On balancing passion and practicality

Writer Boris Fishman discusses growing up as an immigrant, artistic rituals, and keeping one foot on the ground

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As told to Diana Ruzova, 2809 words.

Tags: Writing, Family, Day jobs, Process, Focus, Time management.

I would love to hear a little bit about your journey. How did you come to be a writer?

My mom loved going to the theater. My dad loved strumming the guitar. But these were not artistic people. Not questioners. Where does this need to question come from? I have no idea.

Well, two things. One is: immigration is so intense and dramatic and traumatic that you can't help being left with stories. But I know lots of other immigrants who have not chosen to channel [their stories] into writing. So, then there's the fact of being an only child and having four adults – because my maternal grandparents were almost a second set of parents – really dote on you. I was spoiled attentionally by these people. When I wanted to say something, they listened. What a great gift to receive from your family, right? I never took that responsibility lightly.

So, I feel like some combination of that explains two thirds of it. And the third third is just that mysterious thing that takes hold of us.

I've tried to write about things that are true to me, while hopefully being of relevance to others. And some of [my work] has been greeted with great interest and attention, and other work has been greeted with indifference. And I think managing that indifference, to say nothing of the rejection that you frequently encounter, is just a major part of being an artist. It gets easier but you never become fully indifferent to the indifference. At least I didn't.

I love what you said about being an only child. I can relate to that. There's something about being an only child where you feel like you're part of the decision making process, one of the adults. So I do feel like there's this responsibility that you develop, the confidence that you mentioned, and a desire to speak your mind.

I became an ambassador for my parents. I'm sure you did, too. You had to call the places that they were too nervous to call. You had to stand up for them at the offices where they were too nervous to stand up. And it teaches you to keep prodding and keep asking and keep speaking and keep offering. So many of my non-immigrant friends so often take what they hear for the answer. I don't. I ask again.

The questioning.

Yeah. And very often the second time, the answer is different, but sometimes it's not. I don't necessarily go on endlessly, that can be annoying and disrespectful, but this instinct to keep speaking is easy for us immigrants to take for granted, as it's such a central part of who we are. But it's a learned instinct.

What is something you wish someone told you when you began to write?

I was very nervous about becoming a writer. As an immigrant kid, I was surrounded by expectations of financial stability, but writing was like an ailment. I couldn't manage to do anything else. I tried. I spent a summer interning for a personal injury attorney. There's no hope of me ever doing anything in finance. And somehow I just couldn't imagine myself as a urologist. Maybe law was something I could do, because it involves speaking and arguing. But that one summer was enough to convince me otherwise. My eyes were glued to the clock. What other signs do you need?

But I was, nonetheless, because of my [parents'] expectations, very anxious about turning to writing and trying to make a living from it. Because my parents are Jews from the Soviet Union, their perspective was, "Well, what if it doesn't work out?" Very sensible perspective, I should add. One of my dad's favorite phrases is, "So, what's your plan?" There has to be a plan.

I wish they could have said, "Hey, this is risky, but we believe in you. And you know what, you're 22–you've got plenty of time to figure it out. Let it rip." Instead, they said: "We understand you have to soar, but keep one foot on the ground." And I didn't have what it takes to ignore them. You could say that there's some way in which I have failed my writing by keeping one foot on the ground.

Like playing it safe?

I passionately believe in the power of realist fiction. But perhaps that claim is suspect, because I've just never allowed myself to go wild. This is a subconscious issue. Maybe I have never cast practicality aside sufficiently to learn just how wild I could get? I'm always paying very close attention to my reader. I think authors who are paying attention only to themselves can feel very solipsistic. There are people who are able to do both. We were just reading *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy in class. There's no doubt that his feet were off the ground as he was writing that book.

How did you manage to create a path outside the traditional expectations?

