

On the power of whittling things down

Author Kevin Wilson discusses how growing up in a small town influenced his process, not turning what you love into a chore, and his pragmatic approach to finding time to write.

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As told to Hurley Winkler, 2945 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Time management](#).

Do you find interacting with your own setting—the Tennessee county you grew up in and still live in—to be an important part of your creative process?

I think it is. Most of my life, I've lived in fairly isolated spaces. Small towns. Not necessarily where everybody knows everyone explicitly, but there's a sense of the wires of connection between you and the people you interact with. Where I grew up, even if I didn't know the person, I had some sense of the degrees of separation between me and them. And so I think it was a little anxiety-inducing as a child because I always had a sense that my actions had reverberations that I could chart more than I could have in a city. So it impressed upon me that, even within this isolation, there was a slightly tighter constraint placed upon me and fewer places to hide within that constraint.

So even this small, isolated, rural space still felt big and overwhelming. I think that shaped me in my creative process. I'm always seeing something small and trying to figure out if I can make it smaller. I'm trying to find a place to wiggle into.

Now, I made it up the mountain in the county where I've lived for most of my life. There's a university here of 1,700 students. There is a community beyond that who live here year-round. We have these distinct places, and I live in both of them, but then I'm also always trying to find little spaces beyond that where I'm not touching any of that stuff. I think that informs the way I write, too, reverberating in the stories that I try to tell.

Your writing is known for its Southern-ness, but the Southern-ness is not so overt. It never feels like a caricature. What is your approach to writing the South?

I appreciate that. But I didn't grow up in the kind of South that I think people think of as being evocative of Southern literature. I think people still hold onto a kind of idea of the South that's long since passed in a lot of ways. I'm not sure that it's present in many places anymore. But I know that I'm distinctly Southern, and a lot of the writers who shaped me were Southern writers, and I was interested in the way they perceive their landscape and their history. I absolutely think of myself as a Southern writer, but I think of myself more as a rural writer. Rurality is what's more important to me and the way I shape stories.

Where I live, there's still agriculture, but it's bigger, more corporate. We have Walmart. We have McDonald's. It's not a kind of William Faulkner landscape. And so I'm interested in how we can hold onto distinctly Southern or rural elements, even as these things start to appear that connect us to the larger world. I think that feels different from the South that people think of.

You're known for the humor in your work, which often feels distinctly Southern. What is Southern humor to you?

A lot of times, what's overt about classic Southern writers is a kind of seriousness and embrace of darkness. When I read them, I'm like, "Where is that humor coming from when I see it?" I think there's an embrace of absurdity. Within that darkness, there's at least a tone of absurdity that, and if you embrace it the right way, can be funny. If you know how to twist it and bend it, you can embrace the absurdity of a situation and kind of morph it into what you need.

For me, a lot of humor is based on setting. So much of it comes from thinking really closely about the setting in which the story is taking place and then looking at it through a lens that allows you to fully embrace and play with the absurdity of that setting in a way that, to another reader or to a person not familiar with that landscape, they're not going to perceive necessarily as so overtly over-the-top and comical that it feels like a stereotype. It's more like just trying to embrace these small little absurdities.

You got a lot of buzz in 2019 when a *New York Times* article came out saying that you wrote your bestselling novel, *Nothing to See Here*, in 10 days. Have you continued to write in those kinds of concentrated bursts?

Never again will I write that fast, I don't think. I do write in bursts and I do write super fast, but the way in which I've done that is based on process and evolution over time.

I had to write my first novel crazy fast because the original novel I'd turned in had been rejected, and I had a deadline to deliver a book or I would have to give the money back. And so it wasn't about the creative process. That money was already spent, and I had to write a book. And so I moved really quickly.

When it came time to write my second novel, I had more time and I made it huge. I made it take place over 10 years. I had a ton of characters and actually would forget the names of the characters sometimes. It took me longer to write it, and I'm proud of that book, but it was a very, very difficult thing to try to manage it because of how I write, which is in short bursts. And I was like, "Okay, now what I've got to figure out is how to marry process to circumstance." So I started reducing the time within the story. I reduced the number of characters. I reduced the setting. That all helped me set myself up for success.

