

On challenging your ideas of failure



Writer Eve L. Ewing discusses improving your work over time, the simple importance of good ideas, and the anxiety of being a full-time writer.

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As told to Jessica Hopper, 3066 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Success](#), [Anxiety](#), [Failure](#).

You pursue so many different types of creative endeavors. When something sows itself as a seed of inspiration in your mind, do you think "Oh, that would be a great poem," or do you consider what's the best way you can express it?

Usually the idea wants to be something based on the nature of the idea. When that doesn't happen, I actually find it generative—that moment of confusion is interesting. I have a short story in [Electric Arches] called "The Device," and I was gonna write that as a poem. It's a short story about Black people crowdsourcing the construction of a device that allows you to speak to your ancestors. And when I started writing it, I was like, "this doesn't want to be a poem, it wants to be a short story, which sucks because I'm not good at writing fiction." But it was clear that that was how it wanted to manifest itself.

And so I worked on it, and it turns out that I am good at writing fiction when I have the right idea. Which is part of a broader lesson I learned about this book. I knew at a young age I wanted to be a writer, I was very into like, "I need to write a book." There's something in our culture where people are focused on the accomplishment and not the actual art or the idea. There have been lots of times when I wanted to write a book, but I actually didn't have a good, cohesive idea. I had no business writing anything, because I didn't have a good idea. And I'm really grateful that my first book is one that actually represents some clarity of idea, a clarity of concept. A lot of my preconceptions about myself and what I'm good at are actually based on me trying to do the right thing at the wrong time.



Boston book release/fundraiser for MassLEAP. Photo credit: Lauren Miller

What you are saying highlights how it's not just self-discipline but also generosity with ourselves that serves us well as creative people.

That was hard. I've always wanted to write fiction. I love fiction, it's my favorite thing to read. I remember when I was 17, my favorite book was *Generation X* by Douglas Coupland, and he came to Chicago and did a reading. I got there two hours early, and I was the first one there, in the front row waiting. And I remember going up to shake his hand and getting him to sign my book, and him being like "Are you a writer?" And I said I want to write a novel but I haven't yet. And he's like, "well there's still time, you're still young."

And I remember in my head being like, "You're so stupid and wrong. Every day that I have not completed a great work of American fiction is an abject failure!" [*laughs*] It's so comical now, but this is truly how I felt, that I was wasting time every day that I wasn't completing something excellent. When I was in college and then again in grad school, I was doing other forms of writing, and I would try to write short stories. It was really hard, and I thought "Okay, I'm just not good at this. I'm good at essays, let me do that. I'm good at poems, let me do that."



From *No Blue Memories: The Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*, which Eve Ewing co-wrote with Nate Marshall. Photo credit: Julia Miller

I always wanted to write for young people, and this past year people approached me about doing children's books and I was like "I don't know. I want to do it, but I've had several failed attempts at doing this." And [later on] I got this idea for this character, this little girl. And she wouldn't leave me alone. I had this idea for this fictional character and her life and her conundrums and her things that she's focused on, and she wouldn't go away. It was so obvious in my mind what should happen and how it should happen. I sat down and started working, and I'm almost done with the draft. This book that has been one of the easiest, most pleasurable, and one of the best things I've ever written. It's also been a fairly pleasurable experience that has just happened. All these times that I tried to write fiction and I totally bombed out. It reaffirmed for me that you can't really be obsessed with the form or the function; there has to be a concept beneath something. And when you have a concept, it just goes.

It was okay for me to say, "I don't have a good idea for a fiction thing right now," and I should have just said that and allowed myself, alleviated myself the suffering, the self-castigation. But I've been amazed, it's challenging my notions of myself and what I'm able to do.

What's your relationship with failure?

Small failures and confusions, I think, are really generative. There's this idea in educational psychology called the zone of proximal development. You know this as a parent of young children learning to read—you can't give somebody a book that is so hard for them that they're just gonna frustrated and not be able to read or enjoy it. And you can't give them a book that is so easy that it's gonna be a baby book, right? We think about this in terms of children but I also think it's true of adults. In children, the zone of proximal development is the area in your own cognition where you're just capable enough, but not perfectly capable, so that there's a little bit of a stretching, where you have to work a little bit to get something, but then the reward is really big.



