

On staying open in the present moment

Writer Bud Smith discusses his day job at an oil refinery, publishing a memoir as a thrilling way to get into trouble, and having the courage to call it quits.

November 26, 2018 -

As told to Kristen Felicetti, 3154 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Poetry](#), [Day jobs](#), [Process](#), [Time management](#).

How's work going? I feel your schedule is always shifting. How are things at the oil refinery?

This machine that makes gasoline caught fire, so we are working seven days a week, 12-hour days to fix it. There's a night shift, too. When they come in, we literally hand them our wrenches, then we leave. I don't like my job right now. When it's like this, I can't make art. I get too tired. I stop making art. All I want to do is make art, though. So even when I have time again, I stay nervous that my time will unpredictably be taken away. I probably do most of my creative work under that fear, that threat of oncoming industrial fire, and how I'll get called in to weld something stupid so it works again.

I've read a bunch of your writing, and while some things are definitely fiction, others appear to be a mix of non-fiction and fiction, or ambiguous. But you made a deliberate choice to release *WORK* as a non-fiction book. It's marketed on the back as memoir, and you use everyone's real names. What was the choice behind that?

The thrill of getting in trouble. Memoir is your best chance at getting in trouble. Most of my fiction, like the short story collection *Double Bird*, is surrealist. *WORK* is straight realism. I got drunk on Christmas and asked Adam Robinson if I could write about my job in heavy construction and how it intersects with creativity (for me). He said "yes," and then I had that column ("[Work Safe or Die Trying](#)" on Real Pants) for a year, that's how *WORK* came about. It was just another art project: *What can I say about my weird job? What can I say about my weird family? What can I say about the weird day-to-day fun me and my wife found in the city we lived in?* I'd like to write another memoir called *I Hope I Get Struck By Lightning and My Head Burns Like a Birthday Cake*. And one called, *Delete Tweet*.

Did you ever worry about that being awkward for the people you're writing about, or about offending them?

No. Once you've been around for 35 years or so, there's little you can do to hurt people more than what you've already done to them face-to-face. Besides, the stakes are so low in a book. What? 2,000 people might read this small-press book about how my brother set off fireworks inside the kitchen? When 150,000 people read *WORK*, I feel like I'd owe my brother an apology. We'll both be long dead by then, and I don't believe in an afterlife.

Writing is low stakes. Sure, there might be some embarrassing things about my dad, like the part where my mom admits that she was happy when he fell down the stairs. Nobody knew about that. I didn't go into real detail about my adolescence and growing up, because that wasn't the subject matter of this book. But I'm writing that book, too. That's the book I'll have to apologize for before it comes out. I'll have to let them all read that one, bring 20 copies to Thanksgiving dinner in 2020.

I'm curious about that choice. Obviously the book started as your column, and writing about work. Then you added more things about your childhood, but how did you decide that certain years in your younger life weren't going to come into play as much? When did you decide, "this experience is not going to be in this book."

I wanted to center everything around the idea of actually having to do manual labor or emotional labor, so everything is work. My creative life, my creative work. So early childhood doesn't really fit into that, because there was none of that happening. There was no work yet. When you're a kid, you don't have to work for people. You just play and they let you play, if all goes well, and if you actually have a childhood. In childhood, you don't have to try to get somebody to love you—they already do, it's automatic. You're a little kid. Or you don't have to work to understand someone, you just do understand them, in your innocent kid way. But as you get older, those things get harder and harder and you understand less and less.

You've mentioned that being the theme of the book before—how everything is work. With that in mind, I think you're one of the more prolific people I know. You have a physically tiring day job, but you write a lot and publish a lot. You also go to a lot of literary events, and have good relationships with your wife Rae, family, and friends. Despite this, you don't seem to be neurotic about time management at all. Do you consciously think about how you structure your day?

I stay open with the present. I can't get anything done unless it wants to get done. Like, it has to really be bothering me for it to get done. And "bothering" is not always unpleasant. I do things as I have an itch to do them. Today, we had this itch to do this interview. It just popped up and we were both able to squeeze it into our day. That's how I approach all my creative stuff. I might have a project that's really weighing on me, so I'll want to work on it. I'll just find a way to stay open for it and do it. But for the most part, if there's anything more fun going on than sitting around and working on a writing project, I'm going to do that other thing.

Do you still primarily write a first draft on your phone during your downtime at work?

Yeah, mostly. I don't believe in the rituals of the artist, though. I don't believe there's a shortcut to anything. So the phone isn't a golden ticket. Anything will work. Sometimes a first draft comes out in the downtime at work on a cell phone, and then is edited 60 times on the computer over the course of three years.

