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As told to Hurley Winkler, 3264 words.

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On finding freedom within the rules

Author Katie Cotugno discusses writing novels from skeletal beginnings, embracing a love of school and rules, and switching gears when a project isn't working out.

As I'm talking to you today, you're coming off of a really tight book deadline. How are you feeling about it?

I'm feeling good about it. I'm feeling exhausted by it. I'm feeling creatively satisfied, and I'm feeling like I have one more big push.

I sold this book on the first five chapters back in the fall, and I knew at the time that we sold it that the draft timeline was going to be shorter than almost anything I had done in all 12 years of my professional career. I felt excited and energized by it, and now, at the other end, I am feeling, to use a sports metaphor, like I have left it all on the field.

Very appropriate given that the book in question, *Heavy Hitter*, is about baseball! And from what I know, the deadline you met was a really tight one and you just mentioned it. Can you tell us anything about the timeline of it?

Yeah, so we sold the book at the end of October, and my editor, who I have worked with before and have a good relationship with, was basically like, "How fast can you write this book?" Because we are trying to catch a cultural moment. It's a pop star/sports guy romance, so there is a very specific zeitgeist that we're trying to chase.

My agent was very helpful. I'm such a teacher's pet, such a people pleaser, that I was like, "I can have it done by January." She was like, "Are you nuts? If one person in your house sneezes between now and January, it's over." So we set a February deadline, and I did meet it.

My first drafts are always very skeletal. My writing very much grows from draft to draft. So I knew that the first draft would be short, and it was very short. As soon as I sent it off to my agent and my editor, I already knew some of what I needed to do next. So I just kept going. I was like, "Here's what I'm going to do while you guys read." They were like, "Yes, okay, do that." Then they came back with notes, and we've really just been piggybacking and leapfrogging. I work, they give me notes, and it's all happening at the same time.

What does a skeletal first draft usually look like? What goes into it?

I am very much a plotter. I've always been a plotter. I start generally with a situation or plot before character. If you, like me, come out of an MFA background, that's a quote-unquote hacky way to do it, but for me, I can never tell exactly who my characters are before I see them walk around on the page, before I put them in situations and move them around.

I start with a chapter-by-chapter outline, and then I'll do a draft that I call a "zero draft" that is really just me telling myself the story. It'll have scenes that I'm excited about. It will have a few lines of dialogue, and it'll feel more like how if I was telling the story out loud. "And then she says this and then he says this and then this happens." That sort of thing. So I get all that down, and once I've done that, I have a better idea at that point, character-wise. It's easier for me to go back and shade in those character details and start to put the meat on the bones.

How do you deal with the stress of a looming deadline, especially such a tight deadline like the one you just met?

I try to take good care of myself physically. I try to get a lot of sleep. I try to get outside as much as I can. When I was younger, I was the kind of writer who could work all the time. I had a day job for years and years and years, and it was a nice, quiet day job where I sat and answered phones. So I would work at work, and then I could come home before I had kids and sit and work for four more hours if I wanted to. I could stay up late and work, and I could get up early and work. Now I have two small kids and there are just different kinds of demands on my time.

The thing that I'm always trying to learn to do is just be where I am at that moment and be working when I'm working and try and make it really focused work and not half-working and half-dicking around on the internet, which is hard. I'm still not really good at doing that when I'm working, and being with my family when I'm with my family, and not having guilt all the time about not doing the thing that I'm not doing in that moment.

When you're working on a project, do you bring in readers, or is it only really seen by your agent and your editor?

It depends on the project. I will say when I first got the idea for this book, *Heavy Hitter*, I could tell that I was psyched about it because I shared the first couple of chapters with a bunch of friends, which is not something that I normally do. Normally I'm a pretty private drafter and nobody, even my agent, will see it until I've done a revision. I generally feel very protective of my garbage drafts.

Is it a protectiveness of the ego? Is it a protectiveness of the work itself and wanting ideas to be organic? Or maybe a combination of the two?

I think it's a combination of those things. I think it is ego, mostly. When I know that I'm capable of something better than I have produced so far, I'm always like, "No one look at me yet."

You published, I believe, seven novels for young adults before your first book for adult readers, *Birds of California*. Did you always want to write books for adults?

