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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3804 words.

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On the pleasures of working without a map

Writer Kimberly King Parsons on publishing her first book, carving out windows of time in order to make consistent progress, and letting your work tell you where it wants to go.

Your book of stories, *Black Light*, was just longlisted for the 2019 National Book Award. What is it that drew you to working with short stories?

The first time that I ever had my heart broken by words was through a short story. It was an Amy Hempel short story and I was a freshman in college. I was interested in reading, but I had never had this sort of emotional, visceral response before to words on a page. There was something about the potency, how it was so compressed. I guess the closest feeling I had before was maybe with reading poetry, but at that time I wasn't reading a lot of poetry. Poetry was sort of difficult for me to grasp, but there was something about the way that Hempel was twisting those lines around that made me feel this electric crazy feeling. I wanted to understand how she did it, and then I wanted to do it myself.

Did you go through a writing program?

I did. I have an undergraduate in English and I have a master's in literary criticism. I was studying Faulkner and that's what I thought I wanted to do was write Faulkner criticism, as if we don't have enough of that in the world. I was applying to Ph.D. programs, and then I applied to the MFA at Columbia because I was drawn to the book *The Age of Wire and String* by Ben Marcus, which was a very strange short story collection, and also Sam Lipsyte's *Venus Drive*. They were both teaching there at the same time and that seemed incredible to me. So I applied to this one MFA and the rest were all PhD programs to do Faulkner stuff. I was like, "If I get into the MFA program, I'll go." And then I did. So I went to New York and did the MFA at Columbia.

What was your MFA experience like?

It was not a super productive time for me, to be quite honest. It was a period of reading a ton, and my partner and I got married and then both moved to different states, because he had a full scholarship to Ohio State and I had some funding for Columbia. So we got married that May and were like, "See ya," and split up and went to different places. But it was actually really great. I think everyone can benefit from living by themselves in a new city. That was very revelatory to me, just being in New York after having lived in Texas my whole life, and having lived in basically the same area since I was six years old.

It was incredible to be in New York suddenly. So that was great. Although I didn't get a ton of writing done there necessarily. I started to, but it was more of a taking-things-in period. Reading a lot of stuff, talking to people, talking to other writers. It made me feel like I could potentially be a writer, and I think that was the thing that made me feel like there was some sort of legitimacy to the whole enterprise of it. Before that I had just been writing stuff in notebooks and hadn't really shown anything to anyone.

It's crazy to think that the course of your life would be different if you'd gotten into a Faulkner program.

Right? Yeah, I know. I feel like there have been a lot of moments like that in my life, where I just sort

of put something out there in this weird way and say I want a decision to be made for me. I kind of enjoy being out of control or being led around in life. There's something I find soothing about that, going where things pull you. I feel like I've done that a few times, like cast out a net in a weird way and just say, "Well, we'll see what happens." That ended up being kind of the same thing with the way that I found my agent. There's been a series of events like that, that I've just put something out there to see what comes back.

How did the stories in *Black Light* come together? Were you writing these pieces with a collection in mind?

No, I was definitely not writing them with the intention of selling a book because I had always believed—like most young writers—that you needed to have a novel in order to find an agent. And so these stories were just pure pleasure, just something I was doing to learn how to write and to practice, essentially. I started them in 2005 when I started the program at Columbia, but I didn't imagine that they would ever be a book, just because I really believed the same thing that everyone had told me, which was that you had to have this other, *bigger* project. These stories were this sort of joyful thing that I did. I had a big project I was working on for many years that ended up being something I threw away, which was great and I don't regret that ever for a second.

When I moved here to Portland, Oregon, I was afraid to leave New York because I didn't want to leave the publishing world. There's this Tin House workshop that's out here, and it essentially happens in my neighborhood. I applied and got accepted. They ask you to bring a manuscript and to come and talk to these agents for 10 minutes or whatever, and I had these stories that I'd been writing since 2005. I started to focus on them and think, "Even if nobody ever reads these, this is the thing that's getting me off and that's what I want to work on." I figured that if you're going to be spending your time on something, it might as well be on the thing that makes you excited.

At that point, I had printed them all out and put them all on the floor and looked at them, and I saw that a lot of my same obsessions kept rising to the top. Even though they were written over a period of many years, they started to make sense together. Of course, there were plenty of stories that didn't make it in, and tons of stuff that I threw out. Then I had this as the sort of project that I was pitching, even though I wasn't even really pitching it. I was still really considering it all practice, which I think is a really great thing, because it takes away some of that pressure. You're just seeing what *might* happen.

So I talked about the project to this agent while I was at Tin House and she told me to send it to her... and then I didn't because I didn't believe she really wanted to see it. Then a friend of mine was like, "Just send it." I felt like that was another moment of being like, "Okay, we'll just see what happens, maybe something will happen and that will give me a clue as to what I'm supposed to be doing." So I sent it to her, and she responded really positively to it. She had some really great ideas. We sort of whittled it down a little further, and rearranged some of the stories. It became a really inclusive thing that made a lot of sense at that point.

