

Rob McGibbon

# About a freelance

Recently a friend called me from Heathrow in great excitement on his return from a long-haul business trip. "Rob, I've got it — I finally know who you *are!*" he announced, laughing. "I've just watched *About A Boy*. That's you — you're Hugh Grant in that film."

"Thanks... great."  
"Yeah. You're him — the bloke with no job, the one who doesn't do *anything!*"

Hysterical laughter followed and I joined in lightly. It's fine: I've been getting this sort of piss-take for years because that's the commonly held perception, you know, that freelancing is a cushy little skive. Yeah right. And my name's Hugh Grant.

I watched *About A Boy* again for the sake of this piece (strenuous legwork marks out a good hack) and I have to admit, the similarities are worryingly uncanny. I even noticed that I dress a bit like the lead character these days.

For those of you not familiar with the plot the film is based on Nick Hornby's best-selling book of the same title. In the movie version Hugh plays Will, an accidentally wealthy layabout. He is single and takes great pleasure in his hedonistic "island" life by gleefully dividing his days into 30-minute slots of idleness, which he affectionately calls "units".

To meet women, Will joins a single parents' group and pretends to have a son; his cynical ploy goes wrong when a 12-year-old boy befriends him, turns his life upside down and consequently brings Will's solo days and wicked womanising to a happy conclusion. It is a wonderful, feel-good film.

I hasten to point out that I do not go around chasing single mums — well, not deliberately — nor have I invented a child — yet. However, as a freelance writer working from home, I do have a disproportionate amount of time to fill and Will's "units" principle could apply: travelling to work — one-tenth of a unit; reading the papers — two units; writing stories — multiple units at staggered half-unit intervals; ideas conference — one unit; exercise — two units; work avoidance tactics — innumerable units.

Without doubt, freelancing is an odd life and it is one that I have come to love and loathe in equal measure. Like most jobs, it can be as good as it can be bad.

My plot so far: my last staff job was as a showbiz writer on *The Sun* under Kelvin MacKenzie; I was young and on an upward trajectory. Then in early 1990 I had an idea for a quick book on an unknown boy band. Uncle Kelvin said, "Nah — write features." I left, the band was New Kids on the Block and the book sold by the truck load; it was an amazing break and there was never any going back.

So, at 24, I had suddenly gone from the buzz of the Super Soaraway to the surreal routine of working alone. And 14 years on, I am *still* on Cell Block F. I mean, Jesus, even fluttering Papillon didn't do this long in solitary.

Since going freelance, I have kept up a steady output of showbiz interviews, news stories and general features. OK, none of it is Pulitzer-winning material, but I have had countless articles in 12 or more nationals, as well as a variety of magazines, and I've had a number of celebrity biographies published. I've not been as prolific as some, but I've not been lazy either.

Most of my work goes to the tabloids and, without exception, I do business with like-minded people who are always honourable and fair. In all this time I have not been let down on one payment — touch wood — and you cannot ask for more than that. I suppose it is because I regularly produce stuff that helps out in the ever-hungry world of newspapers. Sounds easy, but it isn't.

Rather like Papillon, I have repeatedly tried to escape this writing life — so don't be surprised if you ever see a guy floating by Wapping and Canary Wharf on a coconut raft screaming, "I'm still here, you bastards!"

I have embarked on various crackpot entrepreneurial ventures in the hope of returning to the comfort of an office environment, which I have always missed. But no matter what, I come back to freelancing; it's probably what I do best.

The reason for these escape attempts is that freelancing is a mash of confusing contradictions. It messes with your head and the only way to make it work is to accept that it's all about balance. If you think of it as a set of scales, then one side sinks down under a stack of irritating negatives, but it is brought back to a satisfactory hover by a small number of seriously heavy positives.

The all-defining upside is encapsulated in the job

title itself: *free-lance*. The freedom of this life is what keeps you sane when all you feel is that you're in a one-man siege, with no one waiting for you to come out.

The loneliness and sense of detachment are the big downers. I miss the irreverent humour of journalists and the immediacy and teamwork of a paper.

But please wipe away the tears, because I am also blessed to be away from the back-biting and politics. I was hopeless at that, so I am grateful to work in a politically incorrect hippy state, run by a free-thinking despot.

