

Kristen Radtke on publishing your first book



August 29, 2017 - [Kristen Radtke](#) is a writer and illustrator based in Brooklyn, New York. Her graphic memoir, [Imagine Wanting Only This](#), was published by [Pantheon Books](#) in April 2017. When asked to reflect on the experience of publishing her first book, Radtke explains, "I think the blessing of all this is that I'm never going to write my first book ever again. First books are messy things. Next time I'll be less concerned about making things as neat and tidy as possible, which was definitely a real fear for me on this first book. I'll try to maybe not let it drive me so crazy."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2471 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [First attempts](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#).

You work in publishing as an editor. How do you balance that kind of professional life with your own creative life?

It's tricky. I feel like I'm always negotiating how to do it properly, so that one part doesn't suffer. It's certainly easier to push off my own creative projects than it is to push off the day job, especially when my day job is in a creative field. So it's not like I'm just working a generic office job, I am working with other people's art all day. So it's harder to slough off that responsibility. It's difficult. I'm about to start a new job—still in publishing—and one of the things I'm excited for is that it's stationed on the west coast, and I'm on the east coast. I'll probably start my work day at 10:30 or 11. So I'll have, hopefully, a couple of hours that I can be vigilant with myself to do work every morning before people on the other coast start waking up.

Are you able to say, "I'm gonna get up at 6 A.M. and work for three hours"?

I can never get up at 6 A.M. Never ever in my life. But I can definitely stick to a schedule. I can get up at 8:00, and do that for two hours. I'm just not a morning person. I always like the [Chuck Close](#) quote that says something like, "Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us show up and get to work." I love that and I think it's true. But it's harder, I think, when you're at certain stages of a project. For example, if I have a page storyboarded, and I know what's going to be drawn, I can draw it. When you're in the early idea generation stage of a new project, it's really hard to go home from your day job and be like, "Now I'm being an artist."

How did the graphic novel—or in your case, the graphic memoir—become your preferred way of expressing yourself?

I went to graduate school for just writing prose, nonfiction, and I started doing these little experiments. I think my first essay I ever turned in in graduate school was in two columns. It was a terrible essay about cicadas. In one column was the text, and in the other column I had drawings of cicadas I'd done with charcoal which I scanned and put into the essay. Everyone was like, "Why are these here? That's stupid." I was like, "Okay, I'll never do that again." Then maybe a semester or two later, I started experimenting with drawings again. I would do a double-spaced page in Microsoft Word and put a picture up in the corner, in a way that didn't make sense. I did things like that for a long time, because I knew I was interested in visual stuff, but I didn't know how to incorporate it.

It wasn't until probably my last semester of graduate school that I tried a graphic novel format. It just never occurred to me before that because I never thought I had the skill to draw something consistently for 300 pages. It seemed so overwhelming. So, I was definitely slow coming around to it.



Do you remember the first time you felt like it was coming together in a way that made sense?

I think in any project you have that feeling about three dozen times—you think it's coming together and actually it's not. But that feeling is necessary in order for you to keep going.

Actually, the first graphic essay that I ever drew, actually turned into part of the prologue for my book. I ended up redrawing the drawing, and rewriting some of the text, and rearranging a part of it... it definitely turned into something.

