Sloane Crosley on side projects

December 9, 2016 - Sloane Crosley is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling essay collections, *I Was Told There'd Be Cake* and *How Did You Get This Number*, and the novel, *The Clasp*. She previously worked as a publicist at Vintage Books and as an adjunct professor in Columbia University's MFA program. She updates sadstuffonthestreet.com almost everyday.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2525 words.

Tags: Writing, Multi-tasking.

Side Projects

Part of my reasoning for doing side projects is muscular and part is logistical. You have this central project or creation that, if it's your baby, usually takes a long time. So you pepper your days with beloved but surer chances for gratification.

It can also work in the reverse. I know there are people who work for newspapers or magazines or do something where they have to produce material on deadline every five or six days—and then they write a novel for the same reason I write a book review or an op-ed or maintain a photo blog. Their creative release is that novel or that long term creative endeavor, whereas mine is to do their day job.

The idea is to break up the monotony of digging the same ditch again and again and again because that ditch gets deeper and deeper and then you bury yourself in it. Just kidding. Basically, you want to see what your life would look like if you went down the road not taken, which is actually a widely misunderstood poem, totally mis-analyzed since we were kids. But, yeah, you want to do that.

The other thing is that there's less pressure on the things that you're not known for, so it makes it easier to release them into the wild, to be unconcerned with the reception—which I know you're not supposed to be even for your primary art. You're supposed to write what's in your heart and your mind and let it go, but we live in the world and I don't know how anyone can not be a little conscious that people are going to react a certain way to something you put your soul into.



Images from Sloane's "Stuff on the Street", her popular pre-Instagram blog

It's not like you're stopping what you're doing to do this mindless thing or to become an interloper in someone else's lane. For that we have television and drugs and sleep and sex. A book review is not quite the distraction cocaine and whisky is. For me it's also, if I get bogged down—or if I feel those weights of self-doubt or frustration about what I'm writing, even when it comes to whatever the main project I'm working on is, which is probably a book in any scenario—if I get bogged down like that I think "Okay, go play with your toy."

By which I mean, just remember you're lucky to do it and not in the gross, interview way of "Oh, I'm so lucky to be here, It's an honor just to be nominated," but you really are lucky to have figured out a passion and what you want to do and a release for whatever creative energy you have—not everybody gets that. You're lucky and just remember that and now get to work. When I do the things I do on the side, whether it's [my Tumblr] Sad Stuff on the Street, which is really not a time-suck and that's obvious, or writing an article or… I just finished adapting my first novel for film or last year I co-wrote a song for Nate Ruess, who is the lead singer of fun.. These things are not in my traditional wheelhouse and yet they feel like a reminder that part of the responsibility and privilege of what I do is to be creative in general. Then, I can go back to the thing I'm *actually* supposed to be doing and apply some new energy toward that.

Day Jobs

I wish I remembered more about why I have ever done anything I have ever done because it's so rare that you have a moment where you think "Okay, this is the last straw" or "This is why I'm leaving, I'm too in love with X to stay."

I worked on the publicity end of publishing, so everything I saw got published, or everything I saw was about to be published. I didn't see bad books. Or, at least, I didn't see messy drafts of books or reject people or witness a significant percentage of subpar writing. I only handled finished work and so my schema of book became "published book," which is confidence-boosting if you let it be.

So working on that end of publishing can be actually helpful even though the cliché is that every editor in New York has a novel under his or her desk. Weirdly, at least at Vintage where I worked, it was every publicist who had an interesting under-the-desk life. To the point where the people who worked in the Vintage publicity department either with or within a few months of me were Hanya Yanagihara, who wrote *A Little Life* and *The People in the Trees*, a fiction writer named Paul Yoon, a wonderful short story author named Ethan Rutherford, Martin Wilson, a young adult author, and a woman named Jen Marshall who contributed to the original anthology *The Bitch in The House*. We are talking about a department of no more than

10 people at a time. Literally every publicist who worked there was also a writer. It was very strange. And yet…

I think part of it is because it fed this lovely delusion that everything we saw was getting published. There was this tacit idea floating about that being a writer was a viable thing. I worked for a literary agency for a year and I thought "I'm never going to get published" and I thought it every day. This is because we got about 60 query letters a day and in the year and a half I worked there, there were two books that I fought for that my boss almost took on but ultimately did not. Are those good statistics, mentally? No, they are not.

At the same time, publicity is no bargain. It's often thankless and obviously very intimidating for me specifically because I worked for a publishing house that publishes people like Alice Munro and Philip Roth. It's not like I thought I was going to be those people, in the Oscar Wilde sense or in the abstract one.

Also, the knowledge of what's out there and what is possible for a book changes—but I have not always changed with it. I had to watch myself with my own novel, with firing off humiliating suggestions like "It would be really great if we got a feature review in *The Seattle Times* or *The New Orleans Times Picayune*." These are places that have up and vanished. They just don't exist anymore or some exist exclusively online as a vehicle for banner ads and popups. Maybe I knew and maybe I forgot that I know. Either way, my know-it-all-y attitude got slapped by the reality of the media landscape. The frozen tundra of the media landscape. At the same time, there's always a way for good books to fight their way through. The classics are the classics. NPR will cover books so long as it draws breath.