It's all just practice, and sticking with it. I ditched all my other hobbies, to make more room to write. I used to exercise and play rock n' roll. I also don't have a lawn to mow, or kids to raise, or a dog to walk. It's not really right to say I'm prolific, I just don't pursue other things. I'm fixated on this one thing, making art, and that's not exactly the most fulfilling life. In my opinion, people are probably better off with a yard, a couple kids, and sixteen dogs.

When you interviewed other writers about their jobs for the Real Pants column, you wrote, "for some reason I can't read enough about the crappy jobs artists have worked." What is so fascinating about reading that? Do we just want to know how other artists are making it work?

I just heard Bon Jovi on the radio playing up the working-class roots thing. His mom was a Playboy Bunny and his dad was a hairdresser. I'd like to interview Bon Jovi's mom and dad; I don't like him very much. See, they sound interesting. I've had to hear about him and Bruce Springsteen my whole life. Springsteen I like more. But he does the same thing. People love that salt-of-the-earth working class stuff. How old was Bruce Springsteen when he got his record deal? 19 or something? I just thought it was more interesting to ask writers what kinds of jobs they've had because then you could get them to talk shit about something. If you talk about books, everybody is just nice as pie and that's boring. I had a deadline for that column, a post every Tuesday at 11am. And that deadline drove those interviews. That deadline drove the project itself.

Did you like having that kind of deadline?

I loved it. It wasn't my idea, though.

That's a different way to work than what you were talking about before, which is write when you're feeling like it.

I don't believe in methods. Life is a mess and what works now may never work again. But I heard a quote the other day someone was talking about. Raymond Chandler. I'm not some big Raymond Chandler fan, but he said writing would get harder for him when he would write slow, because it felt like he was doing the pushing. But when he would write fast, it was like he was being pulled by the work. That's the way a deadline is for me. Writing fast. Editing fast. Making things happen. I'm not a cautious writer, and you can see all my mistakes, but I also hope you can feel those mistakes too, and that they mean something.

Early in *WORK*, you talk about how sometimes people you meet at literary events will be surprised to learn what your job is. They'll say things like, "It's cool that you work a real job, working with your hands," or ask about your coworkers. Do you find that condescending to some degree, or not at all?

I don't find it condescending. The average creative person doesn't have the job I have. And I could see why they could wonder, "What's going on with this person? What's the gimmick or what's behind this?" That's like, there used to be this writer and every photo I saw of them, they were in a cowboy hat, and really pushing the cowboy thing. Whenever I feel like a total dumbass, I just let out a sigh of relief that I don't have to pretend I'm a cowboy to get people to read my books.

Plus, every writer has different types of jobs they hold while they try to make art, especially in New York City. Everything from the office day job, to teaching, to waitressing, to various weird things.

We're all doing different things. I go to a literary event and it's not *Bright Lights, Big City*. Everybody's not high on cocaine and rich. Everybody's broke. Living paycheck to paycheck, the clock is ticking down to when they have to move away from this place.

What is your process when you think about how to edit and structure a book like *WORK*? It's not chronological; it's very short chapters of experiences or anecdotes. How do you figure out what's going first, last, etc?

All my books so far have been written out-of-sorts. I start whenever, and I'm not too sure what's the beginning and end—just like with life. Your true beginning is the day you were born, but who remembers that? Your true end is the day you die. Good luck getting your death in your memory bank.

Eventually, editing happens once I run out of steam, once I surrender. I've had luck thinking of my books as playlists/mixtapes and just sequencing them by feel. Print it out, read it, and then not be afraid to move things around. Delete big chunks of things that don't fit. When you move things around, you make room for whatever comes in at the 11th hour. Those 11th-hour, left-field pieces of the puzzle, those are the ones that make the project, but you've got to be completely open to the idea that you could fuck it all up, and not care, because fucked-up art with rough edges is what I want. I couldn't teach anyone how to write a book. Maybe it's just... don't hate yourself for as long as possible while typing as fast as you can.

What are some things that inspired *WORK*, or other recent writing of yours? You memorably mentioned *Seinfeld* on the podcast *Otherppl with Brad Listi*.

Larry David writes everything a little rotten, but everything is still a beauty, too. So that kind of infected me at a young age, that way of writing. That whole year of writing these pieces and continuing to write them was a huge year of music and art for me. I kept going on these trips to see the artist Ileen Kaplan who lives up by Ithaca New York, by Seneca Lake. I would just go up there and I would usually buy a painting from her. I was so inspired by her paintings. I write about her in the book. She was a big influence on my mood that year.

