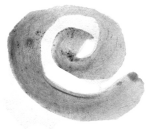
On putting in the work



Writer Bud Smith discusses getting involved, doing it yourself, and fully committing to your style.

October 19, 2022 -

As told to Shy Watson, 2721 words.

Tags: Writing, Day jobs, Process, Inspiration, Focus.

You are just about the most prolific writer I've ever met. Rumor has it you wrote *Teenager* on your phone while clocked in at your full time job. Do you have any other secrets to productivity?

Well, I don't know about *most* prolific. I can't figure out how people write a book a year no matter the size. Nothing feels like a race to me. I'm not rushing. There's no secret to making art. It's just, if you want to make some art, make some art, humans have evolved towards art. Avoid things that drain and do things that feel fulfilling, put those fulfilling life experiences into a small piece of art, and perhaps, even the most common type of life (my own) adds up to something grander, because I was paying attention, documenting, trying to learn from it. If I had children, I'd be teaching them these experiences. I don't. I put it in a poem, a story, a novel. To be more productive, just to do a little bit of your art, when you feel like you can. Don't beat yourself up. Make your goals tiny. And I really am saying, write three hundred words a day. Fill up ONE index card a day with chicken scratch. That's all it takes. Retype the things that pile up. All of a sudden you have something. Have no hierarchy of importance when it comes to your work. Make whatever. Be at play, always. Get comfortable doing sloppy work, malformed, phoned in, wonky work—believe you can fix it later. Because you can. And then when it does pile up, actually fix it later, as if harvesting a crop you get to correct once more, twice more, impossibly, luckily, till you're happy with the harvest. Limit distractions. Just today, I re-approached things fresh, yet again, gave my phone to my wife, Rae, and said, "Why don't you put in a parental control password for me, write it down. Don't tell me." I've gotten too depressed with social media. So now I only have Twitter and Instagram on my phone for 15 minutes per day and then it disappears. Poof. I don't have the internet on my phone at all anymore, zero minutes. I can't browse … anything.

I remember when you were giving me advice about writing a novel a few years ago, you said to start at the part you're most excited about. Did you do that with *Teenager*?

For sure. That's what I mostly do. Write about things I'm really excited about. In the beginning I don't have a plan, maybe just one or two scenes but I write them, and bumble towards creating things around them that thrill me in some way. Then for the next draft I make a little punch list/index card of new scenes to create to properly finish 'the thing.' The cards become a vague map I can leaf through when I get stuck. Working through that punch list often happens out of linear order, too. Just jumping to which new scene I feel most like working on. Later, I have to fix everything. Tie it all up, make it gel. Connect the dots even further, which is just a way of saying 'reverse engineering.' I have a clerical mess to rearrange, but while I'm rearranging all of it logistically, I get a chance to enhance the language so it matches the characters and the place, which I had to discover through writing it all anyway. So I'm never too worried, early on, if I get lots of things wrong along the way, if it seems idiotic. Repairing my errors has always led to the actual interesting places in the work, slowly emerging out of some fog, to surprise me.

How does your writing process differ between your short stories and novels?

My shortest short stories are like little dreams I'm having—I forgive myself for not totally knowing the place,

not totally knowing the people, and not even totally knowing their exact problems or the exact problem of the place. Did I convey the feeling I wanted? Great. We out.

But with the novel, I want to know more about the people, the place, the problems. I want the reader to feel like I just didn't fling a bunch of shit at them. If the novel is a long dream, I have time to understand the dream somewhat while it's happening, learn its illogical rules. But my short stories are closer to dream logic, closer to *this thing happened and we're not explaining.*

Your wife and collaborator, Rae Buleri's illustrations added so much to my experience of reading *Teenager*. They created an entire atmosphere. I know that you two worked together in a similar capacity when she illustrated *Dust Bunny City*. What was it like to collaborate with a visual artist as a writer?

