

On waiting until you're ready get serious about your work



Writer Arriel Vinson on finding a book's form, returning to your original intention, and prioritizing the work.

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As told to Jancie Creaney, 2549 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Mentorship](#).

Your debut, *Under the Neon Lights*, forthcoming summer 2025, is a YA novel-in-verse. How did you land on that form?

Under the Neon Lights was my thesis at Sarah Lawrence College for my MFA in fiction. It was not a novel-in-verse at that time. I graduated in 2019, but the summer before my final year, I was interning at Hachette Book Group and I was taking the Metro North into the city every day. I wasn't the type of person who wrote poems on a laptop, so I would take my journal with me and I would write the novel in the journal, but it was in poem form, it was in verse. And then I would go home and change it to prose because I was like, well, I got to graduate, I have an MFA in fiction. I didn't really feel like figuring out the logistics of doing that in verse because it wasn't what I was getting my degree in.

We don't know enough about novels-in-verse yet. And so, I graduated and I went to [Kimbilio Fiction Retreat](#). It's a retreat for Black fiction writers, and I still brought it in prose. I took the feedback. The story was the same, but I noticed that when I was writing it in verse, there were descriptors or words that I was using that I wasn't using when I converted it to prose. It just felt like every time I converted it to prose, I was losing something, whether that's the rhythm or the brevity of it. [The story] surrounds a skating rink and there's such music to that that I wanted to capture the music of a skating rink and the rhythm of a skating rink in verse in a way that I don't think I was doing in prose.

Do you think the story told you what form it needed?

Yeah, it did. I mean, when you have, I can't even remember how long the Metro North from Bronxville to Grand Central was, so let's say 25, when you have 25 minutes, you have to write pretty quickly. During the semester, I was used to having a lot of time to write. I could hole up in my bedroom for hours and write a short story for workshop. But when you have 25 minutes before your internship starts, either you write or you don't, but if you're going to write, you have to write fast. I was writing as quickly as I could, but it always came out in verse. I still have that notebook somewhere.

Is returning to an early draft a way of sticking to your original vision? Like you said, with so much input coming from different people, some of it enriching to the work, some maybe less so, I wonder if going back is a way of finding an equilibrium between listening to your voice and taking advice from people in the industry?

It definitely is. Thankfully, my editors and my agent have a very firm grasp of what my vision is. But I think when I'm revising, sometimes I don't have that grasp. Sometimes I do have to go back and ask, why did I set out to write this story? What was I saying back then? Am I still saying that now? How have I changed as I've written this novel? Because of that, how have I changed my protagonist, and are there things that were true to her then

that aren't true to her now or vice-versa? I find it really helpful because at the end of the day, this is a novel about gentrification, about first love, about female friendship, family dynamics. Anything that's not taking me to those places needs to be removed.

It's easy to forget, when you're trying to revise, what you set out to do. So I keep every draft, even if I think they suck. There are scenes that have survived every single draft, every single one, because I think they're the pillar of what I'm trying to get at in the novel, which is community, what we have as community, no matter what gets destroyed, no matter who tells us we don't deserve it. All we have are our loved ones and our community and the people around us to keep us lifted. I want to make sure that every scene is doing that.

Following the announcement of your two-book deal with Penguin, you said: "I thought I was ready in 2021, I wasn't. I thought I was ready in 2022, I wasn't. And in 2023 I could feel it. I wrote it down as a 2023 goal and meant it." What do you remember of those early years? Where you were at with the books in 2021 versus 2022 and 2023?

In 2021, I was a completely different person. I was back in my hometown. I had just gotten a divorce in 2019, and I was working at a different job. I can't say that I was super grounded in 2021. I didn't prioritize my writing in the same way. And that's not to say I wasn't working hard, but it is easier to put off when you have been through all of that. And in the midst of a pandemic, the last thing on my mind was to create. I knew in the back of my mind that I wanted a book deal. I've always wanted a book deal. I knew it from the moment I stepped foot on Sarah Lawrence's campus, but I also knew that I wasn't willing to work as hard for it in 2021 as I had seen others work.

I'm super close to Leah Johnson, she's a YA author. She also went to Sarah Lawrence and I watched her journey and I think watching her journey is what made me say, "Okay, girl, get serious." Because her first book was such a success and she definitely gave me tough love like, "Hey, you need to write your book. You need to get the book deal." But she also gave me the space to have my own writing journey and to realize for myself how important it was to write and how important it was to dedicate myself to my writing. Because you can say that you think it's important to write all the time and you think it's important to revise and to finish your novel. You can say those things all day long. You can talk about writing all day long, but if you're not writing, you're not writing.

I wanted to convince myself that I was ready to query. I was ready to do this, I was ready to do that. But then when it came time to submit the novel to Reese's Book Club LitUp Fellowship, I hesitated. I hesitated because I didn't think the novel was ready. When it's finally time to submit it somewhere, you're like, "Oh, I actually haven't been working as hard as maybe I've told myself that I've been working." Being part of LitUp really made me say, "okay, when are we going to get to it?" Because even then we had a three-month mentorship. Leah was my mentor because she's a Reese's Book Club pick.

We got the chance to talk to a literary agent, and I talked to my now agent. I beat myself up so much in 2022 after that fellowship because I'm like, "Girl, how did you do a mentorship and you're still not ready to query?"