Where does your concentrated-burst writing process come from?

I have a full-time job. I'm a dad. I'm a husband. The kids take up so much of my time, and I don't mean that in a bad way. They just do. And I don't want to not do that. When I teach, that takes up a lot of my mental space, too, trying to help my students. So rather than try to write every day for two hours, which would kill me, I don't write at all for months and months and months. I probably only write two or three months out of the year. I just save it up.

Then, that whole time that I'm not actively writing, I'm just writing the story in my head. In the little moments of time where I couldn't actually be at a computer writing or even in a notebook, I'm just thinking it, organically letting it just circle around in my head, so that when summer comes or I have a small break, my wife and I trade off. We each go away for 10 days a couple of times a year to write. 10 days is the most we can do where one of us takes care of the kids by ourselves. And so we do that. When I get there to the cabin for 10 days, it goes super fast because it's just been waiting in my head for six months. And that isn't necessarily the way I would like to write. In a perfect world, it would be a little more organic and spaced out over time, but I've had to make it fit the needs of my life.

How do you envision your writing life changing once your kids have grown up and moved out?

I'm sure it will change in some ways, but I'm realistic about the fact that I might just run out of ideas. And so then I'll have all this time, but no real spinning of the wheels in my head because I'm kind of running, trying to figure out what's important enough to me to spend this much time working on it. I might just fall off. Everybody does eventually, and I might just lose it. So I try not to think too much about what the future's going

to be.

I love writing. I love this so much. It's the thing that makes life tolerable in a lot of ways. So, how can I make sure that I don't lose it? But also how can I make sure that it's not a chore? I make money. I have a career in writing, but it's not my only thing that I do, so I don't want it to feel like something that I have to do. I can keep it as something that's meaningful to me, and it's special when I get to do it. And there's nothing attached to it other than the pleasure of making the thing.

You mentioned a cabin. Where do you typically go to write?

I used to do residencies, like MacDowell or Yaddo, but the ability to plan that far in advance is really difficult with kids and with my life. So now I just find the cheapest Airbnb I can find in a town that's not too far away, and I just sit in that apartment or cabin for 10 days and I work. I don't have to walk the dogs. I don't have to feed the kids. I don't have to fold laundry. If you excise all that stuff from my day, I can write for 16 hours without stopping because I don't have anything else telling me I got to go do it.

I'm sure that staying within the South for those concentrated bursts of writing is obviously beneficial for you from an economic perspective, but do you feel like it's also important for the writing itself to remain in the South?

I'm most comfortable in rural spaces. I'm comfortable in the South partly just because I kind of know the mechanics of how the roads in Southern towns are set up. I kind of know what a town square's going to look like. I kind of know that I'm not going to get too lost. I also know not to go too far down certain roads. You know what I mean? Even when I'm in a cabin writing, I like knowing that, if things go haywire, I can get where I need to get. And that's really rewarding to me.

And that familiarity shows up in the writing. I don't know what Montana is. I don't know what living in Minnesota would be like. I can't write that accurately. I stay with the setting that I know so I can write the story and the characters that I don't know as well. Once you know the weird spaces of a setting, then it becomes easier to move your characters through those spaces and get a sense of what you can get out of it.

You mentioned that your wife is a writer, too. What are the unique benefits and challenges of being partnered to someone who works in the same medium as you?

She's a poet and I'm a fiction writer, so there's absolutely no jealousy involved. Anything that she gets is not something I could have gotten, and same for her. Maybe if we were both fiction writers, it would feel a little weirder—maybe we'd be trying to get the same agent or something. But we work really well in that respect. It's just nice to know that I can talk about my needs for what I want to do creatively and have it not seem silly or overly dramatic. When I'm upset that I didn't finish the work I needed to get done, or that I'm going to have to completely rewrite a scene, it doesn't feel like I'm an absurd, dramatic person.

