On staying inspired

Writer Gina Chung discusses integrating research into your process, finding ways to take pressure off your creative work, and the joy of feeling around in the dark.

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As told to Eva Recinos, 2385 words.

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A lot of your work focuses on animals, can you tell me about your interests in terms of the animal world?

The first short story I ever wrote that was about taking the lens of focusing on an animal and its habits—and its connection with humans—was a short story that was published in the literary magazine, *F(r)iction*. It was about a young woman who is dealing with the untimely death of her father, who was a researcher on bats, living in Austin, Texas. And Austin happens to have the world's largest urban bat colony. I was there on a short vacation, and I saw the bats flying out from under the bridge there, and I was just so moved by the sight and wanted to learn everything I could about these creatures.

Because I'm a fiction writer, most of the way I process things emotionally is through narrative and story. I started thinking, "What kind of character would be really interested in these types of animals?" and "What kind of parallels would I be able to draw story-wise between facts about the bats, versus what might have been happening in her life?"

With *Sea Change*, it was actually a short story to begin with. And it began with the first line of the novel, which is, "This morning, Dolores is blue." I started thinking to myself, "Okay, who is Dolores? Why are they blue?" And the first thing that popped into my head, maybe just because animals are on my mind a lot, was that it was an octopus…I knew that they changed colors, and that this is not only an adaptive mechanism that helps them hide and camouflage themselves, but also that it's an expressive thing that they do, which is documented among researchers who work with octopuses and study them.

I started writing about Dolores. Again, beginning with the animal or with the creature, I expanded outwards to think, "Okay, who is this person telling us this story or this fact? Who is this person observing her and why does Dolores mean so much to this person?"

What is your research process like?

In writing *Sea Change*, I read everything I could find online about octopuses and specifically giant Pacific octopuses, which is the species that Dolores is part of—I should say, my novel is a little bit in the speculative realm. So while giant Pacific octopuses do tend to be quite large among the different octopus species, I made her 10 to 12 feet long, and she is extra fantastical. She comes from a realm of the ocean that I invented called the Bering Vortex, which is sort of a no-man's land where it's been transformed over the years by pollution, man made interference, and global warming, into an area of a lot of natural aberrations, of which Dolores is one of them.

A lot of that was my imagination. But, also, I included a lot of the facts that I did learn about octopuses, over the course of my research. I just had this running Google document of different interesting facts that I would

plop into there. I also watched a lot of YouTube. I was writing and doing a lot of this research in 2020. I would've loved to have been able to actually go to an aquarium and talk to someone, but everything was closed.

That's super interesting. So you didn't write the first line of *Sea Change* thinking it was about an octopus right away?

I kind of just started writing it. And then, yeah, I figured in the back of my mind that Dolores was probably not going to be human, given that she was turning blue. I didn't quite immediately know who she was or where she was coming from. And that's often the place I start from with fiction.

Is it a case of going by how a sentence might sound, or is it just a free write? What does that process look like?

It tends to be more of a free write in the beginning. I describe it as: You're in a room in the dark and you're just feeling around. You're trying to get a sense for yourself of "How big is the room? What else is in there with you?" It's a really fun and exploratory process. I like to try and stay in that cocoon stage for a while until I feel pretty confident about, to use the room metaphor, "Here's where a couch might go," or, "Here's where we might put in a lamp."

It's so interesting to think about grief or isolation in these really watery places like the aquarium in *Sea Change*. The main character, Ro, seems to understand Dolores and like her more than she likes humans around her.

Octopuses are just so cool and fascinating. And one of the things I really love about them is that they're so smart and they're so playful and they have such personalities. They're really capable of building bonds with researchers or the scientists and the aquarists that work with them. And they can also hold grudges. I remember reading that they like to play pranks. And if they didn't like a researcher, they've been known to squirt water at them, which is a thing I incorporated later on in the book. I love that about them, that ability to form a bond with another person and to not only be affectionate with them, but also hold more spiteful feelings. That to me feels so human… And then I'm thinking about their habits and personalities. They're very solitary creatures. They don't really encounter one another or seek one another out, except to mate or maybe potentially to spar over territory and things like that. And so I definitely found that to be an interesting parallel with building out the character of Ro, who of course is quite solitary as well for her own reasons.

I think that's one of the reasons she finds Dolores kind of comforting, because here's this creature who's so magnificent and so beautiful, but also so self-contained. Part of her wants to be more like that because she finds needing other people to be very painful and burdensome. And of course, at the same time, she's not an octopus, she's a human being. She has to come out of her cocoon and her cave in order to actually find out what it is she needs.