But in the end, publicity was most helpful for structural reasons. You do get to check things off a list when you have a job like that, which is really nice. Like today, as I speak to you, it's 3:22 and I woke up kind of late, I had a bunch of bullshit to do and errands and I've written maybe 400 or 500 words today, mostly involving editing. So I'm just adding to an essay that already exists. While I had the day job, I would write two press releases a week and that would be nothing, and then I would go home and write more and different kinds of things, my things. In some ways, I feel behind. I wrote about 300 press releases at Vintage. That's a book but not a book for me. It's a book for other people. But it was my job and I liked it and I think you need that sort of variety. You *need* to do different kinds of creative things. Or I do.



Sad Stuff on the Street

Greg Larson and I have been maintaining the site for seven years every day. The way it started is connected to my day job. I was Dave Eggers' publicist and the miscellaneous McSweeney's go-to-girl while I was working at Vintage. I was out in San Francisco a little bit, not much. It wasn't that necessary, but occasionally I would go out there. Once, I was in the McSweeney's offices and there was a guy there named Greg, who had started working for McSweeney'S fairly recently. He had, I think, interned for *The Believer* but then he stayed because Dave had just published *What is the What*.

The novel is based on the real-life story of Valentino Achak Deng who was one of the Sudanese lost boys, a refugee who was living in Atlanta. So Greg was hired to start the nonprofit arm of McSweeney's, beginning with the building of a school for girls in the Sudan, which he did. Greg's a one-man show of fundraising, and was also the person clearing goats out of the road so supply trucks could get through.

Anyway, Greg and I start to date. It was a lovely long-distance relationship but… long distance is tough. By the time we were talking about one of us moving cities, well, yada, yada, yada, brick wall, we broke up.

I don't know how we pulled off what came next, but we spoke, as friends now, the next day. Then the day after that. We were both still sad about the relationship ending and he sent me, at one point, this photo of this lonely little heart sticker he found on the street that said "99 cents" and had been run over by a car about 18 times. Then I sent him a picture of a sad sock I found. Then we were almost exclusively communicating in photos, which sounds like a real communication break down but we didn't see it that way. One day, he sent me a picture that remains my favorite "Sad Stuff on the Street" photo: a half deflated orange balloon in a puddle. Which, hey, is sad enough, right? Oh, but wait, there's more. On the puddle, written in Sharpie, is something along the lines of "Please love me" or "Love me, I'm cool." I mean, Jesus Christ.

We decided that because we had all these photos in our phones and our inboxes, we should make a website. This is pre-Instagram, pre anything, so we made a Tumblr, which is still where it lives. It has something like 400,000 followers. Which is decently nuts for the fact that we haven't done anything to promote it. All it is is us posting funny pictures, filling the queue up with photos and writing our own somewhat witty captions about them.

If you look at the analytics map, which I like to look at because it makes me feel like I'm competent at something, you can see that we've received submissions from absolutely everywhere. What can I say? The world is filled with a lot of "C-level sadness," is what I like to call it. We did an interview at some point with a Belgian newspaper. Then a Russian one. *The New York Times* did a nice piece on it. We started getting submissions from Yemen, from Jamaica, from Iceland and Thailand. We had a couple from North Korea. Who, I ask you, is uploading hipster photos to the internet in North Korea right now? Doesn't seem worth the labor camp time. The two places that I'm always rooting for are Vegas and New Orleans. Vegas feels like there would be a lot of sad shit on the streets, but we don't get them from Vegas. I don't know why. Maybe people don't register their street detritus as sad. Maybe they're just like, "That's a floating, soaking wet feather boa in broad daylight, so what?"

We like to think of it as an urban version of "stop and smell the roses." You have to stop to take a photo and people will probably look at you. You want a good angle so you might be crouching down. That the thing that unites all this weird shit: it takes time and it takes effort if only seconds of time and minimal effort.

It takes on this emotional pathos where everything is a little bit sad and everything has this paper-bag-twisting-in-the-breeze quality. Then, life becomes like a video game and I feel like I'm almost a little bit numb to some of the stuff I see. A friend of mine will send me the leg of a broken child's toy and I'm like "Yeah, yeah. You've seen one, you've seen them all." The whole Hemingway "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." doesn't even strike me as that sad anymore just because the level of depressing stuff we've received. Like, it's amazing anyone one on this planet is walking around with two shoes on their feet. I don't understand how that's possible. We have received literally hundreds of single shoes.

But every once in a while there will be something truly transcendent. An object that you see when you look down, and that makes you delightfully sad, and that's it.

The Road Not Taken

It's like, "I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference." That's what people always reference. It's been blown up to be this thing of, "Take the more difficult road or march to the beat of your own drum or forge your own path,"… Choose your own clichés. What it's actually about is this narrator who is incredibly ambivalent about where to go and it doesn't necessarily mean that you should therefore take the road less traveled. Wrong struggle, sorry. There's a more articulate version out there in the world with a real analysis of that poem, but I do know what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean what people put on mugs and t-shirts.

People will process things in the way that's the easiest for them. And the hard/easy path dichotomy is easier. That's what we were talking about, right? Distilling people down to little tiny nuggets of themselves. I want to have a good kicker. Tell them I said something really brilliant about how you should treat people with more complexity than that.

Sloane Crosley recommends:

The Oxford American's Writer's Thesaurus
The Workshop: Seven Decades of The Iowa Writers' Workshop
The Joy Williams interview in *The Paris Review*
Fraud by David Rakoff
Raw honey

This isn't really for me so much as visual artists but it's good in general:

Sponsorship: The Fine Art of Corporate Sponsorship by Ryan McGuiness

Name
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Vocation
Writer, Co-Proprietor of sadstuffonthestreet.com

Fact

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