I love YA. I obviously have quite a YA backlist, and I started writing *How to Love*, my first YA, when I was in high school. It was my senior thesis when I was at Emerson. I didn't necessarily, at that time, set out to have a career as a YA writer, but I was young, so I was writing about characters who were my age and I just fell into it that way. Then as I got older, I just naturally loved writing about teenagers. I could write the prom a hundred different ways. That stuff is so fun to me, that feeling tsunami of being a teenager is just incredibly fertile storytelling ground. There's room to do a lot more in YA than I think people sometimes realize.

Having said that, now I'm 38 years old, and I'm lucky to have been in the industry for this long, and I've had different experiences. I have gotten married and I've had kids and I just was feeling like I wanted my characters to have a little bit more road to run, so that transition to adult fiction felt pretty natural at that point.

What do you think writers of young adult novels are best at when they make the transition to writing for adult audiences? I think pacing might be part of it, because you have to keep the attention of teenagers. Is that one area where you feel like you have an edge over other writers who haven't written YA?

I think of myself, always first and foremost, as a journeyman craftsman more than a high artist. I always feel like my first objective and obligation as a writer is to keep your attention for as long as I have asked for it. I always feel like I'm writing for people in waiting rooms. I'm writing for people on planes. I'm writing for moms who are up in the middle of the night with babies and listening to audiobooks. I do think that that's a quality that is particularly important when you're writing for teenagers. Before you can do anything else, you have to get them to keep the book open.

You got an MFA in fiction writing after you'd already published several books for young adults. Many writers will get an MFA in the hopes that the degree will lead to publication somehow, but you already achieved that. So what made you decide to get an MFA?

School nerd. I missed being around other writers. I was really excited about the idea of taking time to be in community with other writers again, which is a thing that I had done a lot. The nice thing about the program at Emerson, the BFA program that I did, is that it is a very workshop-intensive program, and I loved it. I was excited about the idea of doing some more of that.

And also, at the time, I really thought that I might like to teach, and then I did some teaching and it turns out that I'm not very good at it and I don't enjoy it very much, but live and learn. But that was also a thing that was at the back of my mind. I've been lucky, but publishing is so volatile. So what kind of insurance could I get for myself to try and be able to do all kinds of different things with my very limited skill set?

Do you ever have to abandon novel projects you're working on? And how do you decide when it's time to abandon a project?

There's the regular writing dread and the regular feeling of, "Oh, this is garbage." I've experienced that

quite a lot. It's nice when it happens quickly. It happens in 10,000 words, but I wrote almost an entire novel last year, and I was like, "This is not it."

In that period between realizing the project isn't going to work and dealing with all those emotions that come with that and getting back on some other horse and starting another project: what is that period like between those two things?

Oh, it's terrifying. I am not a writer with a ton of ideas. It takes me a while to find something that feels exciting to me. There definitely have been points in my career where I was like, "Maybe I'm just done. Maybe I've just said everything that I have to say. It was a good run." I feel confident that I will always be a writer. I feel confident that I'm always going to be how I understand the world. But for me, I don't think that my supply of ideas is indefinite. I think there will come a point at which I will run out.

What's the plan if that, God forbid, ever happens?

I think I would be a great school secretary and I'll just go back to writing dirty fan fiction and it would be fine.

The majority of your books have a romantic component to them. What draws you to romance on the page over and over again?

I love a kissing book. I've always loved a kissing book. To me, a book that doesn't have some kind of love story, whether it's romantic or otherwise at its core, feels fundamentally incomplete and unsatisfying. I just feel like falling in love or experiencing love is such a universal human experience. I also just like to think about attractive people making out.

How has romance been a doorway into exploring other themes in your work?

If you look at my books' covers, they are marketed as romances, and they are fundamentally kissing books, but I've been able to talk about alcoholism and abortion and teen pregnancy and sexual abuse: all different, really weighty topics. But if you put a cute boy in them, it does, as you said, really open the door, I think, for readers who are suspicious of being preached to.

The trick is also that you can't be preaching. Teen readers especially can smell it on you if you are coming at them with an agenda, and it's always really important to me not to be doing that. But I think that teen readers can also handle and process a lot more than we necessarily give them credit for, and they're smarter than we give them credit for.

Do you ever feel in a first draft, maybe even in one of your "zero drafts," that you're coming at the darker themes with the sense of agenda, even if you don't feel like you necessarily have an agenda? How do you strip that back?

If it's starting to feel like an agenda is creeping in, I think that's when you have to really go back to your characters and really give it a think and make sure that you're being true to who they are, how they would realistically act, even if it's not the way that would be most convenient for the plot or for your moral agenda. You have to think: what is the most truthful possible way for me to tell this story? That's your job as a writer as well.

