

# Written in the stars

Image: Jamie Street

Once upon a time, magazines were a reader's gateway into the world of astrology and a goldmine for publishers.

Now that the internet has all but removed the glossy middleman, where has the money in horoscopes gone?

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The words "follow the sound of my voice" echo down the corridor from a disembodied Shelley von Strunckel. The world-renowned astrologer has a sense for intrigue, it seems.

Von Strunckel's King's Cross lair is just one of the properties she owns – but surrounded by floor-to-ceiling shelves adorned with books detailing the history of astrology to guides on how to write birth charts, it's the natural setting for her writing.

Discovered in 1991 by the late horoscopist Patric Walker (they both worked for News Corp), von Strunckel is responsible for creating *The Sunday Times*' first horoscope column. She has continued to pen the page for nearly 30 years. A lot has changed since then, she recognises. When asked how, intriguingly, she states: "Landlines are a charming, antiquated thing."

In the 1990s, horoscopes were a brilliant economy. Without mobile phones, all calls through to a newsroom's astrology line came via a home phone. Readers would dial into their hotline of choice to hear a recording of the staff astrologer reading aloud their horoscope, paying for the pleasure. Patric Walker's voice was but one of many that a caller might hear. Towards the end of his life, he was famous for two things. To the British public, he was revered for his world-renowned horoscopes for the *Evening Standard*. To his close acquaintances, like von Strunckel, he was known for his diamond collection.

His contemporary, Jonathan Cainer, struck a deal with the *Mail* wherein he exchanged his written copy for all the money made from the calls. It is reported he earned up to a million pounds each year.

Shelley von Strunckel's weekly horoscopes in *The Sunday Times Style* magazine still offer additional landline readings, but only for tradition's sake. Between 2012 and 2017, the total time spent on landline calls slipped from 103 to 54 billion minutes, according to Ofcom. In the days before mobile phones and wireless internet, if a reader wanted to call in, they had to do so via the print product – that was where the number was listed, after all. When the world migrated towards smartphones, with instant internet access everywhere, the hotlines struggled to bring in as much money as they once did.

"It was an incredibly successful business model," von Strunckel recalls. "They'd make a million from the phone lines alone. BT was making a couple of bob off it too."

Despite the hotline struggle, there is still money in horoscopes. Only now it happens away from the page. If a reader wants to contact, say, British *Vogue's* horoscope writer, Alice Bell, they can do so via her website or Instagram.

In January 2018, Bell was working as a fashion assistant for *Vogue.com* in New York. Without any prior horoscope experience, she pitched an article: 'How to shop in 2018, according to your star sign'. Nine months later, Bell opened a waiting list for birth chart readings on Instagram, charging \$30 each. Within two days the list had reached 100 people.

"I made around two weeks' salary at *Vogue* in two days," she reveals. "That was the point where I thought I could actually financially support myself doing this." She left her post in January 2019 and six months later, *British Vogue* commissioned Bell as their resident horoscope writer.

Most of her money, is made through her own website where she offers birth chart readings (\$100), private astrology sessions (\$125) and FaceTime sessions (\$40 for 15 minutes, \$70 for 30). Condé Nast won't see a penny of it.

Horoscopes, and astrologers in turn, have largely divorced themselves from print. Bell may hold the title of *British Vogue's* staff horoscope writer, but the title carries more clout than the paycheck.

Bell's original pitch for *Vogue.com* taps into the relatively superficial appreciation for horoscopes found on social media: "tag yourself if you're a Virgo" or "Dating a Taurus be like" memes. Before Y2K someone might have picked up a print paper to find their horoscope, now they can tap to open Instagram and engage with the content free of charge. It is unsurprising that written horoscopes have lost their legitimacy in the face of social media because now anyone online can write them.

The money, then, remains in these opportunities for avid readers to feel personally connected to their astrologer. Just as an *Evening Standard* reader might have called up to listen to Patric Walker in 1991, people today will FaceTime someone like Alice Bell. A meaningful conversation with another person who shares your beliefs has value. It is just that magazines are no longer the conduit for that.

But what about von Strunckel? Has one of the world's longest-serving and most well-respected astrologers noticed this change?

"I do not make as much money as Patric Walker did," von Strunckel says with resignation. "I make my money from property." ●