

On focusing on the longer journey



Author and editor Ed Park discusses dealing with rejection, refining your process, and making time for creative work whenever you can.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3588 words.

Tags: [Writer](#), [Day jobs](#), [Failure](#), [Success](#), [Time management](#), [Inspiration](#).

We've known each other for years. You were my editor at *The Village Voice*. When you lost your job, you finished your first novel, *Personal Days* (2008), which put you on the map as a fiction writer. Do you ever look back at that moment as a fortuitous thing? At the time, of course, you're like, "Oh crap, I don't have a job"—but you made the most of it.

It was a pivotal moment. I finished what became *Personal Days* very soon after being let go, but I had been working on it for close to a year. At *The Voice*, I was doing a lot of work on the editing front, and I was writing articles and reviews. For as long as I worked there, which was since the mid-90s, I was always writing fiction, stuff that for the most part nobody saw. Novels that didn't get published, stories, some of which would get published over the years.

There was a moment after the *Voice* was sold when I knew that the place where I'd worked for so many years was going downhill, and I would surely be gone. That was very depressing. But the creative side of my brain was processing it in maybe the only way I knew how, which was to turn it into fiction. I had written a lot before that, including a novel a bunch of editors saw and nobody wanted. This was actually in 1996, a long time ago. I wrote another one that agents didn't want to see. It was just sort of like, "Why am I doing this?"

You can get rejected over and over, but if you still actually want to do something, you're going to keep doing it. Honestly, that was the only thing I wanted to do, as much as I liked various elements of the *Voice* job. I knew getting let go was coming. Tons of people were getting laid off and I would be among them. It was a terrible feeling. But the upshot was that I was determined to see this current project [*Personal Days*] through to the end. If I hadn't been let go, maybe I would have continued to work there, but my novels would never get published.

That work/art balance is complicated. You were a really important editor for me early on. I've found that if someone is super organized and good at editing and things like that, people assume they're not a great artist. There's often this view of the artist that's like, "Oh, I can't stay organized, I can't hold down a job." This is something I've discovered in my own experience, where people assume, "Oh, you do this thing, you have a 9 to 5, so clearly you're not really a writer." Did you feel at all when you were finishing the novel, getting it published, that you in a way had to prove yourself? Like, "Hey, I'm not just an editor, I'm also a writer"?

Maybe it was surprising to some people who just knew me in the context of the *Voice*. *Personal Days* didn't take place at a newspaper, but obviously there were things inspired by my time at the *Voice*—the issue of morale and corporate takeovers and things like that.

As for being defensive, I think part of me was like, "Hey, I actually have been working at fiction writing in a

more general sense for a long time," and it was really those years of writing these unseen, invisible novels, and these stories that few or no people saw, that helped me hone these fictioneering instincts. So weirdly, I was able to finish *Personal Days* in a relatively quick time.

On the other hand, my second book, *Same Bed Different Dreams*, took many years. That length of time wasn't to prove that I was a real artist or anything. It was just the way my life and my art worked out. I mean, this is maybe what you're getting at: You try to create a balance and you try to do both equally, but you never know what's going to take over or how much time a project is going to take. You can do things to try to be more efficient on either side of the ledger, but I certainly didn't start *Same Bed Different Dreams* thinking it would take nine years.

When you were finishing *Personal Days*, you were maybe in transition mode? In that sense you're thinking, "All right, I've lost my job, I'm going to get this book done and move on." Once that was out, did you find your process changing? You'd been used to writing while holding down a job. You're in a new place after that.

Yeah, I think it did. A couple things happened right as I finished that book and the book was sold. My first kid was born, right before the book came out. I had started teaching a little more. So it was like a new set of responsibilities. I can see the person I was then, yearning for a creative life, feeling the demands of work and family and trying to balance it all. I went into book publishing and it was a lot to take on. I wrote stories every so often, to keep my hand in the game. But it definitely took a while before I felt like, "Okay, the kids are a little bit older—is there going to be a second novel?"

Then I had this idea that became *Same Bed*. For the first several years of *Same Bed Different Dreams*, a lot of it was written when the kids were at hockey practice. My older son played at Lasker Rink in Central Park, in the upper part of Central Park. If it wasn't super cold, I'd be on the tables outside, sometimes with a laptop, sometimes just with notepads. And my younger son played at a different rink, Riverbank. I'd sit in the little eating area.

If you want to do it, you just find the time anywhere. At a hockey practice or wherever, if there's an activity that your kid is doing. Just sit in the car and write wherever. I think one of the things I've learned to do as a writer is just make the best of any new situation. Even standing in line for bagels the other day, I was writing on the back of a receipt.

As long as I've known you, you've had multiple projects going. For instance, the literary newsletter, *The New-York Ghost*. Did having those kinds of smaller writing projects help to keep the other writing going?

Mostly yes. The *New-York Ghost* started post-Voice layoff and pre-novel publication. It's weird because I missed editing and suddenly I wasn't an editor. I thought, "Well, I'll just put this fun thing together for friends, for free." I laid it out and put a logo on it, people contributed pieces and art. I turned it into a PDF.

