

# On day jobs and money and creative work



Author Kiley Reid discusses the influence of money on art-making, writing about exactly what you want to write about, and why practice is key.

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As told to Scarlett Harris, 2338 words.

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**When did you realize you had a sixth sense for writing about money so relatably?**

I don't know if that realization is ever really cemented to any author's mind as far as their penchants are concerned.

Money fascinates me. The limitations that it puts on our world, the way that we think about it, the way that we talk about it, the way that a word like Venmo very quickly becomes a verb, and how technology takes communication away from people and further degrades culture because of how we communicate.

I don't write science fiction, but I'm very intrigued by the world-building that happens in science fiction. I like to treat money in the same way, highlighting the quality of our lives in response to the boundaries that money places on us in terms of who we date, where we go to school, what we can buy, the food we eat, how that food is made. All of those things are circulating around money.

I love reading about normal people, people that I see every day working at Walgreens, or being a nurse, or taking a cigarette break, doing things that people do in real life. If you are writing about normal people in the 21st century on a low-to-the-ground, domestic level, money has to play some sort of role.

And people love talking about money. People always like to let me know that they think it's gauche to talk about money, and they wouldn't do that in a normal circumstance because it's impolite, but they're very interested in money and want to know details of dollars and cents in the same way that I do.

**Coming off the success of *Such a Fun Age*, did you ever think that the way you wrote about money and class in that book in particular would resonate so much?**

After *Such a Fun Age*, I was really pleasantly surprised to see that readers were obsessed with the same domestic and petty instances that I was: those little things that someone says that makes you stay up late and wondering, *what did they mean by that?*

**Did you know straight away when you began writing *Come and Get It* that you wanted to feature similar themes to *Such a Fun Age*?**

I have a feeling that money will play a big role in everything that I write, as I do see the world through a bit of a materialist lens. [But] I never go into a book with themes that I mean to hitch. I never go in with a

checklist of a list of moral points or political avenues that I want to go down. I always start with people.

**Let's get into the research process. Did you tour dorm rooms and speak to college students about their attitudes to money?**

I did not tour dorm rooms. I did speak to many college students about money. That's how this novel really began. I read *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, written by two sociologists, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton, and I was really moved by their findings in their research about who college works for and who it works against. It really clearly depicts how different a college experience can be from one student to another and the opportunities available [for] one college student, just because they happened to be in the same room with someone who studied abroad, or had a brother who did something, or whose father worked somewhere where they could get an internship. It was really fascinating to see those results.

I interviewed around 30 to 40 people formally. I started at the University of Iowa and interviewed students who I'd had in classes and some of my [colleagues'] students as well. I went in [to the interviews for *Come and Get It*] not knowing plot points, but I wanted to ask students about how they navigate money and how much they get, who they get it from, how they ask for it, how much rent they pay. I wanted to just delve into this world of undergraduate life and see how they lived.

The more that I wrote, the more I understood who I needed to go to.. and a lot of the themes [of the book] ended up coming out of those interviews, from loneliness, to guilt over money, to a blasé attitude towards finances, scholarships. It became more focused as time went on.

**What about your own college and early graduate experiences as it relates to money?**

I was ruthlessly saving everything to a fault. I wish I had had a little bit more fun, spent a little bit more money at that time.

I worked a lot. I was a babysitter and a nanny for a very long time. I worked as a hostess, I worked at Godiva Chocolate, I worked at American Eagle for a second. I was a magician's assistant for about eight weeks. I got sawed in half. I did anything to make sure I could have some footing beneath me.

**What were your attitudes to money growing up? And how do they show up in your work now?**

I was a saver. I had and still have a bit of an anxious personality and always wanted to have something to fall back on. I don't think that's a surprise. I think many authors and writers in general, and probably artists at large, have a bit of an anxious spirit about them.

I'm terribly interested in the dimensions of living within a class society, and how some people can work hard and have nothing, and some people cannot work and have everything, but I do not believe that money controls our morality or makes us nicer, richer, worse, better than anyone else. And so I'm really interested in fiction that gets to the truth of what money does to us as people. I'm not sure when that started, but I've always been interested in people and storytelling, and money always makes its way in.

**What's your attitude to money now with the success of *Such a Fun Age*?**

Having more financial stability has highlighted how completely unfair it is that other people don't have the stability, and I think it's reflected in our literature. It's hard to pick up a book written about normal people told by normal people, because it's mostly people who have financial stability who get to have the time to write books, and I think that that's a huge detriment to literature at large.

There were moments in my twenties where I did not have healthcare, and I knew that that was a scary thing then. But now having healthcare, I am even more angered by the fact that that was something that was not given to me just as a human right when I was younger... I think we'd all like to believe that money doesn't buy happiness... but

money can drastically change the quality of your life.