It's interesting how certain narratives flow through the publishing world. I remember for a long time people saying, "No one wants story collections. They only want novels." Or, "Nobody wants novels, everybody wants a memoir." I guess you can't be naïve about that sort of thing or what the marketplace is, but it can also color what you do or how you think about what you write if you know too much about that stuff.

I think it's bad, yeah. I think writing and working on a project that's totally free from the idea, not only of the marketplace, but even the idea of a reader, is important. Just working on that thing that makes you excited is the thing that matters. It's always the thing that I've gone back to. You can try really hard to do what you *think* is going to sell or please people, but really at the end of the day it's your time. That's all we have. If you're going to give up this time in your life to work on something, it has to be the thing that you are really into.

So is the expectation that you'll write a novel now?

Yep. The novel never goes away, right? We did a two book deal, and the second book is a novel. Basically it was a short story from the collection that my agent and I had cut because she thought it seemed more like the beginning of a novel than a short story. It was just a sort of weird, swollen story that kept getting longer and longer. So when we were talking to the folks at Knopf and they said, "Do you have a second book?" We were like, "Yes we do," and then we went back and looked at this almost 40 page short story that had no signs of really wrapping up anytime soon. I liked the narrative voice enough that I thought I could ride that for a novel-length thing, so I wrote a little treatment about what I thought *might* happen—which, of course, turned out to be totally wrong—to try to give them some idea.

Thankfully they were into it, so it worked out really well. That's actually due kind of soon. There have been moments where I feel like the novel's getting really close, and then other times I look at it and I'm like "Oh fuck, no, that's not at all close."

Does the idea of now having an audience—the notion of a reader—hold any sway over your writing process now? With a second book, there is this idea that now people are really listening..

I'm the kind of person who needs a lot of responsibility and obligation, because my natural tendency is to be a lazy fuck-up. I need deadlines. I need people dependent on me. I need to be enrolled in programs. I feel like I'm the kind of person who thrives in that circumstance, so even though this first book was sort of this long meandering way to get to it, I'm actually really grateful to have these people who are

waiting for it on the other side.

But I don't think it's influenced anything. If anything, it's just making me sit down and generate more stuff and be more focused. Even when you're doing it and you know someone's going to be reading it, you can suspend that knowledge during the process. I forget all the time that there is someone waiting for it. It's still just me writing what I most want to read. Also, I can't have a ton of free time. I can't just be like, "All I'm going to do is write for 20 hours." I need to have specific, rigid frameworks in my life to do well as a writer. That's been my experience thus far.

Before I had kids, I would just sort of dick around on the internet and do whatever, or watch movies, or go down weird research rabbit holes. I wouldn't get anything done. Then when I had kids, I only had six hours a week to do this because we paid a babysitter six hours to watch the kids. So I couldn't be watching *Drag Race* or something while my kids are in the other room. I'm paying all this money for a sitter, so I have to actually work. That's been the best thing for me. Having those sorts of limitations and obstructions is really beneficial.

What does your writing life look like now? Do you have a daily practice? How do you break it down in terms of work?

My kids are both in school. My little one just started kindergarten, so for the first time they're both in school from 8am to 2:15. So I drop them off at school, then I come home. I have weird rules for myself where I can't be on the internet inside the house, so I'll sit in my car—on the internet—in the driveway, and listen to music and drink my coffee in the car. Then I come in the house and I sit on this couch and write. Then I have to leave to go get them at 1:45, and that's kind of it. I'm trying to just stick to those hours as much as I can.

Of course, since I've been doing a lot of promotional stuff for *Black Light*, that's definitely eating into novel-writing time. The other thing I do is that a lot of times I'll go to sleep with my kids when they go to bed at around 8:00. They like you to lie down with them, which is just the worst—to lie down in a dark room when you're kind of perpetually exhausted. So I will always fall asleep with them, then I wake up at midnight feeling sort of panicked, so then I go upstairs and I can usually write from midnight to 3am or so.

That's actually been really good just because the stuff that comes out during those sleepy hours is really weird and a little more blurry and strange. In the morning, a lot of times the first hour of writing is me just looking at the weird shit that I wrote the night before. That's kind of how it's working right now. We'll see if that changes. I'm trying to be in full mom mode from 2:15 until the end of the day, but a lot of times I'm still thinking about whatever I'm working on.

Do you have a roadmap for where you feel like the book is going? Or are you one of those people who just writes a few pages a day and it goes where it goes?

I'm not an outliner at all and I don't ever want to be. Personally, it's not my thing. I have what I call "buckets"—it doesn't make any sense. I know that there are certain characters and each character has a bucket, or like there's a certain plot that's sitting at the center of the novel, but I'm not sure how it resolves. It's all very mysterious to me still. It's just like the shape of something in the middle and I'm working towards it. If I sit down to write, I'm just writing based on what sentences please me in the moment, and then I have to find a corresponding bucket to put them in. I use Scrivener, which is this program that organizes all of your stuff for a novel, and I can just sort of drag and drop things into other things.