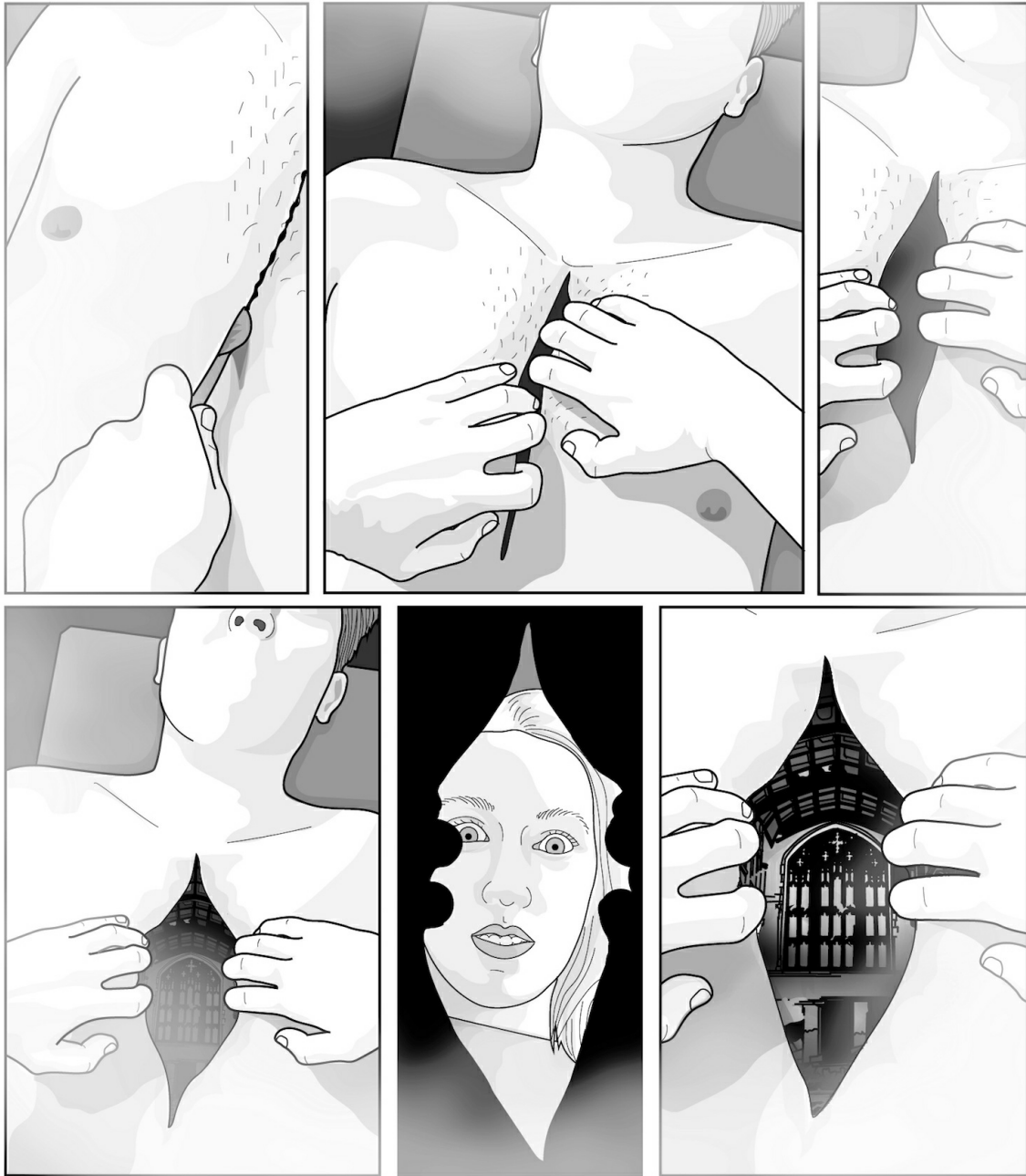
I'm trying to think of the point at which I felt like it was actually coming together... It was probably after I got the book contract, because before that it felt like it would never happen. Even after I got the book contract, I felt like it would never happen. After I signed with Pantheon, I had so much work to do. I probably only had two complete chapters, which I ended up changing completely. So it wasn't until I was halfway through that work period, after signing, that I felt like it was maybe possible that the book would be completed.

I can't imagine what the editing and rewrite process would entail with a graphic novel. It's one thing to make changes to the text, but the images add a different layer of complication to the process.

It's arduous and time consuming. A sentence can be revised ad nauseam forever. If you know what needs to happen in a scene, you may be revising that for a while to get the language right, but you're creating the whole time. With drawing it's different. If I storyboard something and I know, for example, that in this picture I'm going to draw myself with my feet up on my desk, talking on the phone, as I am now, I can see that exactly in my mind. Then I just have to spend the hours to put it on the paper... but that takes much longer than revising the sentences.

Do you find it hard to cut things? Is it heartbreaking to have to cut an image out of the book that isn't working, especially after you've spent so much time working on the drawing?

It's not so much heartbreaking as it is infuriating. It's hours you'll never get back. Although there's a certain point for me—especially when I feel like I'm very close to the end of a project—where if someone says, "Cut this chapter." I'm like, "Fine. I don't care. Sure." There's a moment in which I give myself over to it, and I think that's totally necessary. I don't think I could finish something if I didn't adopt that mindset. I don't know if anyone else feels like this, but toward the end of a project, I'm so sick of it and I kind of hate it. It takes a while before the smoke clears on that feeling. So I'll do anything to it at the end just to be done with it and have it over with.



When you were putting together *Imagine Wanting Only This*, did you share the work with someone along the way? Is it important to get feedback in order to avoid falling too far down the rabbit hole of a project?