You co-wrote a book with Candace Bushnell, author of *Sex and the City*. How did that come to be, and what was that experience like?

Candace and I had the same editor at HarperCollins, and Candace was working on a book. I think she and I were both at a point in our careers where we were trying to figure out what was next. Actually, it came very close on the heels of the one that I was just telling you about that I got almost all the way to the end of and was like, "This is not it." Candace had written *The Carrie Diaries*, which was a YA, and had another book under contract and was trying to figure out what that might be. Our editor set us up on a blind date and thought that we might have a similar aesthetic, thought that we might be interested in grappling with similar things.

Candace is such an original gangster, first of all, but she's also just such a writer's writer and is so ballsy and so fearless. It was really just like a masterclass in writing, to be able to work with her and to trade ideas back and forth with her. Also, to just see her amazingly fancy apartment on the Upper East Side with her enormous poodles. Everything that you think about Candace Bushnell is true.

We went to one lunch in New York at the very beginning, and I had felt like I was really keeping my cool. I didn't eat anything at the lunch, obviously, because I was so nervous. And I went to Penn Station, got three Nathan's hot dogs, and I fell asleep all the way home. From New York to Boston, I passed right out. I was like, "Oh, I guess I was nervous." Like a small child. Ate three hot dogs and fell asleep.

Let's talk about a book of yours that came out last year, *Meet the Benedettos*. The novel's concept is *Pride and Prejudice* meets *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. And another one of your books, *Liar's Beach*, is a take on Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. What do you find most freeing about writing a novel based on existing cultural references?

I wonder if this is because I spent so many years in Catholic school, but I love rules. I find rules

incredibly freeing, and I think that's why I gravitate toward romance. I come from a background of fan fiction. I love being as creative as possible within a prescribed set of boundaries. I find that incredibly creatively satisfying and freeing, and I love retellings also for that reason. It gives me a set of rules. How can I take this world and make it completely my own, completely original, and also completely recognizable? That's such a fun and satisfying challenge to me.

Is there anything particularly challenging or even stifling about following a form and retelling a story?

There did come a point with *Meet the Benedettos* where I was trying to make the plot work beat by beat. Right around the time when Lizzie goes to visit Charlotte, I couldn't make it logically fit. I had written it like five times, and my editor was like, "I release you from this burden." She was like, "Just put it where it goes. Just let the characters do what they're doing in the story. It doesn't have to be a beat-for-beat re-creation." And that was when it really opened up for me, I think.

What advice would you share for writers who might be interested in trying on what you did, using the structure of a classic book to explore something more modern?

For me, what makes it successful, particularly with a book like *Pride and Prejudice*, is that I can always tell when writers don't really love the Bennetts or when they don't respect the Bennetts, when they think that they are just a silly joke. In the original, the characters are silly, but Austen is so warm toward them, and I feel like the retellings that don't land for me are the ones that are looking at the characters with an eye that is too harsh. I think you just got to love your source material, fundamentally.

You're so prolific and so young. What are your writing goals from here?

First and foremost, my writing goal is always to just be able to write the next book. I just feel lucky to have gotten this far. I want to be able to keep going. That's a thing that feels within my control, whereas things like giant book tours or the bestseller lists or year-end lists: those would be nice, but fundamentally, they don't really have very much to do with me.

What I can do is take my work seriously, be a person that people want to work with, and just keep at it. I also want to be the kind of writer that can write a lot of different kinds of things. I think the longer you stay in this industry, the more valuable of a skill that becomes. I read more book club/literary type fiction. I would love to write something like that. I think I have a cozy mystery in me. I don't know. I would like to write a middle grade. I do feel, in many ways, I'm still getting started. So while I do think I will run out of ideas, I'm not out of ideas yet.

Katie Cotugno recommends:

The Vaster Wilds by Lauren Groff: creepy, propulsive, genuinely surprising when I was not expecting it to be.

Adding both roasted chickpeas and quinoa to every Caesar salad.

1000-piece Colin Thompson Ravensburger puzzles, which are weird and satisfying and whimsical enough that my four year old is into them even though they're objectively pretty hard.

Taylor Hanson's deeply improbable cover of "Material Girl," which frankly did something indelible to my understanding of gender.

Getting the *New Yorker* in print again, even though my whole life is just periodically subscribing and unsubscribing to the *New Yorker* in print.

Name

Katie Cotugno

Vocation

author

Fact

Katie Goodall

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