Attendees at the Chicago Poetry Block Party, which Eve Ewing co-created with Nate Marshall. Credit: Sarah-Ji Rhee

I think about that in terms of my own artistic production, but also my life. I'm attracted to things that I either am really good at and that I can just do comfortably, but I've also learned to appreciate things that are a little hard, where even the small successes become immensely rewarding. I used to not be like that at all. When I was 19, I learned how to knit. Knitting is this practice where especially in the beginning, you have to accept that you're gonna make mistakes. When you make a mistake you have two choices. One is you can accept that the final product is gonna be flawed, and maybe no one will ever see it but you will always see there's a little hole right there. The other alternative is to start over. And either of those options is totally fine. I would knit and be like, oh I made a mistake three rows back and rip it out. And people watching me would be like, how can you?! They just saw me labor over building a garment loop by loop, which is a ridiculous enterprise, right? How can you undo it? And I'd always be like, well, I did it once and I'll do it again. And now I'll do it better.

I learned from that. That was the first thing in my life that I really pursued where I was like, I'm not that great at this, but if I work at it a little bit at a time, there's always something to improve. And knitting is also really satisfying because you have this artifact at the end, and there's all these different techniques and you can say, this time I'm gonna learn how to make cables. This time I'm gonna learn how to, you know, do other things.

It's a slightly less painful process than looking at old drafts.

The other things that taught me this were teaching and drawing. Teaching was my first job out of college. I had to accept that I was not good at something. Every single day my only goal was to try to be a little bit better the next day. I ultimately became a very good teacher, but it's just a hard job. There's nothing you can do, there's no shortcuts.

Drawing is really really hard for me, and it does not come naturally. And I like it. My father is a visual artist and I remember once I was sitting with him in an afternoon and I was trying to draw an arm, and every time I showed it to him, I was like "look, this is good now." And he'd be like "People have wrists. This person has no wrist. You just drew a wrist-less person."

Natural talent—I don't actually know how much I believe in such a thing. I do know that there are things that if I work hard at them, I will get better. 2018 is gonna be a year of writing a lot of different things that I've never done before. I'm writing a lot of things that I've never done.



Attendees at the Chicago Poetry Block Party, which Eve Ewing co-created with Nate Marshall. Credit: Sarah-Ji Rhee

With so many different things you are doing and pursuing-how do you compartmentalize creative time? I imagine you as someone with a color-coded system and a very full Google cal.

I have a few tricks that I do. One is that I always forgive myself for what I'm not doing. I focus on something really hard and I forgive myself for everything that I'm *not* doing. Part of it is that I'm very blessed and privileged to be at a point in my life where I'm really only doing things that I love. When I was working on this second book I was miserable in my office at like 2:00AM, and my mom said "Try to find the positive and see it as a blessing." At first I was super indignant. There is nothing positive about me being here thinking ghosts are gonna come murder me in my office in the middle of the night, right? But then I sat back and I was like, someone is paying me to write a book, right? This is literally my dream. It's literally my dream! I have an office. I don't have to leave 'cause Starbucks is closed, or be up late at night in a space where I have five roommates and I can't work. I have a desk, I have a key.

You are full on *A Room of One's Own*.

I'm a big believer that when you don't want to do something, there's a deeper reason. When I find myself dragging or having a hard time, I step back and ask, why aren't you doing this? Is it 'cause the project isn't important? Why'd you do it then? Is it just for money? Like you agreed to do this just for money or you said yes because the person seemed important? And I'm like, maybe you shouldn't do that again.

A lot of those lessons I learned earlier in my writing life, where I realized the process of writing something you don't want to write is too sucky. It's really bad. There are benefits and drawbacks to being a writer who also has another job. One of them is I don't have to write something if I don't want to. I say no to a lot of things. Part of it is also figuring out what my goals actually are and who I'm accountable to. Something that happens to me is that I'll tweet about something, and then an important publication will email me and be like, do you want to write about this thing? And in truth, the only thing I wanted to write about it was the thing I already wrote, which was a sentence. I'm not mad, I'm really actually very grateful. It's always a moment of temptation. If I go for the bait so I can have my name in a fancy place, what I write is probably not gonna be that good, and then my name is gonna be on it, and then people are gonna think I'm not a good writer, and I'm gonna be homeless.