Well, first of all, Rae's art is amazing. She seems to like my work too, so it's easy to work together. She's got no ego, and I try not to have any either. So it's real easy to give each other little critiques, little challenges. She'll say, *Ah you can do that better*, and she's right, and so I go back and do better. And I can give critique, she says, "Hmm." And then she redraws, carves the block print out again, whatever. But as those things go, maybe her re-work is not in the direction of the critiques I give, just towards what she chooses to do, deeper.

If somebody gives you a really good critique or a really bad critique, all they're doing is diagnosing something off in the energy of the art. If the critiquer has taste you agree with, maybe you should try to "fix it." But only you will know the true answer to finish your art, no matter what they prescribe. Every once in a while they happen to say it is a great diagnosis, and miraculously, the medicine to cure the illness too.

Rae and I got better at offering each other critique, after I began teaching creative writing classes in our apartment and she heard how students gave each other feedback, positive and negative. So when she became the illustrator of *Teenager*, she asked me to read her 20 pages of the novel each night. And she'd say, "Okay. So here's what I liked." And she gave her list and then, "Here are the things that weren't very good." And then she started to rip the novel apart.

Rae's never looking for a shortcut. And I think that's one of the things that we have to remember with our art. It can feel like it's taking forever to make it, and there's no time, and there's always a rush to publish. But Rae feel like there is always time to redraw the thing, redraw everything (if you're not sure it's your best work), and I'm the same way, I want to retype my novel again and just go wilder, truer with it.

You can retype your whole novel in three weeks or whatever it is. Or you can just settle and say, "This thing is as good as I can make it." Sometimes, hey, you're out of time, you do have to surrender. Obviously you have to at some point. Anyway, the mistakes, the crudeness, the unfinished, sometimes that is the soul of the work, you'll know. Just don't let anyone rush you. And don't take critiques from someone who wouldn't work as hard on their art as they are telling you to work on yours, they have no frame of reference, they have no foot in reality. Rae works as hard as I do, who better to take advice from?

That's wise. Has your experience teaching workshops changed you as a writer or editor?

Yeah, it's actually made me much more anarchistic with form and style because I've just seen that anything works if you fully commit to it. It doesn't matter what your personal style is, what matters is that you fully commit to that personal style, and just go all the way in. However you present your work, slick, or raw and ragged, ultimately, it has to touch the person reading, or why bother doing it.

Something that I've noticed in your work is that you'll depart a bit from reality as we know it to render people and experiences in more magical ways that often feel more emotionally true. How do you tune into the emotion of what you're writing, and how do you go about getting that emotion across?

Abstraction swiftly transforms a basic story into a grand tale. A bending of space and time, conveying a feeling

that is specific to a character in that moment, that place. We as humans do this every time we tell a joke, how we exaggerate a common thing that happens to us, and reform it into a tall tale, a bullshit story, blown out of proportion, because the logic, the rules of physics, holds us back. I'm telling you a story, I want you to forget your problems, here are mine, maybe they'll help. Perhaps if I make my problems even bigger, the solution gets even bigger, and somehow it will be more obvious, easier to help you. Transcendence, breaking away-it's the point of expression-I'm going to take you away. And if I am going to take you away, I want to take you farther away than you'd at first be willing to go, or hopefully, farther than you know we can go.

The narrative situation of *Teenager*—two kids running from the law—was naturally propulsive, but your short stories carry that same propulsive feeling. How do you manage to keep your reader at the edge of their seats the whole time?

Find a hook and get yourself on it. The reader will get on the same hook too and they'll be with you. I usually write in small vignettes. I know in a couple hours I'm going to sit down and I'm going to try to write this one little tiny scene. I know it's like 300 words, and I know I'm just going to try to sketch it out on an index card. With *Teenager, *I was purposefully trying to write a thriller, a page turner. But sometimes when I read a typical thriller, I feel like the author is not really taking care of me with language. They're not taking care of me with all kinds of other stuff. It's just a bunch of plot design, plot elements. So with *Teenager *I spent a lot of time making sure I was doing better than the books that piss me off. Most badly written books have short scenes, short chapters. Great ones can do the same thing, it's all about style, and substance. And no fluff.

