#2 JOHN STEINBECK took on a range of odd occupations before earning enough to work as a full-time writer. Among his day jobs: apprentice painter, fruit picker, estate caretaker and Madison Square Garden construction worker.

#3 STEPHEN KING served as a janitor for a high school while struggling to get his fiction published. His time wheeling the cart through the halls inspired him to write the opening girls' locker room scene in *Carrie*, which would become his breakout novel.

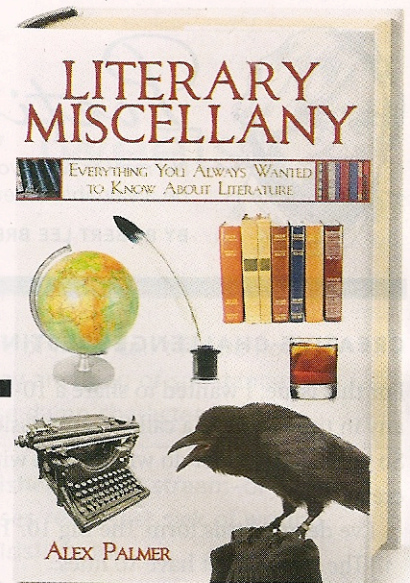
#4 HARPER LEE worked as a reservation clerk for Eastern Air Lines for more than eight years, writing stories in her spare time. This all changed when a friend offered her a Christmas gift of one year's wages, with the note, "You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please." She wrote the first draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird* within the year.

#5 J.D. SALINGER mentioned in a rare interview in 1953 that he had served as entertainment director on the H.M.S. Kungsholm, a Swedish luxury liner. He drew on the experience for his short story "Teddy," which takes place on a liner.

#6 Before joining the likes of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, **WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS** worked as an exterminator in Chicago. It served as a handy metaphor years later in his novel *Exterminator!*

#7 RICHARD WRIGHT worked as a letter sorter in a post office on the south side of Chicago from 1927 to 1930, while he wrote a number of short stories and poems that were published in literary journals.

#8 Before his writing career took off, **WILLIAM FAULKNER** also worked for the Postal Service, as postmaster at the University of Mississippi. In his resignation note, he neatly summarized the struggle of art and



commerce faced by many authors: "As long as I live under the capitalist system I expect to have my life influenced by the demands of money-eyed people. But I will be damned if I propose to be at the beck and call of every itinerant scoundrel who has two cents to invest in a postage stamp. This, sir, is my resignation."

#9 T.S. ELIOT worked as a banker, serving as a clerk for Lloyds Bank of London for eight years. The job must have been a bummer—he composed passages of *The Waste Land* while walking to work each day.

#10 Sometimes, an odd job can actually lead to opportunity. Poet Vachel Lindsay was interrupted as he dined at a hotel restaurant in Washington, D.C., by a busboy who handed him some sheets of poetry. At first irritated by the young man, Lindsay was quickly impressed by the writing. When he asked, "Who wrote this?" the busboy replied, "I did." **LANGSTON HUGHES** was about to get his big break.

Alex Palmer is the author of *Literary Miscellany: Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Literature*.