On being ruthless with revisio

Author Sarah Wang on getting feedback from editors, sustaining momentum on a years-long project, and making yourself laugh.

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As told to Bronwen Lam, 2400 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, Adversity, Collaboration, Process, Production.

Your much anticipated debut novel, *New Skin*, came out in May. How did it feel to be on the precipice of something like this?

It's unreal, an act of dissociation really, which I think it has to be, in a way, because how else can you manage the enormity and unknown of it, the possibility of what will or won't happen? I imagine it's like facing other big or pretty crazy moments in your life, you're just a little bit checked out in some way.

That said, there have been different phases leading up to publication. Months ago, I was really anxious about publicity. Securing reviews, pitching. Are we doing this or that? What's moving forward? Who are we talking to? All that, I find really stressful. While it can still happen at a different level once the book's out, much of that has passed, and I'm more relaxed, starting to get excited for things like travel, being asked to do events, readings. It now feels really exciting, fun.

***New Skin* is a darkly funny story of an immigrant mother's plastic surgery addiction, her time as a reality TV contestant for people with botched-procedures, and her daughter's attempts to save/escape her. With body horror having a moment, and reality TV and ICE raids in the news, the novel seems to have a kind of timeliness to it. How intentional or fortuitous is that?**

It's something I've been thinking about as people have been saying, "It's so timely." I started working on this book over 10 years ago, dare I say longer, and certainly at the time wasn't thinking that in 15 years these things were going to be a conversation. In fact, I was kind of embarrassed because it felt a little cringey like, "Oh, plastic surgery… " The same thing with the reality TV show plot which I added several years after starting the book. This year I clocked six other novels with reality TV plots. Another aspect is immigrants and ICE, which unfortunately is in the news more recently. Since I've been working on this as long as I have, I think it's actually completely random that I'm publishing my book now while similar things are happening. I've been fascinated with body horror and botched plastic surgery forever. I've always loved Cronenberg.

How were you able to sustain momentum, working on this project over that kind of timeline?

It's been a really long process. I didn't know what I was doing when I started. I tried to write something in grad school thinking I would publish it as soon as I got out. A lot of people probably think that when getting an MFA, but for me, it was a process of starting over from page one so many times, throwing away entire manuscripts. I think I was able to sustain myself in part because I can't do anything else. I can't hold a [traditional] job down. I've gotten fired from almost every job I've had. I'm not that functional in a lot of ways. I stay up all night and that's when I write. So if I had to have a real job or do something in the morning that I was beholden to, I think I would really struggle. I've always felt like this is the only thing I can do in life, so I must do it. Like it's the only thing I'm good at. I do teach now, a night class, and I'm good at that, I really love it.

But of course it has to do with writing and imparting the knowledge I've absorbed over the years about writing and literature. It's a women's college, and I love talking about female subjectivity, so it's all just my interests, really.

While I did put this project down, many times, I didn't start over immediately after scrapping a draft. There were a lot of fallow years where I didn't write a word, where I worked on other things, where I had no idea how to keep going. Also when I left LA, where I went to undergrad and grad school, for New York, things changed and I began a more professional trajectory in writing. I don't mean that in a cheesy way, like you must be a professional writer, I just mean I started publishing more, participating in literary communities and getting fellowships. That helped. If I got tired, if I strayed, things would always course correct and bring me back in new and unexpected ways. It helped too, being a monster at applying for residencies and fellowships. The more I got, the more conversations I had, the more opportunities. That helped me to keep working. It helped me financially a little bit too, not much, but a bit. That was another way I was able to keep going.

I think a lot about the tension between doubt and determination, how they're always in conflict but inevitably exist in the process of creating. How have you navigated that in your work?

I think doubt is always there. Because you're just making up a story, making up what people say, what happens. Writing is testing things out, seeing what works, what doesn't, what shape something becomes. It's also having the strength to know when to throw something away, when something isn't working.

I think the determination for me is incredibly strong, partly because I'm not someone who has a full-time job and who has to make time before or after work when your energy is sapped. There are certainly sacrifices that I make for living this kind of life. Financial sacrifice is obviously a huge one. But I think having this lifestyle where I teach and freelance (I did book editing and things like that before), I was able to really preserve my energy for writing. I also feel this kind of insane determination that I don't think I have in any other part of my life. I don't have children, and this is the thing that I think not only I can do, but maybe the only thing that I've really wanted to do. So I'm very singular in that way, which helps me because it's really hard. It hasn't been easy to keep going. It's extremely hard, especially when you're in a room alone and no one's giving you deadlines. You have no real motivation to keep going other than you want to do it and you think one day you can and will do it.

How do you know when something's not working, when it's time to scrap it or start over?

Sometimes I've been overeager, thinking "It's great, it's good to go," and I've jumped the gun. When you're so excited about something, want so badly for something to happen, you think it's ready because you want it to be. Over the years, I've pitched agents a draft of the manuscript when it wasn't ready. I've been in writing groups, I've worked with people who've given me notes and feedback. Sometimes they'll suggest something you don't want to do, but other times someone will say something you've suspected or that you've never thought of but realize they're absolutely right. And so sometimes people have told me, agents have told me, "Start over."