From *No Blue Memories: The Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*, which Eve Ewing co-wrote with Nate Marshall. Photo credit: Julia Miller

When I first started writing full-time that was always the anxious worst-case scenario for me. It wasn't just that I would be homeless, but I would see myself living in a refrigerator box in the alley behind my house.

Also everyone in your house would be having Christmas. And they would all be singing around a Christmas tree and playing the piano and the windows would be steamed up and they'd have giant Norwegian sweaters on.

The cat would be pet by someone else.

And looking at you judgmentally out the window.

It was always just direct to that. There was no in between.

I don't take issue with the term compartmentalize. I really do say "now is the time to work on this proposal for 45 minutes. And during that time I'm not gonna look at my email."

I have a crazy calendar but it's because I put everything on it. My calendar looks crazy but I don't think my day is different than anyone else's, I just make it very regimented and visible. I'm really into productivity apps. I think one day I would like to write a book about the discipline of writing and how you do it. But you know, I was talking—actually in this very cafe—with Claude Steele who's the guy who came up with the idea of stereotype threat. And he wrote a book called *Whistling Vivaldi* that is very widely read. And I was talking to him just about his life, and he's in his 70s and he's a professor at Stanford, he's been at Stanford forever and he went to Berkeley, and is a very prestigious esteemed man.

He's Black, he grew up in Chicago, and I was just asking about his life, and I found out he used to work in the Union Stockyards. This is a scholarly meeting, I'm supposed to be talking to him about my research, and I was just like, "Tell me what it was like to work in the stockyards?" And he just told me, in the '40s and '50s, what it was like to have to wear a huge coat inside and then you'd go outside and it'd be 98 degrees. And the smell of the meat would be so bad that you'd like literally want to fall over. He told me all about how a cow is slaughtered and his job was packing the meat and he had to put it in wax paper. They were Black so they always got the worst jobs. He's like, "what I do now is the easiest thing ever." And while I never worked in Union Stockyards, I have had enough jobs of other sorts that at the end of the day, I read books and write for a job, and then talk to people about what I read and what I wrote. And that's, you know...

You're not packing meat.

I'm not packing meat for \$2 an hour, or whatever. It's not cold and it doesn't smell like rotting pork like it does in the stockyard. This is really dramatic, but when I finished my dissertation at two in the morning in my house in Boston, the very first thing I thought about was Harriet Tubman and slavery. I burst into tears. And I was like, "I just finished my dissertation, and my ancestors were enslaved and if they tried to read people would punish or murder them! And they were ripped apart!" That was straight to where my mind went. I also was extremely sleep deprived. But you know, when you get that perspective, it's like, "Uh, yeah, I got it pretty good."

ELECTRIC ARCHES



EVE L. EWING

Cover of *Electric Arches* by Eve Ewing

Dr. Eve Ewing recommends:

I recently saw someone give a talk about pinball machines and so I've been thinking a lot about pinball machines. There's a poetry to them, and they are so elegantly designed and so trashy and ubiquitous, they have this really kitschy art on them that's kind of amazing, and it turns out Chicago is kind of an important site in the history of pinball.

Over the summer I got *The Space Age is Here to Stay* by Sun Ra on vinyl but I just got a new record player for Christmas so I've just been able to actually listen to it recently. It's incredible and gives me so many ideas about space as a metaphor for Black liberation.

In a similar vein, I have been turning the poem "*American Journal*" by Robert Hayden over and over in my head. The speaker is an alien who has come to the United States and is taking observational notes. Each line is a challenge. It's a poem that gives a whole lot.

I recently finished *Swing Time* by Zadie Smith and it left me so confused about my own position as a reader and what I think makes a good novel. Because I feel a weird ambivalence toward the book—I don't know if I loved it or not. And that ambivalence is interesting so I'm trying to zoom out and see what it can teach me.

This is like sacrilege to admit, but I'm obsessed with *Shark Tank*. It's bizarre because the show is like a sum of all these things I hate and yet I'm addicted to it. I think I like watching people's totally bizarre pitches, where they are trying to use narrative in these succinct and compelling ways and if they don't they get totally flamed. And I like watching people ask each other tough questions.

Name

Dr. Eve L. Ewing

Vocation

poet, author, sociologist



Photo by Daniel Barlow