It seems from the book that you're inspired by her work, but also her mode of living?

Yeah, completely. I would go and see Ileen and her husband Michael Maxwell, and they live like sponges for art.

You go to their house and every wall is books and paintings, and there are guitars everywhere. So it's very inspiring. I was really into Chad VanGaalen, too. I was listening to his album constantly. He's one of those musicians who is a prolific artist, too. He's always drawing. He draws his own music videos. He draws his own album artwork.

Anything else?

I became really good friends with Joey Grantham during the year. He's 23 years old and I'm 35. He has all these recommendations of books to read and albums to listen to and movies to watch. Things that were under my radar from a different generation. There have been so many things that I've discovered through him. Like, I read a bunch of titles from *The New York Review of Books* that really influenced me. But also just different albums, different movies. He edited *Double Bird*, too. My collection of stories out from Maudlin House. It's most important to find yourself in what you are making, but also to find your people whoever they are, and put them in what you make.

It's funny that you mention age. We talked about being surprised to learn what type of day jobs people might do, but I also feel that way about age. In New York or in any creative community, sometimes I literally just perceive everyone from age 20 to 40 as the same age.

Yeah, it's true and it seems like a lot of people who are in the small-press world, they'll do it for a certain amount of time. There's a clock ticking down on that, too. Somebody can be 35 and just getting into it and I'll think, "Oh, I'll see you until you're 45." Then you might not be into this anymore. The course will have been run, whether you're a writer trying to move on to bigger or better things, or you just get burned out by all of it. You might have 10 years of hanging out in this scene, or this small-press world. Then something's going to happen to you. I get inspired when people have the guts to quit things. Walking away, however you do it, is outrageously triumphant.

Do you think about futures like that for yourself? Like whether maybe one day you just won't be interested in this anymore, and you'll want to do something else?

Oh, totally. I think about that stuff a lot, because I used to be obsessed with other forms of art. When I was a kid, every day when I would come home from school, I would draw. I was going to be a cartoonist or something. And then one day I just didn't want to draw anymore. And then I got a little older and I got obsessed with the guitar for like, six years. I played the guitar every day. I wrote songs on the guitar and I played in a band. And that's all I cared about. And then one day I was just like, "I'm not into it anymore. I don't care about the guitar at all, or playing or writing music." So I think that could happen with writing at any time. And that's fine with me, it doesn't really matter.

Bud Smith recommends:

A thing that's been important to me lately are the novels and short story collections of Tove Jansson. *Fair Play* is the one I keep thinking about. She is an introverted Scandinavian who is obsessed with things like the forest floor and sea birds, and she's not always kind to people. A lot of her dialogue is fights, or straight-up rudeness... and she's never sentimental. As I'm writing about my own life, I'm trying as hard as I can to be unsentimental about it all. Nobody is better at that than Tove Jansson.

Another thing that's important to this project is rain-outs. That's when it rains like crazy and they call off my day job and send me home without pay. No better writing gets done than rainy day rain-out writing without pay.

The record player is crucial, too. Not because it sounds better or anything like that. It's because every 22 minutes I'm forced to get up out of this chair and fix the needle back to the beginning. The interruption of having to get out of the chair makes me work faster, because there's this frantic energy in things, and since it's easier to put the needle back at the beginning of the record rather than flip it, I always wind up listening to side B of whatever over and over through almost the whole writing session. A record kind of keeps you in check. I don't like to write to endless Spotify playlists. I like to write to side B of whatever, forever.

This one is a two-for-one. I had a formica desk for years and years. \$40 from Walmart in 1996. It finally fell apart, and I was planning on buying a new desk to replace it. Rae and I were carrying the formica desk out to the

curb on bulk-trash day when, of course, there at the curb was this giant bamboo desk. It's like an executive bamboo desk. So we dropped the formica desk off and hauled the bamboo desk inside the apartment. It's been good for my writing these last few weeks, because it's big enough where I have almost two feet of space behind my laptop and I can lean this cork-mounted map of the United States against the wall. I'm not what I'd call a patriotic person, but I write about America and Americans a lot. It helps so much when writing to look at the towns and rivers and the landscape of this place. I'm from New Jersey and I write about New Jersey, but it feels so good to write about other places. Maybe I'll get lucky and find a bigger desk and be able to fit a map of the whole world.

Name

Bud Smith

Vocation

Writer