So, say there's a character in the novel who's a hoarder and so anything that has to do with hoarding, I'll add it to the "hoarder bucket." So I'm moving around these little bits of text. I still write the novel in the same way I wrote stories, which is really line by line, sentence by sentence. It's just this evolving collection of vignettes and ideas and snippets, and eventually I'm hoping that they're going to reach out to each other and connect the way that I want them to. I know some people have really hard ideas about how they want the novel to look or the shape it's going to take, but I love that feeling of not knowing what's coming next. It's exciting for me to be surprised along the way. I like feeling really stupid about the project and not knowing anything about it until I'm actually sitting down and writing it.

You mentioned that you've been busy doing promotional stuff for *Black Light*. Do you get a lot of young writers asking you for advice? Things perhaps you wish you had known when you were starting out?

I did an event with my agent and a lot of the people there were writers who were just interested in the process of how you get an agent. I think people want to have a map or a checklist to go through and say, "If I do all these things, then the thing will happen for me." For me, contests were important. I was sending things out and I won something, or maybe I got an honorable mention or something. It was just something that made it feel a little bit more worthwhile, and I got a little bit of money from it. I decided I was only going to use that money to apply to other contests.

The thing about paying for contests is people have to actually read the work. When you're in the slush pile of blind submissions, a lot of times you don't know if it's actually getting read, but when you're paying a fee—and it's not to say it doesn't suck, because you do have to come up with that fee—at least you know that someone will read it. So I'm always encouraging people to do that, but then I know a lot of people who say contests are the biggest waste of money and time. But I had a few things like that happen, and it was helpful.

I would just say it's always about writing the thing that you want to be reading and also making sure that you're always reading. I have a friend who had been working so hard on this book, and she had not been reading anything at all. It was sort of shocking how six years later or whatever, she came out of this fugue state of writing her book and was like, "I don't even remember what I liked about reading." I think always reading and trying to write the thing that you most wish you could be reading—the thing that's most exciting to you—is what is most important.

It seems like common sense advice, but it's really true. You learn what good writing is by reading.

If I had to choose between being a writer or a reader, I would choose to be a reader, hands down. It's critical to the way that I live my life that I'm carrying all these different voices around in my head. They're so meaningful and so important. But it's not even voices of other writers. It's just voices of people in my life. It's something that a Lyft driver says to me. I don't know, just weird things that stick with you.

That is another important thing for me—paying attention. That could be paying attention to what you're reading or paying attention to what's being said in the world, but being present in that way and paying attention to what you hear. I feel like it's so important to be reading all the time.

Also, it's about listening to music, too. I feel like there are so many things that enrich my life every day. I feel really lucky to be alive in a world with so much amazing art, just to live around it and experience it. It makes the artistic pursuit seem less ridiculous when you realize how hugely influential it is and how important it is to your own daily life, you know?

Kimberly King Parsons Recommends:

I'm reading a couple different things in manuscript right now and there's a book called Godshot by Chelsea Bieker. It's coming out from Catapult and it is so beautiful and so strange and haunting. I'm loving it. I just read Susan Steinberg's Machine from Gray Wolf. It's like a very strange, fractured novel and it kind of fits right in with the things that I like. Short and weird and this kind of hot, fast book. My very favorite novels that are like that. Elizabeth Hardwick's Sleepless Nights or Renata Adler's Speedboat. These books that are doing weird shit with form.

I have a hard time listening to music and writing at the same time, but I love the band Lower Dens. They're so incredible. So I've been listening to that music sort of obsessively, all of those records, working my way back through their catalog.

I feel like it's such a privilege to come in late sometimes on a band, because you know then you get to go back and explore all of their older work. I did the same thing actually with Songs: Ohia and Magnolia Electric Company, going backwards. I love when there's a whole array of records, all those years that you've missed, and then you get so excited when you get to experience it for the first time. It's the way I used to feel when I was a kid, where you're stumbling onto something and it feels like it's only yours, like you're the only person who has ever heard of it.

I often use music as a reward for writing. So I will sometimes finish a chapter or finish whatever I'm supposed to be doing and say okay, you get 20 minutes to listen to whatever you want, which has been really good. Sometimes I play around on my Omnichord. Not really making anything special, just sort of as a break from writing. It just frees me up. It's just joyful. It doesn't have any deadlines. Nobody is waiting for it. It's just for fun.

Also, this morning my kid had a big knot in his shoelace and I was like there's no way we can get this knot out, we're going to wear different shoes today. Then he left for school, and when I came home I sat down on the floor for, I don't know, at least 10 minutes getting this crazy ass knot out of his shoelaces. He doesn't know how to tie his shoes yet, so he keeps making knot upon knot. I was pulling them apart and thinking "This feels so good." Just to be sitting there, doing something with my hands, and to have the end result of the shoelaces untied. I feel like there are moments like that all the time where you just sort of remove yourself from the idea that we have to be productive all the time and, just for a second, do something because it's fun.

Name

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Vocation

Writer

Fact



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