Now I think of it, I've not had a bollocking since I can remember. How many employees can say that? But, as liberating as that sounds, my merciless internal dialogue can match any monstrosity from an editor.

Then there is the small stuff.

I never set my alarm.

Lucky bastard, you think, but I am always up early and usually start work by 8.30am. I used to get chippy with people who call late in the morning and joke, "Sorry, are you still in bed?" Now I just give a fake yawn and say: "Yeah, but I can talk — the two lap dancers from last night are downstairs making breakfast."

Freelances are spared the miseries of commuting, but they are also deprived of the first whinge of the day.

We can watch telly all day, except I only ever watch the news. I may not have had a paid holiday for 14 years, but I have extended some trips beyond the possibilities of any regular job.

Oh, and here's a big up: freelancing has the ultimate cure for the mid-week hangover — you are automatically transferred to the weekend. At times I feel like an honorary member of *The Tomorrow People*.

Self-motivation is the key, so how do you get going without a boss breathing down your neck? In all honesty, it is an excruciating struggle, but I'm hardly in a position to delegate. If I don't do it, no one will and eventually I will starve. Faced with that alternative, I choose to hit the keyboard.

What about money, people always ask, how do you cope? Well, that's also good and bad. I can spend weeks on something speculative and earn bugger all, then I might turn something around quickly that is the equivalent of a long spell on PAYE.

Finances are constantly unpredictable. Imagine the accounts department telling a staff journalist: "Sorry, we forgot to put your wages on the system. You'll get it in a couple of months." I'm pathetically happy if that *doesn't* happen.

What about the insecurity? Freelancing is definitely not for the faint-hearted, but is any job in Fleet Street secure? Besides, who is going to sack me? The flip-side is that I haven't had a promotion since my 20s.

Hey, I'm not even in line for a payoff if I decide to do nothing and sit it out.

In contrast, virtually all my contemporaries have risen to be high-ranking executives. At last count, six are editors and several others edit major magazines. And fair play to them all. They have grafted incredibly hard, put in the hours and taken a lot of shit to get where they are.

OK, I may still have the same singular job title, but I reckon I can compete in the newspaper world's bracket-filling obsession. In my mind, I am a freelance writer (news/features/sport)/messenger/PA/forward planning/sales/IT manager (ignorant twat)/syndication/library/accounts/debt collection/chief executive/editor. I am even Rob the Builder. Can I bodge it? Yes I do.

So you can understand why I have to laugh when people say I live a hassle-free existence and don't do anything. A freelance has to do *everything* with little or no back-up and that's plenty of pressure.

The beauty of the freelancing beast is that, within reason, I control my career and I believe anything is possible. I can chase any story, approach any publication, write any book. The inescapable catch, however, is that I have to make it happen myself, which is as daunting as it is thrilling.

There's a brilliant line in *About A Boy* when a woman tries to coax Will out of his self-inflicted loneliness. "No man is an island, Will," she gushes. But he snaps back: "Well, I am — I'm bloody Ibiza!"

No freelance is an island, I hear you say. Well, I am — I'm bloody Devil's Island!

Commissioning editors are always welcome to visit Rob on his island. Contact him through his website, [www.rob-mcgibbon.com](http://www.rob-mcgibbon.com).

# Sky meets Murphy

Michael Wilson's rocky run-up to the launch of Sky News Ireland



assistant, catering manager, mediator, ambassador, bouncer and provider of Sky News umbrellas. This last job is the most important of all. In all war zones there is a currency that opens doors and moves mountains. In the former Eastern Bloc this currency used to be Levi's 501s, in Central America it's Marlboro Lights, and in Iraq it's US dollars. Here in the war zone that is the new Sky News Ireland office, the currency has become brollies. Did I mention it rains a lot in Ireland?

## Thursday 6 May

In my diary there is red highlighter around today. This signifies either a hot date or a career-defining moment. Unfortunately, today it's the latter. This morning we reveal the "look" of Sky News Ireland to the hack-pack of Dublin. They are stunned into silence. At least I hope that's why they are silent. After that the talent gets to go on a nationwide tour in the SkyCopter. The hype builds across the nation. Except in Galway, the home town of the main anchor, Grainne Seoige, where the excitement, the fascination and the tension are totally lost on the local media. The big story of the day is not the arrival of two of the new stars in the Sky family by helicopter into the centre of town, but the opening of a new sewage treatment works. Do these people not understand showbiz?