I have always done the pure passion thing, and then I've always done an extremely practical thing alongside it. I'm proud of every part of that. That's how you make money as a writer. Early on, I wrote college promotional brochures. I did research for a maker of temporary concrete. I have edited more manuscripts than you can count. I've even–this wasn't for income, this was for passion–worked on the line in a restaurant kitchen. I didn't do it for money, but I appreciated the money it gave me. But my kids have paid for this. My mental sanity has paid for this because there's only 24 hours in the day, and I'm really thorough, so everything I do, I do *completely*. And other things pay for it, emotionally and time-wise. If you ask me, "What are your hopes for yourself as somebody who has just entered his middle second half of his 40s?" My answer is to stop living this way so that I can focus on my kids.

I would love to hear a bit more about how you balance your writing practice with teaching. Does one ever inform the other? Do they ever get in each other's way?

Of course, in some sense [teaching] drains your battery, but in another sense, it really, really sharpens your excitement for craft, for storytelling. It puts you back in touch with certain authors you've loved. It sort of forces you to realize certain things when you're preparing for class, because there's no better way to understand something than to have to teach it. Your students reveal things about the books to you, too, all the time.

Writers who teach love to pretend that teaching leaves time for writing. "I'll just be more disciplined. I'll get up at five instead of six." No.* *You went to bed at one*. *You answered every email that you got from a student, every single request you got from a student, the 50 other things you do. You never want to say no to students. You want to encourage. But it often leaves you with nothing for yourself.

With writing you need massive blocks of uninterrupted time where you can start to flow freely and inhabit that space, especially if you're trying to start something. So summers are the only time. And if you want to take a vacation with your kids, you're basically talking about eight weeks when you can work. It's not a lot of time. I live in two places right now, so there's that transition as well.

There are some people whom I went to graduate school with, incredibly talented and promising writers, but for one reason or another, they have stopped writing as a professional way of life. Then there are those other people who are literary superstars, who will be feted no matter what they write. But there are so many of us who are somewhere in the middle: 46 years old, with two kids, with four books. And we are still living multiple lives. We're still contriving ways to find time to write in between our other obligations. We don't have the freedom to be one or the other.

A lot of your journalistic work is about food and wine.

[Wine is] pristinely expressive. Smell bypasses the cortex and goes straight to the thalamus. When I put my nose into a glass of well-made wine, it's mind travel. I go to certain places I've never been to. Like I put my nose into one kind of glass and I'm in some arcadian meadow on some sun-swept day with the wind just so. Other times, you're in a wet wood right after a rain. It's like therapeutic MDMA–you find yourself in places that if you've gone there, you've only gone there in past lives. And then it's over. An iconic example for me is something that I mentioned in this piece I had about wine in *The New York Times* last fall. My wife and I took our daughter to Istanbul, and we went to a bar that focuses on indigenous Turkish grapes. I was poured a glass of a varietal called Kalecik Karasi. It sometimes has a raspberry-heavy aroma. When I put my nose in it, for the most fleeting second, I was in my grandmother's kitchen in Minsk while she made her raspberry jam. For a nanosecond, I got my grandmother back. I'm getting goosebumps saying this. I've told the story before, goosebumps every time. I want that joy. I want that connection to the land. I want that connection to tradition. I want that incredible precision and meticulousness and artisanship. I want that transport.

What a contrast to academia…

Yes, which can be an utterly joyless, grievance-filled environment, and anybody who pretends otherwise is full of it. For me, wine is also a connection to Europe. It's a connection to time moving in a different way. Wine will never become instantaneous. Wine doesn't care about AI. All those things feel very salutary.

As for food, it's very elemental, right? In the sense that something that was inedible 15 minutes before is not only edible, but nourishing now because of things we've done to it. Something is elementally satisfying about providing that nourishment. People's conditions–emotionally, physically, spiritually, psychologically–transform on a dime if you feed them properly when they are hungry, when they are without that nourishment. The power of food to do that is astounding. You can move people with novels, but it works at a very different speed.

What is it about hunger that defines the Post-Soviet immigrant experience? All immigrant experiences. Even after years of assimilation, pounds of pineapple, why are we all still so hungry?