I think of you as proof that writers don't need to go to MFA programs.What other avenues have you found useful in helping hone your craft?

Volunteer to read for online lit mags/zines. See what people are submitting, because that is the leading edge of underground art as far as literature is concerned. They are your contemporaries and their work is more important than anyone's. The dead are dead, and the people making art today have learned, whether they know it or not, from dead legends, an osmosis of cultural influence. Get involved in selecting and curating that underground work for publication anywhere that will let you. Learn to edit others for publication. That will be the most vital thing you can do for your own writing. You can't edit yourself effectively until you can edit others masterfully.

Starting my own small press was a big thing. Anything DIY that you can do. People all the time start a band, put out their own record, put out another record, go out and they play shows for it. And eventually, somebody decides that there's something there, and then there's a little bit more money, a little bit more whatever behind the artist. But they had to gain that experience, become road tested, put in the hours. It can be the same with writers. Put in the hours.

But some of the communities won't have you. So what do you do? Make your own place off to the side. However small. It's what I did. If you feel like you don't have a place in an established scene, then you're right, you don't have a place, but you can always make your own spot—apart—you should. And eventually you'll have put in your hours and you'll have become a road tested creator. What I mean at its most basic level, if you are studying and working at something because it adds value to your life just by doing, then you're doing it the best way. The most valuable way. Study what you love. Always expect you can do better. Because you can. That's what experience offers you the chance to do, simply, better. Only you will know what "better" means, the community, whatever the community is, they won't know it till you show it to them.

Another thing I tell people is to jst to read lit journals and websites of whoever is doing underground writing these days. Read bestsellers, and classics, but it's vital to read books from small presses. When I read something I legitimately like, from an author, especially an underground writer, I reach out to them and let them know. It isn't just like, "Here's a chance to network so I can gain their favor." It's a way to find the most interesting living artists working today and be in communication with them the way I wish I could talk to Tolstoy, because, listen, some underground artists are operating at that level of genius, but the dead are dead and we need to seek out our living geniuses, and at the very least say hello.

And every once in a while somebody would write back, "Oh, wow. So good to hear from you! After I read your note, I

read your story in blah, blah, blah. And I really like your stuff too.” And eventually I would find people who would want to exchange work, and maybe they were just bullshitting me, but you can quickly find out if they actually respect your work when they start to give you edits, and you edit them (and this is how you become a “better” editor of others and then yourself) (By doing.)

Get rid of imposter syndrome as soon as possible. Thoughts like, “I don’t have the degree” or whatever. I learned the most about literature by teaching literature to others. That came about by deciding one day that I would explain what I knew about it to people who wanted to come to my apartment and study it with me. Does that make me a teacher? Everybody is a teacher, I’m saying, if you pay attention.

Bud Smith Recommends:

Get some exercise. I swing a kettlebell while watching a “great” film. I have a stopwatch going—swing for thirty seconds, rest for thirty seconds. Half an hour of that every other day and I feel good enough to keep living.

Put a list on your refrigerator of books you want to read and films you want to see. Cross them off as you go. Add to it when a friend suggests something. Tell your friends if you found anything good.

Pick up the phone and call a friend, we get stuck in a rut of text messaging. If you can’t see them in person, give them a call. Some people hate talking on the phone, I get it, but nobody hates a good conversation when they need it.

Get out of your house/apartment. Be human, see people, be part of town.

If you’re going to buy anything, figure out some way to have a local business order it. Avoid ordering online as much as possible, especially anything art related. I want to read *Notes from a Dead House*, what’s it matter if a translation of a book written in 1862 gets here the day after tomorrow?

Name
Bud Smith

Vocation
writer

Kristen Felicetti