The past couple years, well, my sense of time is all demolished, I've been writing longer pieces for different places. *The New York Review of Books*, primarily. I love the process, but it's also months of my writing life. It can throw the amount of time I can spend on fiction for a loop. But I have that freelancer's mentality and often if an editor asks me to do something, it's like I really do wish I could clone myself and just say yes to all this stuff, because there's pleasure in that as well. Definitely.

***Same Bed Different Dreams* took nine years to write. How did you know it was finally done?**

The beginning came quickly, and I wrote and wrote and wrote. I remember the story came to a fork in the road and I went the wrong way. Or maybe the roundabout way. I got a little lost. But interestingly, writing some of these nonfiction pieces, specifically this article about this experimental avant-garde poet named Yi Sang, a Korean poet from the '30s, some pieces like that actually almost reflected back onto the novel. I mean, I think I said yes to writing about Yi Sang because he had already made his way into my book a little. But then when I did the article, I really immersed myself in his work and life. So he had a little bit more prominence in *Same Bed*. Toward the end, we were trapped inside because of COVID and so it was a lot of just thinking about the book, thinking about

what was wrong with the book, trying to figure out how to cure it, and not wanting to give up.

The one thing about that much time passing is that I just felt like, "I can't quit now. I have to finish it. I have to make it good."

As you went along, you self-edited, did you have anyone to help you or you were just doing it on your own?

The early part of the book, I sent some chapters to some friends. When I started writing the book within the book, the dream sections, which are based around historical events, I sent those out to a couple people. But not many.

Before I even thought of having that book within a book, it was really just one long, 700 page beast. The monster in the box. At a certain point, you're almost embarrassed. I'm not going to give somebody 300 more pages and ask for feedback. I have to be at peace with it myself before I can have other people read it. My agent did heroically read the first big draft back in maybe early 2017.

I just had this thought of how someone who's a good gardener will come over to your house and say, "Oh, these plants are all overgrown," Then just cut them back to the point where they look like they're dead. You're like, "You've killed my plants," but then in a week or two, a couple weeks, they grow back again, more beautiful, and you realize, "Oh, it was necessary to chop these down."

I like that.

Sometimes with editing you need that. When I was an editor at Pitchfork, writers would often have a first paragraph where I thought, "This is you clearing your throat, you have to cut it, the real thing begins the paragraph after this."

Maybe this interview starts here.

This is where it all begins.

This is the good stuff, yeah.

I don't mean to gloss over it, but the book was so complicated, and eventually I divided it into three different strands. One of them is essentially a first person narration that unfolds over a couple months. The second is the "Dreams," these strings of historical events, covering a wide range of time. I had those two strands, and then I was like, "I like it, I like it, but it needs something else." So I was like, "Okay, there has to be a *third* strand, but this one is going to jump every decade and each one will be in a different voice, in a different format." It was a little bit crazy and daunting, but I had faith that it would work. I spent so much time on the book that I was beginning to know what it required. And so I was like, I have to do it.

This third strand, there are parts of it that were weirdly autobiographical in non-obvious ways. I was mining a lot of my own memories and my own personal history and having it play out on the page in a way that the other two parts didn't.

So it turned out to be the right decision, but it's funny it took me so long to get there. Maybe year seven. I was like, "Wait, possibly a third thing is needed!" I can't advise this as a way to go about writing a novel, but the project makes its own demands on you, and its own rules, and you learn how to play them. With any luck, you have these insights. They might take a while, though.

I think for a lot of people that's surprising. They figure everyone is Joyce Carol Oates. That said, I'm sure she even has a hard time now and then! It's hard to start another project. It's different every time. You can't have the perfect formula for every single book: "I sit here at this exact time. I do this in the exact same way. I magically write another book."

Sometimes it takes something unexpected happening. Or you watch a movie or read a novel that suddenly sparks something. It's unpredictable. I'm a big fan of repetition and having a routine, but I also love how it can be the chance thing that you learn about and then get obsessed with that influences you.

I would also say, to that point, this story collection I have, it's like 25 years in the making. The first story I think was from '98 and the most recent is from earlier this year. And it's funny to think about, these aren't all the stories I've written, but the ones that I like the best, and together they kind of tell a mega-story, even though that was not a conscious ambition.

Same Bed Different Dreams has been a huge success. You were a Pulitzer Prize finalist. Do you view yourself differently or do you view the process differently after something like that? What did it feel like to be nominated for such a big prize?

It definitely felt good. I'm not going to lie. It was a surprise. They announced the finalists and winners online, all at once. I was actually preparing for a class. I had a makeup class to teach, so I was looking at my notes. And I was shocked to hear my name, but obviously very happy.

Did it feel like validation?

