On cultivating your creative instinct



Writer Curtis Sittenfeld discusses overcoming creative blocks, how to start a project, and the balance between listening to feedback and trusting your vision

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As told to Scarlett Harris, 2612 words.

Tags: Writing, Inspiration, Process, Focus, Time management, Success, Politics.

So I just finished reading Didion & Babitz by Lili Anolik and one quote that jumped out at me was, "If you were a serious writer, then a novel is what you wrote." I think we can agree that that is not true, and you've deftly jumped between the two, but I think it's a sentiment that still pervades even though Eve Babitz said that about her 1979 novel *Sex & Rage*. So I wanted to start by asking you what you get from each medium that you don't get from the other and vice versa.

It's funny because they seem less different to me than other people sometimes think. I feel like writing a screenplay and writing a novel are very different, or even writing a political speech. It's writing fiction and fiction, just [in] different lanes. They don't seem extremely different to me.

A short story can feel like an idea, or a lark, or a little mini adventure or something like a day trip, just as an experience, whereas a novel can have the rewards of immersing yourself deeply in a project. But at some point it's going to feel like a slog. You just have to stick with it.

How do you get yourself through that? What happens when you do reach that point in a novel or a long form project where it becomes a slog?

That's one of the gifts of experience, and of having completed other books. When that point inevitably comes I don't think it's a sign that I should give up. It's actually a sign I should persist because I've been through it. Feeling a lot of doubt doesn't necessarily mean that a novel was a bad idea or isn't worth completing.

So it comes with experience. You've obviously got, what, close to 10 books under your belt now?

Nine, yes. Two story collections and seven novels.

What about genre, then? You've jumped from the campus novel to dramatizing political wives' lives to Jane Austen retellings to rom-coms. How do different genres allow you to stretch your storytelling muscles?

I have written in different genres, but I never think in terms of genre while I'm writing. It's more like I write the story that I want to write, then the publishing industry tells me what genre it is.

Given the current political climate, would you ever delve back into fictionalizing any women in politics today?

I don't think I would do any current political figures.

Has the current political climate affected your work in any way, like I know a lot of people who experienced writers block after the election or during the COVID lockdowns. How do you deal with outside pressures or, indeed, writer's block?

In my own life I think there are times when I'm not in the mood to write, but I don't consider that to be writer's block. If I really don't want to enter my own book in progress, I'll try to think about why and find a way around that. So I start from the beginning cleaning it up. Almost treat it like it's a messy room and clean it up. Or if there's a scene that I don't want to write because it bums me out, maybe I'll just work on a different scene and come back to it. Or I'm having trouble writing because I haven't done enough research. So I go do the research. I try to troubleshoot, or figure out what the underlying reason is.

Do you find it hard to write, or think about art, just given everything that's going on in the world? Or is that more of an escape for you?

It's some of both. There's some ways that it feels hard to focus, and then some ways that it feels frivolous to successfully focus.

What does a typical working day look like for you?

I have teenage children, and so there's a morning routine. My kids go to school. I usually go for a pretty long walk by myself. After that I try to write for a few hours and use my morning brain. There are writers who don't interact with any other humans between when they awaken [so] they write, and it's not at all like that for me. But I try to use my most focused brain for writing earlier in the day, and then after lunch is kind of for everything else.

Does that act as a bit of a palate cleanser, or a way to clear your mind between the morning, like getting ready with kids and stuff, and then sitting down at your desk to be creative?

I'm very protective of that time in the sense that I would not schedule a work call, but I would have a call with my brother or with a very close friend. It's not pristine time, but it is protected.

Talking to people that inspire you rather than suck your inspiration.

Yeah. If somebody said, "I really want to pick your brain about this thing having to do with writing," I might say yes, but I wouldn't schedule it for the morning.

How do you start a project?

At first I'll think of stuff in my head for a while. The more I think of an idea, the more promising it is— it just naturally occupies space in my brain. Then I start making notes with pen and paper. If it's a story, it's more like a moment, or just it's kind of a more fleeting idea. And if it's a novel, it's something that I can see approaching in a lot of different ways, and sticking with for two or three years. I might write a scene or two and just kind of see how it feels. Then I will type an outline. That's when I really feel like I have a path forward, even though I don't feel like I have to stick to the outline, but it is very reassuring to me to have it.

Are those scenes that you're playing around at the beginning of the story, or are you kind of experimenting with scenes throughout what might be the storyline?

I usually intend for them to be at the beginning. Although sometimes I think I'm writing the beginning and it turns out I'm not writing the first scene, I'm writing the 12th scene or something. But at the time, I think it's the first.

What inspires you?

It’s usually actually more specific rather than more abstract. So I don’t think I would think, “I want to write about a political wife, which one?” It’s more like some very, very specific idea.

It’s kind of the same as not thinking in terms of genre. I’ll hear something and I’ll think, “Ooh, that sounds like fiction,” or, “That sounds like a plot twist or a more interesting version of this real thing sounds like a plot twist.”

There’s a story in my collection *Show Don’t Tell* that’s called “The Hug.” I probably thought, “Oh, there’s this weird phenomenon early in the pandemic wondering how we greet people.” And then I think I probably thought, “Oh, what if there was a very overt external conflict between a woman who wants to hug her ex-boyfriend who’s coming through town and her husband doesn’t want her to.” But that’s sort of a very specific or magnified version of the general confusion about how to touch people or not touch people, or greet people, or stay away from people in the early pandemic.

How do you know when a project is done?

I think that’s an instinct.

