

On committing to wasting time



Writer Ling Ma discusses creating a sustainable writing routine, not equating time with money, and allowing for exploration in your process.

October 2, 2023 -

As told to Jess Focht, 2660 words.

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

Your novel *Severance* won many awards, and last year you published a collection of short stories, *Bliss Montage*. I know crafting short stories and novels are different processes. When you have an idea for a story, do you have a sense of whether it'll be in long or shorter form?

Really, I try not to label a piece of fiction too early. I kind of just get into the idea, try to inhabit a few scenes, and rummage around in it a bit before I understand the scope of it. I think when I was writing *Severance*, I actually told myself it was a short story. I was trying to trick myself into thinking like, "It's not a really big project." You know?

It's so daunting to write a novel. I started *Severance* when I was 29. Before that, I had already started a novel that I couldn't finish. It was beyond my ability. Thinking of *Severance* as a short story made it more palatable to just continue working on.

I was blown away by your ability to craft both a novel and a short story collection so successfully. Is there anything with the process of writing, and your creative process, where you come to a stopping point with your short stories?

Yeah. I work with sort of surreal premises. With a novel, it has to be more rooted in realism to carry it through. *Severance* is much more rooted in realism compared to many of the short stories in *Bliss Montage*. I think the premises of the short stories can be a little bit wilder and more outlandish. For me, that makes it more difficult to sustain. I'm saying that, of course, having written one novel and one collection of short stories.

I did get a sense that *Severance* was going to be a novel around the time that Candace Chen [the narrator] starts talking about work, and it's clear she's pissed off. There was a lot of anger I could feel there that was probably reflective of my own situation at the time.

I'd been working and bouncing around, job to job, for seven years. I just didn't want to continue in the same vein. I could feel a lot of emotional weight there. I felt that the frustrations were going to be unpacked in some way, and they were going to take a while to unfurl.

One of my favorite parts about your writing is that it's so deadpan while also being very lyrical and humorous. It's addictive to read, and has a really specific humor to it.

And then drafting is a whole other process. Does it take you many drafts to reach this level of prose? I'm curious about your drafting process, in general.

Yeah, definitely. At least for *Severance*, it was a 40,000 word document of scenes that I had tried out and cut.

With the short stories, too, I tend to overwrite and try things out. It's just a way of inhabiting the stories. At one point when I was writing *Bliss Montage*, my editor came over and visited Chicago. I don't know why, but I felt really pressured to show her that I had done work, so I showed her. In my closet, there were six different stacks of packets. Basically, each stack was a short story. I would put the newest draft on top every couple of weeks. Some stories had 15 different drafts. I usually don't know the ending until the end, though. So, I guess I write really chronologically in that way.

So, not a lot of outlining.

No. I think you have to kind of inhabit the scenes and the characters to even know what the story is about. Sometimes I think, "Well, this story is about X, but it turns out to be actually about C." I would not have predicted it unless I inhabit the scenes. I use the phrase inhabit a lot because you really have to put yourself into the story. If I know what's going to happen in a story, I feel like it's kind of dead.

I think the creative process is really exploratory. It's better actually, sometimes, if you don't know what's going on. I think a lot of the scenarios that you set up are posing questions that, maybe, you are wrestling with yourself. Fiction is another way of thinking.

With *Severance*, you've mentioned in interviews that you knew it was going to be a project that would take several years. I think that says a lot in our current consumer culture. A lot of young writers write with the idea of like, "Oh, I'm going to finish this novel in a year," and give themselves really strict timelines. Sometimes I think they feel such pressure because they have to make money. Our society definitely encourages more of a timeline and finishing things instead of the process, in general. And it also speaks to attention spans shrinking gradually, overall. Were you confident in the fact that you needed that time and space to write *Severance*? How did you navigate that?

As a young writer, starting out, I think what you're really learning to do is how to work with a writing routine. You can't just start out doing eight-hour days of writing. That's lunacy. I did actually start out thinking that way. I would sit in front of the computer for six hours like, "Why is there only two paragraphs?" It's kind of like training as an athlete. You start with, maybe, two hours a day instead of eight hours at once. So, in thinking about time, you have to also factor in the time that it takes to train yourself to be able to work for, say, eight hours a day. I don't think tons of published authors necessarily do that anyway.

For some reason, I really wanted to pigeonhole my writing routine into the same workday schedule, starting out. So, it took me a while. I did get to the point where I would be able to do a four-hour shift in the morning, four-hour shift in the afternoon. I can still do that, but it's actually very grueling. If you do that back to back, it's extremely draining. I don't think you'll always produce great work if you push yourself too hard. I also think a novel, or short stories like fiction, is a way of thinking. You're going to get to a point where you get stuck, or you're not sure how certain scenes are supposed to play out. You need the time for your subconscious, or your lizard brain, to work and figure things out. You need time to think.

I mean, people in PhD programs, writing their thesis, take seven years, some of them. Some of them take 10 years. Just like them writing their thesis papers—writing a book, it's a form of thinking. Writing fiction is a form of thinking.

That beautifully answers what I was getting at, and is very inspiring, especially viewing fiction as an art and way of thinking.

I think the challenge, living in capitalist society, is not equating time with money, even though that's what we're always taught, "Time is money."

Today, I was very unproductive. I had to go to a dentist appointment. It did occur to me, like, "Wow. Am I losing money?"

It doesn't make any sense. It's an unnatural system. "Time is money" is an unnatural way of thinking. I mean, it works with your investment portfolio. It doesn't work with the creative process.

I was reading *Bliss Montage* earlier this week, and what you just said reminded me of a couple of different passages that I really thought were astute in how it points that exact thing out. In the story, "Returning," which was my favorite, it says, "He saw his writing career as a rocket trajectory, as opposed to the valleys, plateaus, and deserts, of most creative careers."