But also, for me, this throwing things away and starting over happened even after my book was bought. One of my editors had strong opinions about a subplot I'd had almost since the beginning, one I was really attached to because I had these ideas thematically, how it was important and intrinsic. I was very determined to keep it even after culling it down. But in an all hands on deck meeting I was told I needed to revise again and get rid of it completely.

It was an intense time because you don't have the freedom of editing forever. Once they buy the book and you start editing, the clock is counting down to a projected publication date. And at that point it wasn't me thinking they were right, it was me thinking that if I didn't do what I was being asked to do, I wasn't going to make my pub date and maybe they wouldn't even publish my book. So I did it out of force and out of necessity and the whole time I was doing it, I wondered if I was betraying myself, if I was doing something someone else wanted me to do. I didn't know. But guess what? When I was done, I was like, "Oh my god, I like it. I think they were right. They were right." But I didn't know until I finished that revision.

What are some of the ways this project surprised you as it came together?

The subplot of the protagonist going to these basement Botox, illicit plastic surgery businesses, wasn't there before. It was actually my editor's idea, and this amazing, magical thing happened when I started writing those scenes about other characters, these young undocumented women who were working in cottage industries where undocumented people often work: massage parlors, boba shops, med spa salons, beauty shops. Through interacting with them, really seeing them, the protagonist is able to imagine what her own mother's life might have been like when she first came to the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant. I was also able to show this sense of community building. They pay for each other's abortions, they take each other to these clinics, they save food for each other from their restaurant jobs. They pool money to do karaoke and are excited about going to see the Statue of Liberty or the Golden Gate Bridge.

There were so many surprises that happened along the way, in different stages. I think partially they were able to happen because of the way I write. I actually sat next to Alexander Chee at the Author's Guild Gala a few nights ago, and when I asked him how he writes he said something like, "I ask a question in every chapter, and the next chapter is an attempt to answer that question." I asked if the way he wrote was exploratory, not knowing what was going to happen and he said, "Yeah." I'm not necessarily writing a question to be answered, but I do feel like I write each chapter to find out what happens next.

Your book is full of humor, even when a lot of what you address is actually quite heavy, can you talk about that?

The way I regard humor in the book is that I don't, meaning I wrote funny things because I like funniness and part of writing a book, for me, is to entertain myself. And I like to be funny as a person and kind of mischievous—that's my nature. So when I was writing the funny stuff in the book, it wasn't because I thought, "Ah, I need to employ humor here for such and such a reason," it was really just to make myself laugh. People who know me really, really well and have read the novel have said this is just every aspect of my personality in a book. Disgusting body stuff, really abject humor, intensity, extremity. So it wasn't a strategy at all, just really an expression of my personality.

In the novel you talk about the painted lawns of LA, which I wasn't sure was real but seems like a very LA solution. Did you do much research for this book or was it mostly gleaning from your own reality and imagination?

The painted lawns was something I thought I'd made up but when I looked it up, realized it was a real thing. So maybe I'd heard about it a long time ago, maybe it had entered my brain without me realizing. Information and the way we come up with ideas, or imagination mixed with memory, is a complicated soup. I actually hated the idea of watching reality TV when I started writing about it because I always thought of it as something extremely trashy and that I'd never really watched before. So when the decision to write a reality show subplot came about I was like, "Well, I guess I have to watch reality shows." And then in the pandemic, I got really hooked on *Love is Blind* and it was a free fall from there. I probably did the most research for the other subplot I completely got rid of, hair transplants and that whole industry. All of that is gone now, but maybe I'll use it for something else. Who knows?

What lessons did you learn in this process that you'll apply to future projects?

I have a wish, rather, for my future self: that I will know what I'm doing a bit more. I hope that I will, since you only know how to write a book once you've done it, once you've gone through everything: knowing the beats, knowing where your characters need to be in jeopardy, line editing, dialogue, all these different components. But of course, they say that each book is completely different, so sometimes you think you know how to write a book and then the next one is a completely different building you need to build.

Your novel ends poetically, quite literally, with shanzai text, the unintentional poetry found on t-shirts produced in China. It's a really beautiful punctuation to the book.

I'm so glad that that's where it ends because through editing and drafting, it could have ended very differently. But to me, ending with poetry, something that's not exactly logical, catapults the reader into the future with

interpretation, something beyond meaning. I'd like to think that's what that kind of language can provide.

Sarah Wang recommends:

Vaginal estrogen cream applied to the face to combat wrinkles and dryness

Singles Inferno, a Korean reality TV dating show where everyone's had plastic surgery and looks amazing

Picking amanita muscaria mushrooms in the Pacific Northwest in October

Endless Garment by Shanzhai Lyric, a book-length poem written entirely from Shanzhai texts found on t-shirts produced in China

Bringing dry cleaning to Los Angeles, where it's much cheaper than New York

Name
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Vocation
author