Okay, I admit it. I'm a newcomer to the shark-infested ink of professional writing. But writing for sustenance has always held a certain romance for me, and now I'm ready to give it a shot (I'm unemployed). Where can I get an application form? Now, straight off the bookstore shelves and into my home, comes Words For Sale, a professional writer's manual aimed at eagerly aspiring but hopelessly unenlightened people like me.

The wisdom of some two dozen editors and freelancers has been synthesized and collected here by Eve Drobot and Hal Tennant for the Periodical Writers Association of Canada (PWAC), and organization formed in 1976 to help standardize practices, privileges, and obligations on both sides of the editor's desk in the Canadian magazine industry. The Periodical Writers Association of Canada has, among its good works, created a writers code of ethics, as well as a standardized writing contract which it is hoped will find wide acceptance among Canadian magazine editors. One of their goals is to encourage new writers, and to educate them on the disciplines of professional writing. Words For Sale is a product of that goal. This is a textbook for novices by experts, most of whom had to learn things the hard way. While the seasoned freelancer would no doubt enjoy its jocular reminiscences about learning freelancing
by trial and error, it is doubtful he or she
would learn much that painful experiences hadn't
already taught.

Words For Sale covers everything from get-
ing that vital first assignment to dealing with
Revenue Canada in the happy event that you are
able to sustain an income from writing. In
between, the budding freelancer can find enough
information to get started the right way. Mind
you, this book pulls no punches. Becoming a
freelancer is hard work. The price is steep,
and includes financial insecurity, a scramble
for assignments, no holidays to speak of, no
sick pay, strained marriages, loneliness, and
frustration. Few freelancers will refer to
their beginnings as "the good old days."

But the rewards can make it worthwhile.
Established freelancers can make enough to live,
if not opulently, at least comfortably. They
keep their own hours, they have no real boss to
answer to (apart from editors breathing down
their necks at deadline time). They can exer-
cise their creativity in a way that accountants
simply cannot. And then there is the glory that
comes from seeing your name and work in print.
Ah...fame! It feels great to be able to pick up
this week's Maclean's at the news stand and turn
to your own expose on nuclear poodles.

"I can't think of anything to write about."
Nonsense, this book tells us. There are thou-
sands of stories out there, many of them happen-
ing right around you, or even to you. "I do
have an idea," you might say, "but I read some-
thing similar in Quill and Quire a few years
back." Write it anyway, we're told. Give it a
new angle, sell it to someone else. If its
good, if its timely, someone will want to read it and some editor will want to buy it. In fact, previously published stories, be they in journals, magazines, or newspapers, are a good place to start. If the story was interesting the first time, it might once again catch a readers' eye and an editor's money, particularly if you have a new angle. A truly original idea is a rare thing, they assure us. If it is original, great. If it isn't original, but is still interesting, maybe it will sell.

"Okay, I have an idea, I research and write the story, I send it off to numerous editors, and find my mailbox filling up with rejection slips faster than I can clear it out. Haven't I wasted a lot of time and effort?" You certainly have! Unless you are Pierre Berton or Paul Grescoe or someone of similar stature, your first task is not to sell the story to an editor. Your first task is to sell the story idea, and yourself as the person who can turn it into a story the editor can use.

Getting editors to accept your story idea, including how to query them about story ideas and when to send a story outline instead (Good heavens! There's a difference?), and how to follow up on a query or outline submission, are all covered in depth here. So too are such arcane mysteries as the "Three Little Phrases": "when?" (your deadline, and justmakegoodandsure you don't miss it), "how long?" (how many words? What's a column item? Short feature? Column length?), "how much?" (most important! What you will be paid: clarifying matters here, including such items as kill fees -- recommended --, or writing on spec --not recommended --, will save you grief in the long run.)
"So my manuscript is in only two days late, its only 200 words longer than the assigned length, and when can I expect my first cheque?"
Not so fast, slapshot. There are more hurdles to clear before your story sees the sheen of glossy paper. Revisions, angles not covered, "a photograph would be nice," answering questions from the magazine's fact checkers, (Does this mean more revisions? Most likely.), cutting your copy (it is 200 words too long, after all); these are just some of the realities the beginning writer must face on the way to that first pay day. Words For Sale does not aim to discourage the budding freelancer, but shows him or her how to deal with the difficulties one is certain to encounter.

One chapter contains the comments of some of the most successful Canadian freelance writers and editors (all of whom have freelanced themselves) on what the novice freelancer must do to make it into their publication. Each editor has his or her own preferences as far as style and presentation go. But they all have at least two desires in common.

One is that freelancers approach them in the correct way, i.e., by submitting well thought out and neatly compiled queries or outlines. (The preference of one editor for a particular submission format is unpredictable. Sometimes it can be discovered by reference to the magazine's masthead. Occasionally trial and error is the only way to get to know an editor's tastes.) But Words For Sale will help the novice meet the general requirements and formats demanded by all editors.
The other is a hunger for new writers: over the past twenty years, there has been a proliferation of new magazines in Canada for which the supply of enthusiastic and talented writers has not kept pace. As a result, even the editors of the well known large circulation magazines are constantly looking for and encouraging new talent. Peter C. Newman, for example, just before his departure as editor of Maclean's, noted that in one average four and a half month period, his magazine had printed contributions from one hundred and fifty-two freelance contributors. Nor does one have to live in a major population centre to succeed as a freelancer. The almost-all-of-us who don't live in Toronto might not have the advantage of near proximity to an editor's office, but we are likely to have less writing competition out in the boondocks, and may have a much deeper and untapped mine of stories to work with.

Other goodies in this book include a glossary of writers buzzwords and technical terms, and for those who have started to earn a writing income, a varied and useful section on money matters, including tax deductions for writers, resale of a story (the writer's gravy!), copyright legislation in Canada, Europe, and the U.S. (they differ), and how much one can expect to earn as a full time freelancer (not much, but who can put a price on fame?).

To my remorse, this book does not give some magic solution to the problem of fighting off inertia, actually sitting down to a think pad, coming up with ideas, and then following through on them. (It does have a 48 item list of ways to avoid a typewriter, but I knew most of them already.) Like books on self-hypnosis, exer-
cise, learning to draw, or understanding the stock market, all subjects--and more--of which are generously represented on my bookshelf, Words For Sale is a guide. It tells you how and what to do with your work, but the work is still yours to do. The key word, constantly repeated for all its drab truth, is hustle. Hustle to come up with ideas, hustle to bring your ideas to the attention of editors, hustle to get the story in on time, hustle urgently to get the revisions in on time, and even when you have absolutely no more time left in which to do it, hustle to get new assignments that will pay the rent when the few dollars from that last assignment run out.

Talent, ideas, hustle: if you don't have all three you can forget about a career in freelance writing. Maybe accounting is for you. If you do have them, but aren't sure what to do next, Words For Sale will give valuable advice to help smooth out the rough spots on the road to freelance fame and fortune.