I suppose that it makes me look at all my work in a different light, even the stuff that never got published. It's all part of the process. Looking over the stories that I mentioned that are coming out [as *An Oral History of Atlantis* this summer], most of them have been published before. A few of them were in the *New Yorker* and *McSweeney's*, places like that, but a lot of them appeared in journals that don't exist anymore, anthologies that vanished. I'm the only one who knows where the bodies are buried. I'm the only one who knows where the stories were published. I'm getting a little choked up. I feel some compassion for the younger Ed. I'm never going to say writing is easy, and certainly publishing is not easy. Just the amount of rejection is a lot. It's a lot.

I'm not just talking about the novels. Even with the stories, just trying to get a foothold in the business was hard. When I was going over these stories earlier this year, I remembered how hard it was, what a long road it's been. But what's great about the stories is that I can see the better part of my spirit or my talent, I can see myself trying to be alive on the page. And in most cases, be funny. Almost like trying to take however bad the situation was for me professionally and find the silver lining, find a way to laugh at it, and in a way, transcend it. That's been interesting, feeling this gentle affection for the Ed of yore, for me in my twenties and thirties and to be honest forties.

There's this interview on *The Creative Independent* from 2017 with Ocean Vuong. In it, Ocean says not to worry too much about prizes and awards because your work can still mean something without them. He's won many awards since then, a completely an amazing thing to do, but I know what he's saying: even if you don't win, your work can still be valid. In fact, your work can even be great if no one ever publishes it. You make the thing, you complete it, and you're like, "I finished this thing...success."

All that said, being rejected constantly and never winning anything is depressing. There's the high-minded point of, you finished the work, that's a success, and I believe that...but then it's like, "but 87 people rejected it," and there's that part of it, too.

Oh, yeah, it's so much rejection and it's hard. I think it's hard to be young and to feel like you're creative and there are those people for whom it happens overnight. But it usually doesn't happen that way.

Ultimately that's okay, because you get better. You hone your voice, you figure out what really matters. You figure out whether you even want to do it.

I was saying before, editors ask if I want to write about a certain book and I want to say yes to everything interesting, because I remember when I was pitching stuff and nobody wanted me to write. If you can hang in there and stay healthy, try to think of it as a longer journey. I hate everything I'm saying right now, it sounds so

cliché, but I do think it's true. We've known each other for a very long time, and we've both been able to keep doing stuff that interests us. And I think it's all worthwhile in the end. The effort is part of it. It really is.

You said you do have some rituals you try to follow. What's essential for you when you're having a good writing day?

Being offline helps. The morning that the writer [Han Kang](#) won the Nobel Prize, an editor asked, "Do you want to write something?" I was like, "Oh, sorry I have to teach." And I just wrote some notes to myself, and five minutes later I sent it to the editor. Then basically I agreed to do it, somehow psyched myself into it, even though I had "no time," and I wrote it on the train to my teaching job at Princeton. That's partly the magazine and newspaper training, deadline writing, but somehow being on a train, having a task, no internet... I almost fantasized, If I could just take a train going back and forth, that actually is very productive.

On the day-to-day level, I wake up pretty early, about 6:45, have coffee. And what I've been doing usually is playing some music on a record player, so that if I can stay off the internet for 25 minutes, that's pretty good. It's like the pomodoro method, in a way. Then if I'm on a roll, I hit play again or I flip the record over. It's a good way of marking time.

Also, for the past year, I'm often using a typewriter. I definitely fetishize the typewriter a lot. I feel like a typewriter appears in a lot of my fiction writing, just because I'm using it so much. The good thing is obviously, you're away from the internet, you're away from a screen. When you're online or even if you're working on Microsoft Word, you're just a second away from email and sending texts.

A typewriter is a great way to be close to your words and the physicality of the paper and the look of the ink. You start typing really fast and there's nothing like it. The sound of it keeps you on track. And at the end of the writing session, having the pages all piled up or sometimes even taped to the wall is a great feeling. Of course, then I refine that, and eventually enter it into the computer.

I'm working on another novel, which I have a lot of ideas for, probably too many. For now, I'm just writing these sections as far as I can take them, knowing that there's stuff I have to fix later, plus the connective tissue and whatnot. And every week or so, I punch holes in the pages, put them in a three-ring binder, so I can refer to them easily. I'm not saying everyone has to do that, but I do think, at least for me, the typewriter does unleash something and it protects me from wasting too much time in the mornings.

There's a writer we interviewed who said on a day she's really looking to write, she has her husband take their modem away so she can't access the internet..

Oh my god, yeah. For *Personal Days*, I actually hid my modem cord because I didn't have Wi-Fi. My phone was a flip phone, not a smartphone. And I don't know if I told you this, it was two apartments ago, I'd put the cord in another room behind the couch and put obstacles between me and the cord, so that if I wanted to go online, it would be a real hassle. I put a row of chairs with a broom on top. It was really crazy, but that's how I finished the book so fast.

Ed Park recommends five 2024 memoirs that he admired:

[A Natural History of Empty Lots](#), Christopher Brown

[Grief Is for People](#), Sloane Crosley

[Stubs: 2001-2010](#), John Jaewon Kim

[1967](#), Robyn Hitchcock

[Do Something](#), Guy Trebay

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