

On writing as an act of discovery



Author and illustrator Jonny Sun on seeking early feedback, writing as archeology, and pressuring himself to make “productive” use of his downtime.

June 23, 2021 -

As told to Christina Lee, 2349 words.

Tags: Writing, Illustration, Identity, Process, Mental health, Time management.

In [Goodbye, Again's] acknowledgements you thank the Asian Students' Alliance of Vassar College for being the first group to hear what became the opening essay, "Moving." Tell me about that visit in 2018 and how 'Moving' was this floating idea before the book came about.

That was one of the first talks that I was invited to give at a college. I remember it really clearly because my first book [everyone's a aliebn when ur a aliebn too] just came out, when I was invited to visit Vassar and speak to the students there, I felt very at ease. It was also one of the first times I spoke directly to a group of Asian American students. It felt like when I'd talk to a group of peers, and it made me feel really at home and connected in a way that I hadn't felt in a very long time. And it was actually a spur-of-the-moment thing. I was giving my presentation about my work and how the first book came to be, and I mentioned that I was working on writing stuff, but I didn't really know what it was. I had just written this piece, and I think someone asked me to share it, or maybe I felt compelled to be like, "All right. Yeah, let's give this a shot," because it was at the very top of my mind.

At the time it was a couple of paragraphs, and I was considering it as almost a prose poem. The response was very... it was quiet. Everyone was silent when I was reading it, which I felt was the attentive silence. It felt really good, and I was like, "Maybe I'll keep noodling on this." Maybe there's something that compelled me to read it in the space to this group, and also something that compels me to continue thinking about it.

But really, I was trying to figure out what to write next, and I was in this space where I didn't know if I would do another book. I was in the middle of my PhD exams as well, and so I wasn't really thinking about anything outside of the PhD exams. I found myself writing these little thoughts and asides, just for me to either work out things or to remember things. If I had thought of something that I wanted to keep some record of, I would write that down. Eventually that became this ongoing project, which ended up being around 200 or 300 little notes on my phone. That was the raw material that I started crafting this book [Goodbye, Again] out of.

You talk [in Goodbye, Again's foreword] about these 200 to 300 notes on your phone as part of this intentionally unproductive time. But you also talk about how otherwise, if you hadn't documented anything, this time wouldn't have been considered "worth it." Why would that have not felt "worth it"?

It's something I'm still trying to work out because it is a deep tension within myself, a deep contradiction that I'm still trying to work my way around. I was attempting to wrestle with that and understand that contradiction a little more clearly, because I really was trying to create more space and more downtime. I needed it because that was a period of my life where I was constantly working and felt very burned out. But as soon as I started feeling like I got some rest, my brain was like, "Now that you feel rested, here's space to do a little more." "Now that

you've created a little bit more space in your brain and your schedule, you have to do something with it or else it wouldn't feel fully productive."

I'm under this pressure all the time—to constantly be working, doing something productive, or making stuff, which I feel like a lot of people also feel. I feel like it's a product of living under this capitalistic culture that I've been trying to work my way around. But then the contradiction is that by writing about trying to shake it, I've also created a new product that I can show for my work of trying to deal with it. And so it feels like I haven't fully escaped it. I don't know how possible it is to fully escape that because it feels very much like that is part of the culture, of the society we're all in. It's a survival thing, that we have to be producing.

This feels like a little bit of a tangent, but my issue with a lot of things that talk about work-life balance and how to create more rest comes from an individual mindset of, "You just have to change your actions, and your life can be better." I fundamentally disagree with that, because that sort of advice and message ignores the fact that we're under the system. That we're being forced into it, we're being forced to survive. If we're constantly being pressured to produce and to make, because that's tied to our ability to live and survive, no amount of individual change is going to change those structures that are forcing you to live under that system.

One of *Goodbye, Again's* essays, "Building Blocks" [comparing work to *Tetris*, where with every complete row "you lose proof that you did anything at all"]—that's where I groaned out of recognition. How do you avoid that feeling of emptiness with looking at a blank screen again, where these accomplishments actually feel like they're amounting to something tangible?

Because I wrote that essay, I don't know if I'm the right person to have an answer to that. It does feel like that is something I'm still dealing with. I thought by writing that out, I'd externalize that and get that feeling out of me. I'd be able to point to that and be like, "Ah, I know this feeling. I'm going to try to figure out how to think my way around it." I thought that by putting words to it, at least I could identify that feeling, and I think I did. But at the same time it feels like I'm in that space again with [*Goodbye, Again*] coming out. It's cool that I get to put my name on it, but it feels like some past version of me that I no longer am, did this. Now, again, I am facing this blank screen of what to do next. So yeah, I'm not sure how to really reckon with that.

It's related to that feeling of constantly needing to work on something or constantly needing something to fill your plate. I don't know if I would say how we're pressured to define ourselves by our work, or how we do define ourselves by our work, but there's some relationship between how I personally identify who I am at the moment, to the stuff that I'm working on. I'm trying to work my way around that, but it feels like a deeply ingrained thing that's very difficult to slowly undo.