I was thinking about how you wrote Ro's character in *Sea Change*. As a reader, I am rooting for her, but I'm also totally aware of the ways that she's very flawed, and then I'm also worried for her. You give us a character that is not making the best decisions. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

I love writing and thinking about and reading characters that don't make the best decisions and often are quite flawed, as you said. My favorite kinds of characters are the ones that are really inherently flawed in those ways, where it's like, maybe you're rooting for them, maybe you identify with them a little bit. But you want to shake them and be like, "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

And I love that because, as readers, that's such a recognizable and relatable thing. How many of us haven't made those kinds of mistakes where, even in the moment when we're doing it, we know we're going to regret this later on? And obviously Ro is a fictional character and she's not me, but she does have, I like to say, emotional roots in my own experiences.

It was really important to me that I write a character who is doing all those things on the page and trying to

learn from them…I think it's especially important for women of color to see that kind of experience on the page as well. There is a shift in the larger culture when it comes to literature and television and movies, where we are seeing more examples of women being allowed, quote unquote, to behave badly. But by and large, I do think a lot of those portrayals are still mostly of privileged white women.

You wrote this novel during the pandemic, an intense time. How did you keep yourself motivated to come back to the book?

I don't know that it would've happened in that particular, concentrated period of time had it not been for all those external factors. I couldn't go anywhere. I was experiencing all these things, both on a micro and a macro level, that it felt like the only place for it to go was into this novel.

I tend to write better at night, and so I would spend most of the day at my day job or taking classes in my MFA program, and then I would plunge into the world of this novel. And it was really intense…I think being in that kind of almost miserable but very productive state of mind is sometimes very exciting for me as a creator.

So being in the midst of it was like, "Oh my gosh, this is a lot." But I'm really motivated to keep going because I can see the finish line, whether it's the next chapter or finishing up this particular scene. It's not a healthy way to work, but it was what worked for me at the time.

Also, decompressing was huge for me. Outlets like therapy, which I've been in for the last couple of years, that's been hugely important for me as a human being and as a creative. And I'd also take a lot of walks outside. Especially during that time when we couldn't really go anywhere, I often just forgot that I had a body, and so it would be very important for me to get outside and walk around, look at trees and plants, and just ground myself as much as I could within the restrictions that we were all working in.

I also had, and still have, a very close-knit writing group of trusted friends. I don't think I sent them pieces of the writing until that whole draft was done, but we would talk about it all the time, and they were also working on their own novels. That was extremely helpful, just to know that other people were in it with me and wrestling with similar questions of character and story and emotion.

The process of putting out a book is so long. You're working on it for a long time, you're trying to sell it, then it's going to be published much later. It seems like you have to keep yourself excited about the project. I'm curious what your experience was like.

For me, one of the things that always helps is to work on the next thing, whether it's the next novel, even if it's just ideas and sketches, or working on another short story. And I definitely did that when my book was out on submission to publishers. My agent was like, "This would be a good time for you to work on the next thing," because that's the most helpful thing to get your mind off of the anxiety of that time period…And then also sometimes for me as a fiction writer, it's really helpful to dabble in other genres.

I took a non-fiction workshop. It was a six-week workshop earlier this winter in February, and that was really helpful, just because I hadn't really written much non-fiction before, aside from very academic papers that I wrote in college. It just activated a completely different part of my brain and alleviated a lot of the hamster wheel of anxiety that I was having in the lead-up to publication. And it felt like a whole new way of accessing writing and creative practice.

The other thing that also helps me is doing a form of art that doesn't feel as high stakes as writing does. I feel like when we're all growing up, we all play and dabble in various art forms without thinking about it. So many kids will just sit down with a bunch of crayons and just create something amazing and not feel any kind of precious way about it. It's only when we get older and more self-conscious that we start to think, "Oh no, if this isn't any good, I have to abandon it."

So lately I've been doing what I call my "shitty watercolors" because that helps me take the pressure off of it.

I’m not very good at it, but it’s such a fun and relaxing and relatively easy thing for me to do.

So I know you’re a fellow fire sign. I once heard a podcast episode that mentioned Sagittarii tend to burn really bright. But when you burn a fire too high, it’ll burn out more quickly. And I was like, “Wow, I did not think about it that way.” My question for you is, how do you stay playful or curious about all these ideas you have versus being like, “When am I going to have time to do all of this?”

I mean, for me, what helps is reading other people’s work and just reminding myself that there are so many different stories out there—so many different ways to tell a story. And sometimes coming across writers who are just writing and telling stories in ways that I haven’t seen before just makes me feel so liberated and happy, where it’s like, “Oh my gosh, you can do that? I didn’t know you could do that.” It’s almost like we go around with these invisible or unconscious rule books in our heads, and it’s only until we see someone, quote unquote, breaking those rules that it occurs to us that we can do it a different way. That helps me a lot to take the pressure off of ideas or timelines or things like that.

Gina Chung Recommends:

Making playlists for your loved ones

Gentle Tarot Deck

Anxiety knitting

Waking up an hour earlier than usual

Mrs. Caliban by Rachel Ingalls

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