I think a lot of people believe they're getting into one track with their careers, but end up detouring or making a few pitstops stops along the way. I guess life, in general, is just kind of a lot of unexpected journeys.

It also reminded me of how the couple in the same story is wanting to freeze themselves so their 401(k)s would collect money.

Right.

I thought that was so funny. I'm in my late 20s and thought it reflected the feelings that many people my age have. We joke about retiring. It's like, "What are we doing? Will anyone be able to retire that's not independently wealthy, or just somehow lucky?" It points out the relationship that our society puts on time, too, and not just on the individual.

I think, even now, I am still trying not to equate my productivity with whether it was a successful writing day, or not. I'm trying not to equate my word count to like, "Was I successful as a writer today, or not?" I think a lot of that has to do with the "time is money" equation.

Right.

What you said about the couple in the story "Returning," I think there is this feeling, sometimes, maybe just a lot for millennials, like, "What if I was born in another generation? Can I be part of the generation that has universal healthcare, or whatever? It wouldn't be this hard."

We are starting to understand that it's hard because of the circumstances. It's not necessarily hard because you're not a hard worker, or you didn't do enough. Americans really take it out on themselves.

Another thing that stood out to me in *Bliss Montage* was the one character who is a marketing copywriter. She makes a comment about writing narratives for furniture. I thought it was very poignant in regards to late-stage capitalism.

I know many creative people have to find jobs to pay bills, like we were talking about. Something that stood out to me when I read the furniture copywriter line is how boring that job would be. Like, how fun can you make that? It reminded me of *Severance* as well, when Candace is working the job that she is just kind of drifting through. The reader can tell how much she hates that job. Do you think there's a role that boredom plays in the creative process?

Well, I'm interested in what my boredom tells me when I'm in the middle of a creative project. If I'm bored with it, somehow, I know that something has to change. The physical act of writing, of sitting down every day, staying in the same room, is already boring. The process of putting one word after the other, and then editing and switching things around, is repetitive. The fiction has to make up for it by being exciting.

I think you should listen to what your boredom is telling you about your project.

There was something I used to tell my students, which was that you have to commit to wasting time. I'm not sure if wasting time and boredom are exactly the same thing.

I also feel like my students think that every moment they're working on fiction, everything is going to be used up. Everything they produce, everything they write, is going to be used up in the work. But I've learned that doing anything creative is trial and error. So, you don't actually use a lot of what you produce. I think your mistakes tell you what the thing is supposed to be, or which roads you don't need to take. I always tell my students, "If you're doing it right, then you're wasting time. Just embrace it. Commit to wasting time. Commit to working on one paragraph for two hours."

That's important, too, in our culture and capitalist society. I feel like it's a rebellious act to just focus on one thing for a long period of time.

There's also something I want to say about working a job and doing something creative. I don't think being a creative person and working a job are necessarily opposed to each other. I always tell my students like, "Don't go right from college into an MFA program. Go out into the world."

The stereotype, of course, is of the writer who just comes up with brilliant ideas in a vacuum, enclosed in a room. But you need experiences to draw on. You need to be in the world to observe it, and to observe yourself, who you are.

So, it feels like sometimes working a job and writing are opposed to each other. Both of them take up a lot of time and energy, and it's always a struggle to find that balance. But as a writer, it is very helpful to live the way other people live.

Yeah. Exactly. It's like research, in its own way, I think.

Yeah.

So, we were just talking about how both of your books make astute commentaries on late stage capitalism within our country's culture by portraying alienated narrators, navigating absurd situations. What makes you gravitate towards absurdity in the face of, maybe, disaster or discomfort, if you want to call it that? Do you hold yourself back from absurd ideas ever? Or when you have absurd ideas, do you just run with them?

I think the world is much more absurd than my fiction is. In fact, a lot of the things that I've witnessed, or has happened, if I were to just put something like that in fiction, a reader would say, "That's way too on the nose. That just wouldn't happen."

I think if you're paying attention, the world is just much more absurd than anything that ever happened in *Severance*. The first draft of *Severance* was finished in 2016. It was before Trump was elected. Do you remember the early days when he had a typo in his tweet and we were all like, "Oh, my God?"

And then compared to the end of his term, how outlandish and absolutely fictitious it became. I think there were certain things, before Trump, that if I were to put in fiction, a reader wouldn't accept. I'm not talking about writing about the president. A certain level of absurdity, before Trump, if I put that in fiction, a reader would not accept.

But after Trump, a writer could actually heighten the absurdity in their work and readers would accept it. I think our relationship with absurdity has changed, especially in recent times. Living in the era of AI, fake images, deep fakes, and all of that, it's hard to actually tell what's real anymore. My fiction pales in comparison to the world.

Ling Ma Recommends:

Being online while writing. Going against common wisdom, picking through online detritus only gives me ideas. I avoid social media if I can.

Slime. The algorithm keeps sending me slime asmr videos to watch, and I do whatever the algorithm wants. In my

tbr stack, I also have File Under: Slime, a cultural investigation of goo. ;)

"Vultures" by Jana Hunter. This track takes me back to 2007, but it is also timeless.

Time to Say Goodbye podcast. Interesting discussions with an Asian American perspective.

Five Flights Up And Other New York Apartment Stories. A selection of Toni Schlesinger's "Shelter" column, which ran in the Village Voice from the late 90s into the Aughts, which captured her visits to New Yorkers in their homes.

HarvesTime in Chicago. A grocery store with Eastern European snacks, Amish butter, and impressive pinata and soda selections. It's also near River Park, and you can walk along the water while eating your snacks.

Name

Ling Ma

Vocation

writer

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Anjali Pinto