## Friday 7 May

For the past three weeks, without warning, small but vital pieces of equipment have failed for no reason at all. "Dirty power", that's the problem. Too many "spikes" causing chaos: editing, graphics and server systems blown out. Today we solve the problem: it looks like a fridge, it's the size of a fridge, it's the colour of a fridge, it's called a UPS and it sounds like Concorde taking off. Which is fine if it's in the car park, but not so good if it's in the middle of the sales floor and next to the open-plan studio. Story of Sky News Ireland: one problem's solved and another is created. But there is one piece of good news, the power may be dirty, but our final rehearsal is clean. Guinness all round.

## Saturday 8 May

Rest day for the editorial team. The operations team make final delicate adjustments to the expensive state-of-the-art technology. Purchase order signed for a hammer.

## Sunday 9 May

New presenter Grainne goes live. A quick two-way from Dublin into Sky News to promote the launch and acres of newspaper coverage both help the awareness campaign — obviously no sewage plants are opened on a Sunday in Ireland. Over on the west coast more hype as the SkyCopter arrives; it'll be buzzing the hotel where President Bush is staying next month. I hope the anti-aircraft batteries haven't been installed yet. Steve Bennedik, the launch editor, is finalising the game plan for the first programme. The real fridge is loaded with champagne. At least 24 hours of chilling is required — and that's the staff here I'm talking about, forget the Moet!

## Monday 10 May

The suits and big guns from the Sky News Centre turn up for the launch — this naturally helps reduce the first night nerves. I see a few of my colleagues offering up a prayer, but even He can't help us now. Titles roll. The programme leads with an exclusive, a special report, SkyCopter buzzing County Clare, and links to Baghdad and Washington. Not bad for the first night. With an increase in audience of around 800 per cent compared with the average evening, the whole team are very proud of their achievement. The *Irish Examiner* seems to like the service, its headline reads: "Slick news service sees viewers reach for Sky."

Michael Wilson is senior news editor at Sky News Ireland. Weekday bulletins are broadcast live at 7pm and 10pm and a review of the week airs in these slots at the weekend

Remember  
Murphy's Law  
— anything  
that can go  
wrong, will go  
wrong. The  
team are happily  
writing and  
editing tonight's  
programme.  
Until Murphy  
strikes. The  
office is hit by a  
power cut —  
computers go  
blank and video  
files are lost

## Saturday 1 May

Being water-cannoned isn't the way I plan to prepare for the launch of Sky News Ireland. But as the EU leaders eat their supper in the opulent surroundings of Farmleigh House, the Sky team are being drenched by riot police outside. The Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern even leaves the other leaders to watch our coverage in the safety of the media centre. The commentators write that once again it is a foreign broadcaster that shows state broadcaster RTE how to cover a story. The irony is not lost that in eight days' time we'll no longer be a foreign broadcaster.

## Sunday 2 May

On air! Well, in a way. Sky News political editor Adam Boulton presents the first show ever from the Dublin News Centre. Two presidents (Cyprus and Latvia) and live links from Brussels and Scotland — not bad for day one. The team's confidence grows, but then...

## Monday 3 May

Basking in the glory of the weekend, the wheels fall off the train set. I want to go back to bed. The whole of Ireland is on Bank Holiday and so is Saint Clare, the patron saint of television. The team have been rehearsing for three weeks now and still it's impossible to get a totally glitch-free programme. Through various technical difficulties we manage to produce 17 minutes of television — that's 13 minutes short of a programme. Oh, and there's only a week to go.

## Tuesday 4 May

I wake up in Limerick — today we open the West of Ireland bureau. I'm told the media world of the west coast is excited about this event. Indeed they clearly are as the paparazzi turn up — all three of them. Contracts then signed, it's back to Dublin to see what's happening for the rehearsals ahead. Remember Murphy's Law — anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. Well Murphy is an Irishman and, as he has home advantage, he is laying down the law for all to see. I walk into the office and the team are happily writing and editing tonight's programme. Until Murphy strikes. The office is hit by a power cut — computers go blank, video files are lost and the colour drains from the faces of the team.

## Wednesday 5 May

I used to be a journalist, but my CV now includes parking attendant, electrical contractor, wardrobe