In the beginning, I definitely shared like crazy. I felt like I needed to workshop all the time. I needed feedback constantly. And then I stopped doing that. When I started doing it again, it was horrible. I sent it to a couple of friends and I was so overwhelmed by the feedback. I shared when I thought I was maybe three-fourths of the way done. It turned out, it was maybe only a fourth finished. I felt like that process was super detrimental, and it set me back a lot of weeks, because I was just so overwhelmed by the feedback. Going forward, I'm not going to be doing that as much. I may talk through things—like, "Does this kind of logic make sense?"—Or I might share individual drawings, but getting too much feedback can really throw the whole thing off course. The best time to share something is when I know I've taken it absolutely as far as I can, and I know there's nothing else that I can do on my own.

Another writer told me that they were afraid if they shared anything too early, if one person said even the slightest critical thing, they would probably throw their hands up and

abandon it, that early on even the slightest whiff of criticism can make the whole thing evaporate.

It can be totally devastating. It's so bizarre how that can happen, because I feel like in a lot of ways I'm pretty tough. I remember a couple of weeks after my book came out, I would see a [Goodreads](#) review, and just want to quit writing forever. Now I think they're hilarious when they're really mean. But I think we go through phases, probably, with our own work. It probably depends on how rooted and solid we're feeling in our creative practice.

Graphic novels constitute their own literary universe, which can be a little insular. There were a lot of people who read and wrote about your book that maybe didn't have much previous contact with graphic novels. Were you surprised by the reaction to it?

First of all, I think it's just weird to have anyone talk about your work for the first time. It was my first book, so just having it read at all by any person I didn't know was strange and interesting and kind of bizarre. I probably should have been locked in a room away from the internet for the first month, because it was just so surreal. There were certainly things that people said that I was surprised about. I thought that everyone would say, "Eh, the writing is just okay, but the drawings are good." And I think it turned out to be the opposite, which was surprising to me. I sort of felt more self-conscious about the writing than the drawing, then the critics felt the opposite way. So I think for me the surprise was just that I was surprised. The feedback that I got was not necessarily what I was expecting.

Do you feel like this format allows you to say things in a way that no other format or genre would allow? The ability to both show and tell?

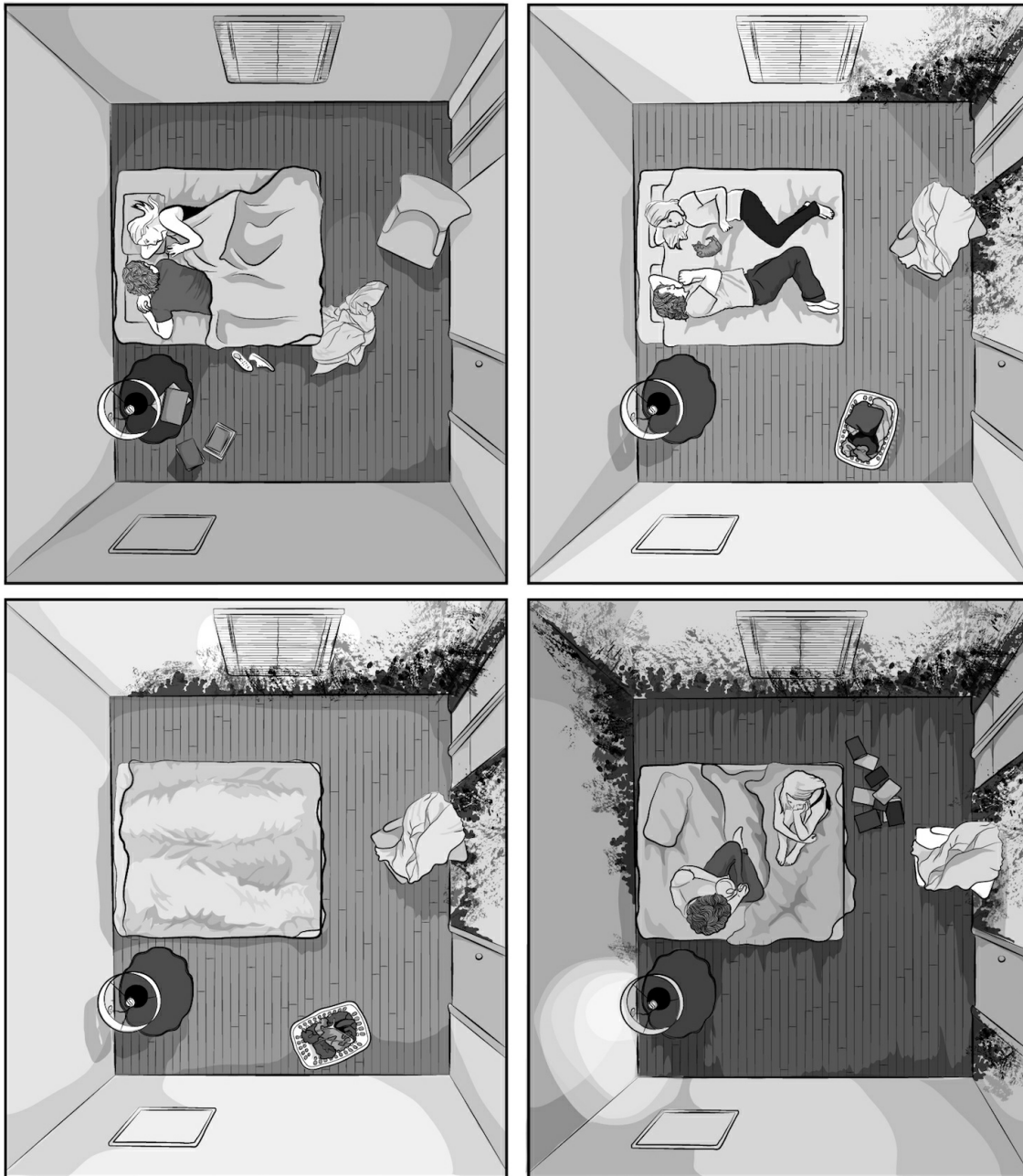
Maybe. Whenever I'm asked that question, I'm always really unsure, because I resist the idea that there's a perfect medium for any project, or that there's a medium that can do something that another one can't. Certainly things operate in different ways and with a different manner, but I like to think that any story can live in any medium. I don't know if that's true, but it's something that I tell myself. I think any artist should just use the tools they have available to them. For me, over time, as I was making this project, my way of thinking gradually changed.