That's a great title, "Pounds of Pineapple." Why are we still so hungry? Well, it's a learned habit, and it's learned in formative years. And so it's very hard to ease into a sense of comfort and luxury. I had every opportunity to let go of this part of myself, because I came here at nine, but I didn't really come here at nine. I moved out on my own at 24, so I really came here at 24, and by then, I was a deeply shaped human being who had spent 24 years living with his parents. That whole time, you're imbibing their ideals. My wife comes from non-Jews in Seattle, not immigrants. Their means were less modest than ours, and there's just a different level of hunger and searching there, whereas for us the security belt could never be robust enough. There was always one more thing you could do, one more angle you could try to calculate, one more sandbag you could add to your barricade, so to speak, because you're barricading against the kinds of bad things that happen more frequently for us–or used to, but we can't believe we're clear of them–than they do for people in Seattle.

Do you have any writing rituals? Superstitions?

I have fewer superstitions than you think. My superstitions are, perhaps over-responsibly, the central elements of a good writing practice. For the three hours that I'm in the chair, I try not to get up, except to go to the bathroom. No food. I'm never hungrier than when I'm writing, but I try very hard to ignore it. No internet. You have to be in the chair. Of course, sometimes physical movement helps you enter a scene. So I might walk back and forth in the room. But other than that, there's just making sure to [write] as regularly as possible at the time of day when you are at your best. We all know the temptation to reward ourselves by folding a couple of T-shirts and vacuuming a little bit and checking out one email. But if you can do this, this kind of humble, monastic expression of the task, your work will thank you. It's like going to the gym. The more you do it, the sooner it'll be over. And it'll feel great.

How do you know when a project is done or when you have to abandon a project?

I have to tell you that I have never let anything [long] go, ever. Not these four books. I've let go of lots of short stories. I haven't become a seasoned enough short story writer to practice it. I've let many of those go, and almost don't do it anymore. But in terms of longer work, for whatever reason, I'm properly calibrated to that length.

I'd love to hear a little bit more about the hunger you experience while writing. Why do you think that happens? Why are we so hungry when we write?

It's fascinating to me. Your brain is just working so, so hard. And it's working in such a different way. I'm famished. I could have just eaten before I started and all of a sudden, I'm famished again. It's like, you're watching yourself deplete mental calories as you go. It's so cool to observe. It feels like a supernatural event because you're literally sitting still, you're not exercising, but you're shedding something so intensely and you need refueling so badly.

It's really beautiful to think about. What is your approach to starting a project?

There isn't anything particularly talismanic about beginning. Some idea, some flicker takes hold of you. In order for it to be a novel, it has to have connection to larger issues that have no resolution. And if something feels all of a sudden like it has a concrete situation, but it also has that reach, you might sit down one day and just go there. A part of you is quietly chanting: "I'm ignoring the intensity of this blank page. I'm ignoring the fact that it's the first page. I'm ignoring the question of, could this be it? Could this be it? Could this be a new one?" Because it only happens so many times in your life that something goes from page one to page 336.

I tend to have a bigger desire to write when I don't have time to write. I don't know if you feel that way. I trick myself into note taking, which is not writing.

I don't know. But you're making me realize that as soon as you have an idea, you've got to have a proper writing day, because notes, as you know, are a pale alternative. They sustain the illusion that there's a possibility there, waiting for you, but it's a hologram until you try to write it.

Boris Fishman recommends:

Give Me Liberty. It is twice the film that *Anora* was. (Interestingly, Darya Ekamasova was in Give Me Liberty, too.)

Finland. I just took my daughter there to learn how to skate on the wild ice I never learned to skate on as a boy in Soviet Belarus. Maybe it was the silencing effects of winter and jet-lag, but I experienced a profound quietness that, considering the noise in America, felt like a miracle. I think it was the quietness of things working as they should, and people largely getting along. Finns are always called the happiest people on earth, but I think it's actually that they're the most secure-feeling.

Wine. There's a lot of anti-alcohol talk now, and to each his own, but for me, the aroma and taste of well-made wine can turn into mind travel.

Dancing to electronic music. For me, progressive house rather than EDM, but otherwise, it is the cure for all ills.

The French spy series "The Bureau." Very instructive about the degree of ethical and geopolitical complexity a European viewer can be counted on to withstand, versus an American.

Name
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Vocation
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