You can't rush. This is so cliché, but you can't rush the process. You can work as hard as you want to work or say you're working as hard as you want to work, but the book is ready when it's ready and you'll know when it's ready, but you also have to be ready.

I was really comfortable. I was at my mom's. I didn't pay rent, really. I didn't have many bills to pay. Financially, I was comfortable. I think when I financially wasn't comfortable, when I was in New York and I had three roommates and I was getting paid \$35,000 a year, I worked a lot harder. I had to kind of shake myself out of that because at the end of the day, I don't dream of working a corporate nine-to-five, I dream of writing books for a living.

It's nice to hear you talk about the shift in prioritizing your writing, thinking you are, and the ways we trick ourselves or the ways we beat ourselves up. And the importance of having a mentor or a friend, somebody who you can lean on and who can push you, too. What did prioritizing your writing look like?

It meant not taking every social call. My social life is almost as important as my writing life. I go out, I go to brunch, I go to this event, I go to that event. I like to say that it enriches my writing and I think it does. But I had to learn that if you're going to say yes to the writing, sometimes you have to say no to everything else.

I had to remind myself that, yes, all these other people have free time to run around to go to brunch, to go to this event, to go to that event. But you don't, not if you want a check. So that's what it looked like. I also did the Tin House YA workshop. I think it was 2021, but it was virtual. I was in Indiana and I made a friend, Channler Twyman, and we've been friends ever since. He and I started getting on a video call every week and saying, "Let's catch up real quick and then let's write for 45 minutes, muted with the camera off."

That dedicated time with someone else every week really changed how I approached my writing because every week turned into a couple times a week and then a couple of times a week turned into most days of the week, and now Channler and I talk every day. He finished the first draft of his book and I finally got a book deal. Sometimes it takes stepping outside of yourself, finding community, finding someone where you are and finding someone you can trust to hold you accountable, finding someone who you can trust to talk about the writing with.

What you said earlier was interesting to me: that you didn't get all the way through to the end in prose. Did you begin again and go, "This is it, I'm going to do it in verse", and then once you realized you wanted to do it in verse, did you just go right to the end before starting a second draft?

I did scrap the prose version of the novel because I didn't make it all the way to the end. I just knew it wasn't flowing in the way I needed it to, and I kind of felt blocked in that form. Once I got to the novel-in-verse, it still had some of the same elements. I don't know who said this, probably someone brilliant, but they were like, you don't really need to look at your draft to write another draft, you know the story. I took that and ran with it. Maybe not my best idea, but it is what it is.

It took a while, but I did go all the way through that draft. From there I was able to revise in a few different ways. I first tried printing out every single page. I paid to print out the entire manuscript so I could move poems around, edit them physically with a pen, because I find that I edit my poems a lot more vigorously on the page. After that, I just tried a few different things because I recognized that printing out or writing by hand takes forever if you're going to put it back on a Word doc.

Now since I've been editing with my editors, they're of course on Microsoft Word. But I rewrote the first 80 or so pages in a journal. I think when I'm trying to get back to who I am as a poet, I have to touch the physical page.

Was there anything that surprised you about the process of writing a novel-in-verse and finding a publisher for a novel-in-verse?

What surprised me is the poet I am as Arriel Vinson who just writes poems as Arriel Vinson is not the poet that is the narrator of my novel-in-verse because I'm not a teen, my name is not Jaelyn, and I have to recalibrate and figure out how do I write poetry for teens that is still impactful and feels like a poem without talking over everybody's head.

I think poetry can easily become pretentious and that's not what I want of my novel-in-verse. That challenge surprised me, figuring out how to get my point across, but how to still tell the story, how to still make it sound elegant, but how to also give the character a voice that is true to her. And honestly, it also surprised me that it takes just as long to write a novel-in-verse as it does a prose novel. This is ridiculous.

YA novels-in-verse are a risk to a publisher because they're not traditional. That might always be the case. I think the novels-in verse that I've read in the past five, six years have done really well. The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo, Every Body Looking by Candice Iloh, and that has to be proof of something. But as someone who used to work in publishing, publishing doesn't take many risks. If we're being honest, I am a Black woman writing

for Black teens about racism, and then I sprinkled some love in there, and then it has the nerve to be in verse. That's a risk. There were editors who didn't see the vision, who were like, "Yeah, not my type of book." I'm grateful for that because I believe the editors I have really do believe in it and think it'll go far despite the form that it's in, despite the themes that it covers.

I was honestly more surprised that it got to auction. To see a YA novel-in-verse about a Black girl in Indianapolis go to auction, I couldn't believe it. I had my friends in my house, my mom's house. I went home to visit for Leah Johnson's bookstore opening and my mom's 50th birthday. We had pizza, we were drinking Olipops, and watching the offers roll in and I'm reading them aloud and I'm adding them to a spreadsheet. It was really the most wonderful feeling in the world, but I was so shocked that it was even happening.

Arriel Vinson recommends:

Read as much or more than you write

Magnum ice cream bars with caramel filling

Beyoncé's Homecoming performance

Find new places to talk a walk in your city

Vision boards, not just for the New Year

Name

Arriel Vinson

Vocation

Poet

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