Sometimes I feel like I’m getting to the last paragraph. I’ll be like, “I could finish this novel today, but I have to go to school pickup, so I guess I’ll finish it tomorrow.” It’s not necessarily a bad thing to not take your work too seriously, or yourself too seriously.

I can also tell that I’m close to being finished revising when I’ll make a change, and then I’ll take the change out. At that point, I’m just fiddling, and it probably doesn’t matter if I make it or not.

Are you ever worried that you’ll forget the ending when you do leave it til the next day?

I would make notes if I’m afraid. I do sometimes worry about forgetting stuff, but that’s what my outline is for.

With a short story or a novel, I don’t think its successful execution comes down to any one thing. It’s not like, “Oh, if I had just remembered that, if I had included that one wonderful sentence, it would’ve been good, but now it’s bad.” It’s really the whole; the sum of the parts.

Do you have any novels or stories in a drawer somewhere that you just couldn’t make work? And if so, how do you when something is not necessarily done as in completed to the best of your abilities, but done as in, this is never going to be where I need it to be or I’m not in the right place to complete it right now.

Sometimes it’s almost like I’m working on something that feels really urgent, and then I write it and I kind of cure myself of the sense of urgency. I’m interrupting my main project, and now I’ve freed myself to go back to it. Sometimes I go back to those stories and sometimes I don’t.

I recently had a story published in *The Atlantic* called “Relatable Mom” that I started in June 2021, worked on it for a few weeks, and then I set it aside for three years. Then I came back to it, set it aside for another four months, and then I finished it.

Is there a time in the future when, for your next short story collection, you might be looking at rejiggering some of those stories that you have set aside?

For sure. So much of this is instinct.

Sometimes I think I turn to stories if I haven’t been writing, because I’ve been interrupted by publication or by life. I can turn to a story and sort of remember that I know how to write. It’s kind of a bridge to going back to maybe even writing a novel. The stakes just feel lower. Because if I write 18 pages of a short story, or if I write seven pages of a short story, and it’s clear that it’s not working, I can set it aside and it doesn’t

matter that much.

For [the original short stories in] *Show Don't Tell* I looked at some of the stories that I had ideas for, or that I had written in the very early stages, and [chose based on] what's less repetitive in terms of stories [I had already published that were to be included in the book].

How do you cultivate that instinct or learn to listen to it? I'm imagining that when you were first starting out, you probably weren't trusting your instinct as much as you are now.

Being a writer is this delicate balance of remembering that you have an audience, and forgetting that you have an audience. You don't want to pander, you want to listen to something inside yourself that's distinct. But you also don't want to be sort of narcissistically indifferent to other people's experience of consuming what you've written.

For example, with the story that just ran in *The Atlantic*, which is about a friendship between these two women, and one of them says something kind of dramatic to the other on the last page in the last few paragraphs. I think some people read that and thought, "That feels abrupt, and it's not what the story is about." But I think it's definitely what the story is about. I can understand having a different view, and I can understand an argument against the way I wrote it, but it's my story. If the editors had said, "You must remove this," I think I probably would have. But if they said, "We're not sure if it belongs here"—I feel like it does belong here.

Do you have early readers for short stories that go straight to a publisher like *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker*? Or do you just send it straight to the editor?

I do have early readers. There's my editor and my agent, they're really smart. They can contextualize things in the broader moment in publishing. And then I have other writer friends. I will enlist readers who have expertise around a particular topic. Whether that's somebody who worked in the White House reading *American Wife* or something like that. If they say, "The First Lady would never say this," no matter who the First Lady is, then I will take that very seriously. If I have five early readers who are writer friends, and they all say, "The last paragraph was confusing," I'll also take that very seriously because there's a consensus. If only one of them says, "The last paragraph was confusing," I'll probably ignore it.

I always seek out feedback. And I also say to my early readers, "Please be as blunt as possible, because the public will be."

How do you handle that criticism? Is there a difference between hearing it from your close friends and early readers and people that you trust and the public?

There's time to change it when you hear it before publication! I can be a personally sensitive person but I am not undone by professional criticism. I grew up in a family where some members of it said blunt or rude things to each other so I wasn't shocked when I went to graduate school and got blunt feedback.

I'm able to contextualize. I did this thing with *The New York Times* where I wrote a story using certain prompts from an editor who then fed the same prompts into ChatGPT. And treaders had to guess who had written which one. Some readers were like, "These are both terrible," or "I can't tell" or whatever. If somebody says, "Your story is terrible," I'll think like, "No, you're just not the right reader for it."

What are your feelings on AI?

I kind of did that, I suppose, with *The New York Times*. I'm not sure. I find it objectionable that ChatGPT essentially was created using books by many writers, including me, without our permission, without compensation. In terms of the implications of ChatGPT or AI for the future, I don't think that I'm an expert on that. It's very complex.

It’s been a while since you’ve written non-fiction. Can we ever expect to see reporting from you again or are you firmly in your fiction bag?

I think I’m a much better fiction writer than nonfiction. Sometimes I’m invited to write celebrity profiles and I think, “There are a lot of other writers who could write a version of a celebrity profile that I would write, or a better version. But only I will write the fiction that I write.” It seems like a better use of my time to do the thing that only I can do.

Curtis Sittenfeld recommends:

Aminatou Sow’s Substack Crème de la Crème

Morgan Wade’s newish album *Obsessed*

Erin O. White’s novel *Like Family* (out in November but trust me, pre-order!)

Bridget Everett’s show *Somebody Somewhere*

Anne Morriss and Frances Frei’s podcast Fixable

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