A small example, I got to have a research assistant for this novel. That's something I couldn't have done with *Such a Fun Age*. My research assistant has the most quick and clever mind, and my novel was made so much richer for that. So that in itself is an example of the tremendous power that money has over art, and if anything, it's just made me more incensed as to what so many people in the United States go through in terms of financial security.

**I know you've said that the Iowa Writers' Workshop was your last shot at trying to make it as an author. What would you have done if you didn't make it?**

I had just been rejected from nine graduate schools [before applying to Iowa]. This was my last time applying to graduate school as a whole. It's draining, and expensive, and there's no feedback system. You're not exactly sure what you did or didn't do wrong if you don't get in the first time, and many of these programs accept between one and two percent of applicants.

If it [didn't] work, I'[d] go back to copywriting. I remember I looked at jobs, and there was a job opening for a copywriter at Chobani Yogurt, and I thought, Okay, I'll do something like that. I felt very comforted by the shop at Chobani!

Now, I'm on the other side where I read MFA applications, and some students who come back a second time, their writing has changed so dramatically and they feel ready, so I don't know if that was the same case for me. I would suggest that people who are dedicated to literature try more than once to get into a program, because having that time and space to write really is incredible.

**You recently had a baby. Congratulations! How has that changed your writing process?**

Having something so important in your life makes you take bigger risks in other areas, and I'm happy to say that despite the pressures that come from having work out in the world, a baby will very quickly remind you to write about exactly what you want to write about. It's also made me say to myself, "Okay. You get 20 minutes to clean up, and then it's time to write." And she's just so cute! It's very fun.

**What advice do you have for folks when it comes to making money from their craft?**

Get a high-yield savings account immediately. Finding a job that doesn't mentally follow you home was a key component of me becoming a successful writer, and understanding that being a writer is an exercise and a muscle and a practice is really key as well.

As romantic as it is to stay up late and drink until two in the morning with your novel, it's just unfortunately not sustainable. So I think finding a job in the meantime that ends at a certain point and starts at a certain point, that was what was really key for me.

I was a receptionist for two-and-a-half years when I was writing a lot, and I knew that at 5:30 I could go home, and that's when I would work on my short stories. Every Friday night, I would stay in the office in the big conference room, and I would get myself dinner, and I would write some more.

For me, jobs like waitressing were not very beneficial because I didn't know when I was getting off of work. Having a very secure time when you know that you're not going to be working so that you can put that job aside and go somewhere else is really important.

Someone told me once to not get good at things that I don't want to be good at, and I think that's a key for people trying to make money from writing. Finding a job that you can do well that doesn't make you miserable, where hopefully you can move around and stand up a bit, and then go home at a certain time, that's my biggest advice.

**What are you up to next? You mentioned the next novel, so have you already started on that? I'm curious to know what kind of insights you will have from motherhood now, because I am dying to read a motherhood novel from Kiley Reid.**

A motherhood novel? Interesting. I'm always working on something mentally, but this semester and these few months in particular, I am focused more on two other projects. I'm a professor at the University of Michigan, and my students have novels of their own and thesis projects. I'm teaching a class called The Workplace Novel, and so I'm focusing on my students this semester.

I'm also, if you can believe it, still working on *Such a Fun Age* film adaptation. There were starts and stops between the pandemic and the strike, but I'm happy to say that we have a great team in place, and I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

**Tell me about that process. How was it taking off your author hat and putting on a screenwriter hat?**

Luckily, I have really wonderful teachers who trust my voice and know how to push me into the right direction. It's like learning a different language. I feel like I'm back in graduate school a bit or some type of master class, where I'm learning how to portray ideas in a whole new medium.

I love film and TV, so I'm really excited to see what this looks like. My favorite adaptations are the ones that are a bit different than the book, because why else tell it in a different way? It's been interesting to see *Such a Fun Age* in this light. Writing is such a solitary process so it's nice to have people to bounce ideas off.

**How do you balance teaching writing and shepherding these young writers? I'm sure that takes a lot of mental energy. How do you ensure you've got some left for your own endeavors?**

As best as I can. It's a lot of compartmentalizing, and it's saying, "Monday and Tuesday, I do this; Wednesday, Thursday is for this." But of course, things come up. I think having realistic expectations as a writer is really important.

But I also think taking a break and working on something else is great for your creative brain, so it's definitely not a chore to take a break from my work and to dive into a student's novel. I think it's actually pretty beneficial to my writing brain. I take a red pen to my own work a lot quicker after doing student work.

**Kiley Reid recommends:**

[OneClock](#)

*Evicted* by Matthew Desmond [audiobook](#), read by Dion Graham

["What Once Was" by Her's](#)

["Palm Trees" by GoldLink](#)

["Psycho" by Eddie Noack](#)

[Name](#)

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author

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