After looking at all these small moments, what happens from there? How does it all then start to turn into a book? I can only imagine it being daunting.

I know what you mean. I learned a lot about how to structure this book from my first book, *everyone's a aliebn*, because even though it's a very different type of book and a different type of writing and a different story, there was almost a sandbox to play with in terms of how to structure multiple, parallel, ongoing conversations. With the first book, the idea was to take something that resembled a kid's book's narrative. A *Winnie-the-Pooh* type thing, where Christopher Robin talks to one animal and there's a story about him and the owl, and then there's another chapter about him and Winnie the Pooh, and another chapter about him and Piglet or whatever.

But instead of isolating each story to an enclosed chapter, with *everyone's a aliebn* I wanted to sort of switch between 10 chapters at once. You're reading a line from one chapter. Then you're jumping over to a line from another chapter. Then you're jumping back to that first chapter. Then you're jumping to a third chapter. I saw that almost as an experiment with how we understand social media. I noticed that my brain works differently when it's on Twitter or Instagram. Here's a ton of people that I follow. I sort of keep them all in my head, so I'm constantly aware of where they are in their lives, what they're working on, and what they're going through. I get all these interspersed updates from everyone at the same time, and it's up to you to parse out and pick out the narratives. Then you see the sometimes fun, sometimes tragic common scenes or events that pull everyone together

and resonate between more people.

All of that is to say that with *Goodbye, Again*, a lot of the excitement was to craft that feeling again. To tease out four or five main topics or themes that I was constantly circling around, to bring all these themes in conversation with each other, but also to figure out how to weave and jump between a couple of meanings, questions or ideas through the book. That wasn't a top-down intention. That's how it just came about, because I realized that I was writing all these scattered ideas and collecting all these thoughts.

Taking that raw material and focusing it into a book was really going through it, doing archeology on my own notes, and trying to really parse out what those common themes that kept coming up.

So when doing this archeology, was there any one observation or overall behavior that surprised you? Sometimes when I look back at what I write, I get caught off guard by the intensity of the emotion or something I'd forgotten or compartmentalized.

The entire process of writing for me is a surprising one. Especially in the writing that went into [*Goodbye, Again*], I was musing as a way to focus my thoughts and to work stuff out. I feel like sometimes I'll sit down and have an idea or an image of how to get from a beginning to a middle to an end, and I'll have an idea of what the conclusion is. But with a lot of this writing, it was a lot of, here's something I want to try to noodle on, and the writing is the process of discovering. Then, once I figure out the thing I want to say, I'll go back and try to edit what I'd written so that it makes more sense. The process of discovery is baked into the writing to begin with.

But I think really, what surprised me—and it seemed like I hadn't really thought I wanted to write about—was about the stuff you inherit from other people, I guess is a good way to put it. I ended up writing about these traits that I feel like I picked up from my parents, my brother, my wife, and my friends. I intentionally wanted to focus very much on the personal and the specific, having emotional specificity in terms of the stuff that I'm trying to put into words. But the more I looked at myself and my own traits, the more I realized, "Oh, all that stuff feels like it's resonant with what I observe in people that I love." The more I looked at my own traits, the more I realized that they are reflections of other people, things that I picked up from or noticed in other people.

I have a piece written in the form of a bunch of recipes for eggs, called "How to cook scrambled eggs." It's really me thinking about my own personal history with the humble egg and trying to understand my memories around it. In this piece I write about different methods of cooking eggs as I remember them, and I try to piece them together in my own personal history. A lot of them are about thinking about how my parents cooked eggs when I was a kid and how that has weird resonances into the future.

Near the beginning, I talk about how I learned how to soft-boil eggs as an adult because we never soft-boiled eggs, as in my family when we were growing up. But when I crack a soft-boiled egg, I use the back of a spoon until I gently tap all around the shell to crack it and then to peel it. I did this in front of my wife once, and she was like, "That's not... Where did you learn to do that?" I assumed that's how everyone would do it, but apparently not.

As I was reading this I remembered my dad telling me how to cook eggs, which was something that he and my mom made a lot when I was a kid growing up. He was explaining the process of a tea egg. The way you make sure that a tea egg cooks properly is, you have to boil an egg and then crack the shell with the back of a spoon all the way around, but being careful not to break the shell. That was the connecting line between memory and past and present, and the idea that it's the stuff you don't even notice that influences the little things about who you are now.

Jonny Sun Recommends:

The Book of Delights by Ross Gay

Ongoingness: The End of a Diary by Sarah Manguso

100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write by Sarah Ruhl

Ocean Vuong's closing remarks at the NYU A/P/A Institute in October 2019

A nice fountain pen with red ink for editing (I like ystudio and Kaweco pens a lot)

Name

Jonny Sun

Vocation

Author, illustrator, screenwriter

□

Rozette Rago