

On reevaluating your benchmark for success



Author, editor, and professor Alexander Chee on pursuing pitches even if they don't get picked up, pivoting between projects to avoid feeling stuck, and finding beauty in discomfort.

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As told to Sara Tardiff , 1790 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#), [Education](#).

Tell me about the last time you felt in a state of flow while writing. Describe the setting, time of day, what you were working on.

It was this morning. I'm working on a new novel and I was in my writer's cabin behind the house I live in. I have a single long green wooden desk that I picked in part because it has no drawers. I just bring in what I need with me and that's all. I want my writing space to always be kind of a blank slate. Mostly because my office space at Dartmouth is sort of overcome with books.

It's a rainy day in Vermont. The gloomier weather helps me drop into a flow-like state. I'm teaching during the semester and balancing a few projects, so it's been busy. But I worked on a couple pages of my novel today and I felt like I really got somewhere.

Do you have a specific writing schedule?

I'd like to stick to more of a schedule. I tend to write whenever I can make the time, but it's usually not as fruitful that way. I always kind of want to make sure everyone else is okay before I work on my own stuff. I'm the breakfast cook for myself and my husband. Left to his own devices, he won't eat until the afternoon—and he'll just sort of be eating cold hot dogs out of the fridge.

I had a writing mentor, Kit Reed, who passed away a few years ago. She kept a really hard and fast schedule. Every morning she wrote and she did nothing else. No one was allowed to interrupt her. Then, when the time came, she'd tend to everything else in her life: teaching, caring for her kids, what have you. But every morning, five days a week, that was for her. She wrote over 20 books—and she had four children and a legion of students. So, it worked.

What's a project that you've abandoned or stepped away from recently?

This year has been interesting, because I've actually come back to a number of projects that I've stepped away from over the years. I somewhat recently found a novel that I had completely forgotten that I wrote. So much so, that I sat down to work and thought, *it's finally time to make those stories I wrote in the '90s into a novel*. And then I found a manuscript where I'd already done that!

Do you typically work on several books at any given time?

I do move around between them. Currently I'm dipping in and out of two novels that are very different in terms of their aesthetics and their subject matter, they do have some overlapping research. When I do work on several things at once, if I do get stuck, I'm never *totally* stuck. If I feel cornered, I can just move over there until I'm ready to come back.

At some point, a book does demand all of your attention in order to get done. With my most recent book, an essay collection called *How To Write An Autobiographical Novel*, those are essays that I wrote over the course of 25 years. Some of those essays have been finished and in my files for a very long time—and that's because, you know, there have been instances where I go to pitch them and they haven't been accepted, but I decided to finish them on my own. Just because a pitch doesn't go anywhere, doesn't mean you shouldn't write it.

When you're working on an essay, how do you approach it? Do you outline, do you do a lot of initial research, or do you just kind of dive in?

I'm realizing that word processing software can ruin your life. It can make an essay feel constantly revisable. Instead of a series of checkpoints—this is a draft, this is when I send it for edits—it sort of makes a story feel endlessly perfectable. If you ever see a writer on tour, you may notice they have a copy of their book that they read from that is completely marked up. They may or may not ever enter those changes to some further addition of the book, but they're still theoretically making marks. So, I guess my process feels less prescriptive than it maybe was in the past.

You're the guest editor of *The Best American Essays of 2022*, an anthology that has been edited by such prolific writers as Susan Sontag, Jamaica Kincaid, and Hilton Als. How do you approach a project with such high stakes and expectations from becoming a myth of itself? How do you get a grasp on such a daunting project and see it through?

You know, that's something I tried to get at in the introduction. At first, I was really excited. I was like, *this is a dream, this is something I've wanted to do my whole writing life*. The series is about as old as my career! The first edition appeared in 1986 and was edited by Elizabeth Hardwick. Obviously the legendary names associated with it...it would be pretty easy to get spooked. Like, who am I to be a part of that? But I took it upon myself to read the introductions of previous anthologies I've loved, as well as essays that I've loved, as a way to revisit my own education as a writer. And that's when I felt like, *I know what I'm doing here. I have a sense of what I'm looking for*.

And what were you looking for?

I'm always looking for writing that shows me signs of possibility for myself as a writer. It's always a little selfish, if not a *lot* selfish. I'm always looking to be amazed, to be thrilled, to be moved, to be disturbed.

Sometimes, part of the power of an essay, is its ability to make you uncomfortable. There are essays I chose that pushed me to think about a topic or pushed me to accommodate some idea that I had never considered. In some cases it just pushed me. Like, there's an essay about a botched circumcision. At times, it creates such profound discomfort to read. The ways the writer conjures the physical agony and embarrassment and personal devastation of that moment in their life. I realized that this was precisely the sort of essay that should be in the anthology. This is the kind of essay you only get to write once in your whole life, because you may never experience anything like that again.

I also started to think about "serious writing" beyond pain, about the *other* things, and how one moves towards that kind of work. So I tried to find writing that looked more closely at pleasure, love, self-indulgence, humor. I appreciate now, as I find myself on the other side of this process, all of the different possibilities I found for myself as a writer along the way.

In the book's introduction, you also wrote about how during COVID-19, it became almost impossible to read books in their entirety and that writing didn't always feel useful. Has your relationship to reading and writing changed much since you wrote the intro?

I've become more aware of the need that I have for a smaller world. At times, although it's good to be involved in the world at large and to speak out about things that you care about, sometimes your world just needs to be your house, your family, your work.

While isolating, social media was often the way that I was interacting with people who were not in my house. So that meant constantly being exposed to news of violence and just an overload of information. I had like 300 open tabs on my phone—which I keep open, to remind me of how busy my mind was. It being so difficult to get to doctors or doctors fundraising for surgical gear to care for COVID patients. I look back at them now and I use them to understand the present moment.

You wrote, "One of my journal entries from that time consisted of just the date."

There was ongoing discourse between the writers who believe you think in sentences or think in images and sounds. I'm not on either side, but I did understand that the screenshots and photos I was taking at that time, were a kind of diary. I did find audiobooks to be life savers. *Dancer for a Dance*, which is by Andrew Holland, it's a classic novel of a gay man working in the 1970s and it's completely outrageous—the voice actor does such an incredible job with it. I'd never really been an audiobook person, but it did become a way to survive all this isolation. I sometimes listen on a walk, but I often listen on the treadmill or I'll watch K-dramas.

How has your understanding of both failure and success shifted over the course of your career?

It's interesting to have achieved a number of the dreams I had as a young person, and then think, *well, what now?* But it's also important to ask, *Was it worth it? Was the dream a good dream? Did I have any business dreaming about it? Could I have done something else or gone in a different direction?*

I had my mid-life crisis a bit early, in like my late 30s. I got it out of the way, moved to Los Angeles. You asked earlier about projects I've walked away from. In a way, I feel like I've just been procrastinating on failure [laughs].

I've let go of a lot of the professional benchmarks I used to have to measure success or failure—because I probably know too much about the inner workings of those various institutions. When I do think of success now, it's related to how creative I feel, how free I am to make what I want to make, to teach the way I want to teach, and to live happily.

Alexander Chee Recommends:

The Italian Invert, a collection of letters sent by a young gay Italian man to Emile Zola, with the hope that Zola might finally write about gay men—and it seems he did, in *The Debacle*.

It is cashmere sweatpants season again here in VT, and it lasts from September to May.

Rereading Chris Adrian's novel *The Children's Hospital* for the fourth time.

I always love a breakfast sandwich but especially the Phineas at Still North Books.

Monthly donations to my local Planned Parenthood, food bank, and mutual aid society.

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Vocation

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