Now I think about things in panels rather than paragraphs. At first it felt laborious to translate text into images. Now I think I'm storyboarding in my mind more than I am writing paragraphs in my mind the way I used to. In that sense, I think my way of thinking has totally changed. I'm working on a collection of essays now, which has a lot of prose in it but there are also illustrations. I just don't know that I could totally go back.

How much did your own experience working as an editor in publishing help get you through the process of getting your own book out into the world?

I helped me enormously just because I knew what to ask for and I knew what to advocate for. I knew when someone told me they were doing something small that they were pretending and it was actually a big thing—I knew it didn't really mean anything. You know, the smoke and mirrors didn't really mean anything to me. I knew when I wasn't getting something I needed. I also knew when someone was working really hard for me, and I knew how to say thank you. I think the main thing was that I knew just how much time all this stuff takes, and I knew to be really grateful for all of it, and to be as direct with the people I was working with as possible, to thank them for their time. I knew to try to work with them and assist, because I think it's really difficult sometimes to be working with writers who feel like it's still all their thing, and it's not. It's not just yours anymore. You're working with a team.

My editor said to me jokingly the other day, "You know too much." I think sometimes that's true. I think it made me more anxious to know there were all these benchmarks for success that I was either hitting or not hitting. I knew that because I had worked on books before. I think it definitely made me more aware of the ways in which I could fail, which isn't always a good thing.



What advice do you have for a young writer working on a graphic novel? How do they get people to even see their work?

Put your stuff on the internet. I mean, truly, really truly. I think you just have to be out there in every way that you can, submit yourself constantly and just see what happens. I think that's the most important thing. The other thing I did when I started doing graphic stuff is that I submitted work to places that had never done graphic stuff before. Places that I just liked. A lot of them were like, "Cool, we never thought about this. Why not?" I think sometimes because it's a smaller genre, it can feel like there's no place for you, but there is.

You have one book under your belt now. What were the most important lessons that you'll take into your next one?

I think the blessing of all this is that I'm never going to write my first book ever again. First books are messy things. Not to say that some of my favorite books aren't people's

first books. I could never have done my first book any other way, but I probably could have done it better, had I been a different person or at a different point of my life. So I think my future projects will be very different. I think they'll be less personal, much less autobiographical. Next time I'll be less concerned about making things as neat and tidy as possible, which was definitely a real fear for me on this first book. I'll try to maybe not let it drive me so crazy.

Five books recommended by Kristen Radtke:

Hubert, Ben Gijsemans

Rosalie Lightning, Tom Hart

Killing and Dying, Adrian Tomine

Journalism, Joe Sacco

Fun Home, Alison Bechdel

Name

Kristen Radtke

Vocation

Writer, Illustrator

Fact

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