

6 February 2009

## AS PUBLIC LENDING RIGHT CELEBRATES ITS 30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY:

***“We need PLR more than ever,” say writers***

***“A reduction in royalties by as much as 70% means PLR is no longer the cherry on top of the cake but forms a large slice of said cake!”*** (Response to PLR author survey.)

In three decades that have seen enormous changes in the ‘business of writing for a living’, one constant for writers has been their annual PLR payment, received each February for the loan of their work through public libraries.

### PLR PAST

Following years of campaigning, the Public Lending Right Act finally came into being in 1979, as one of the last acts of the outgoing Labour government.

***“PLR is still the best thing to happen to authors since copyright”***  
(Response to PLR author survey.)

Annual PLR payments became increasingly important to writers as the book trade underwent a revolution in the 1990s. With the end of the Net Book Agreement in 1996, retailers went for market share on best-sellers by offering deep discounts to consumers. The book price wars had begun; a development which accelerated with the arrival of Amazon.com and other online retailers. Whilst this spelt good news for book buyers, writers found themselves worse off. Publishers had to find a way to pay for the discounts. Unless you were a JK Rowling, a Zadie Smith or a celebrity with a household name, advances and royalties dwindled.

By 2007, the top 10% of writers were earning more than 50% of the total income made available to writers\*. The reality for the working writer is now bleak; with average incomes having dropped from £7000 to £4000 since 2000. This is less than 25% of the national average wage.

### PLR PRESENT

It is easy to understand why authors place such value on their PLR payments. PLR does not discriminate according to sales figures or celebrity status. It is focused neither on front list nor on bestsellers; many authors whose books are no longer in print remain popular with borrowers and earn the maximum PLR payment of £6,600 each year. Its principles have not changed in 30 years, although its remit has expanded to include illustrators, translators, editors and photographers.

***“PLR doesn’t go for the obvious. Writers who benefit are not always top of the bestseller lists. Often they are lesser known authors, appreciated by readers and hence by PLR.”***  
(Tracy Chevalier)

Recent years have seen a rise in the popularity of audio books, the launch of the internet, the emergence of 'digital publishing' and the e-book reader as the fast growing cultural sector came to be described as the 'creative industries'. Such developments offer writers great opportunities to develop the audience for their work. However methods still need to be established to reward them appropriately.

***“The annual PLR statement.... is the one moment in the year when all the rhetoric about authors being part of the ‘creative economy’ suddenly means something – and that’s why we value it so much.” (Joan Smith)***

## **PLR FUTURE**

PLR’s next challenge is to make the case to further expand the scheme to reflect these technological developments. The original PLR legislation needs to be modernised to allow for alternative ways in which the written word can be accessed through libraries, as well as reflecting new models of library service. Increasingly local government partnerships are bringing together college, school and public libraries to share facilities and offer better value for money.

***“We have already begun the process of re-evaluating the legislation to ensure PLR keeps up with the pace of developments for writers. At the All Party Writers Group meeting in December these ideas were discussed with politicians of all three parties and we look forward to working with them to develop solutions for recommendation to ministers in this, our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary year.” (Dr Jim Parker, Registrar, Public Lending Right)***

**Ends/06/02/09**

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### **Editors’ Notes**

1. PLR was established by an Act of Parliament in 1979. It gives authors the legal right to receive remuneration from government for the public’s use of their work through the public library system.
2. PLR is funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Funding for 2008/09 stands at £7.43 million. Following the government’s recent Comprehensive Spending Review, PLR’s funding for 2008-11 is as follows: 2008/09 (£7.43 million), 2009/10 (£7.58 million) and 2010/11 (£7.68 million).

3. The UK writing economy: a typical writer has seen their income drop by £3,000 pa since 2000; a typical writer earns 33% less than the national average wage; the top 10% of writers earn 50% of total income (cf other equally skilled professions where the bottom 50% earn almost 40% of total income); nearly 80% of authors need a second job to survive; in 2004 the publishing industry exports contributed £1.5 billion to the economy; the creative industries currently contribute 8% of GDP. (\*Sources: ALCS *What Are Words Worth?* & the DCMS commissioned report *Staying Ahead: the Economic Performance of the UK's Creative Industries* and Society of Authors research, 2000)
4. In February 2009 - relating to book loans during the period July 2007-June 2008 - PLR is distributing £6.63 million to 23,773 authors at a rate per loan of 5.98 pence.
5. Authors are eligible for payment if their PLR earnings reach a minimum of £1. There is a maximum payment threshold of £6,600 for the top-lending authors. This year 232 authors will receive the maximum payment. In a recent survey of PLR's top earners, 80% specified that their annual PLR payment is core to their income.
6. Since its inception in 1979, PLR has distributed over £113 million to authors.
7. Authors living in other European Union countries also qualify for payment from the UK scheme for loans of their books from public libraries in the UK. Authors living in Ireland are the principal beneficiaries. British authors currently qualify for payment from PLR schemes in France, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands. Payments are distributed by the Authors' Licensing & Collecting Society (ALCS).