I think I would feel way more guilty going away for 10 days if she also wasn't like, "Yeah, go, because I need to go, too." I need that space to do what I've got to do. You can have a family and be a writer, but I just hate that feeling of being like, "Daddy's got to go write the Great American novel, so bye-bye." That stuff feels so weird to me. This is a fun thing that I love doing, and it helps me, and it's necessary for me, and it makes me a better person when I come back into the world that we're making.

Plus, the freedom to just speak technically about work that may seem esoteric or mundane allows me to be open in a way that maybe I couldn't be otherwise. A lot of times, Leigh Anne is like, "I know who you are and what you want in a way that other people don't, so I think I have a sense of what you're trying to do here with this story." And that's just super helpful.

Speaking of relationships, you have friendships with many writers who live in the South and write about the South, such as the writer Ann Patchett. How do your relationships with fellow Southern writers impact your own writing life?

In so many ways, it's helpful to see how other people perceive the world and also how they stylistically shape it. Ann is one of my best friends and is like family to me. She's taken care of me in so many ways, and we named our son after her. But what's also just been really lovely is, the more that we learn about each other and the more I understand her desires and her personal history, when I then read her books, I'm like, "Oh, this is how she's getting that stuff into her fiction, and here's how those themes that she's interested swirl around." What interested me about her work at first is that so many of her books are about people from disparate situations, being forced in uncomfortable situations to hold onto each other, to make a little makeshift family. That happens again and again in her books. The more I get to know her, the more I get to see why that impulse is interesting to her and why she's such an omnipresent person in the lives of so many people, because she's a community-minded good person. Being close to other writers, the more you get to know them as people, the more you're getting a sense of how their process accommodates their impulses that they want to make.

Kevin Wilson Recommends:

Radiooooo: This app lets you choose a decade and any country in the world and you can hear songs from that time and place. I have spent so much time listening to songs from the 80s in Germany or Norway. You can filter it by FAST, SLOW or WEIRD, and I just choose WEIRD and let it go for hours.

Memphis Grizzlies: I have loved this team for a long time, through some very bad seasons. They are young and vibrant and clearly love each other and are overachieving in amazing ways, and Ja Morant is maybe the coolest player in the NBA right now. Memphis is an amazing city that never gets its due, and the energy in the arena right now is so wonderful. You can see Moneybagg Yo or NLE Choppa at the games; I got to see Young Dolph perform at halftime a few years ago. People revere and honor players from the past, like Zach Randolph or Tony Allen, in a way that feels so regionally wonderful. And my youngest son is a huge fan. We go to games and watch on TV, and it's been awesome.

Reading out loud: Every single night, I read a book with one of my two boys, and we have been doing this since they were tiny, and it's the best part of my day. The pleasure of reading aloud, of sitting next to someone and sharing the story as you each form the images in your head and follow the narrative is just so lovely. I cannot recommend it enough, and it forces me not to skip over things, to listen to each line, to appreciate swerves.

Painting figurines: My oldest son has really gotten into painting little figurines for tabletop games. He doesn't really play the games much but likes to paint and assemble them. And he's so good at it. They are beautiful and precise. And so he asked if I'd do it as well, and so we sit at the dinner table, and for about thirty minutes, we just paint figures next to each other. It's way more calming than I would have thought. I don't worry about the end result, but rather just transforming this object into an object that is specifically made by me. I'm such an isolated person, and I need to be alone a lot, inside my head, so a lot of what I'm recommending is communal because I need that in order to not leave the world entirely.

Bear by Marian Engel: This book was published in 1976 by Engel, a Canadian writer, and it's my favorite kind of book. It's compressed and hyper-specific and about isolation and desire and creativity. A museum worker moves to a remote island in Canada to look over the library in this mansion after the owner has died, and she meets a bear, who had been kept by the family, and they enter into a kind of relationship. It's such a strange and mesmerizing novel.

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Vocation

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