On the importance of focused time

Writer and musician Madelaine Lucas discusses developing your voice, writing every day, and how the story reveals itself.

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As told to Cara Blue Adams, 2668 words.

Tags: Music, Writing, Mental health, Success, Education.

Could you walk us through your writing practice?

I'm most productive in the mornings before I'm awake enough to start second-guessing myself, so I try to get to my desk as soon as possible on the days I write. My routine has changed a little bit over the last few years since getting my dog. Before, I used to wake up and go to the desk straight away. Now, my husband and I take Pancho to the dog park first, but I try and push off doing everything else that I can until after I get my writing hours in. Taking a shower, exercise, responding to emails, all of that can happen later in the day.

Another thing that I've learned is that I don't work well if I have a whole day to write. For me, it's much more about touching the work every day. That focused time is so much more important than having hours and hours to spend.

Sometimes you can get lost in all of that time.

Yes. Exactly. When I would try and write all day I'd often end up ruining what I'd done in the morning by overthinking it in the afternoon and then have to go back and fix it again the next day. Now my process is much more about slow and steady work.

You grew up in Australia, and both of your parents were artists: your mother is a painter and your father a musician. You are also a songwriter and a musician; you started recording and performing music in your late teens. How did that inform your turn toward fiction writing?

Growing up, my parents made me feel like a fellow artist, even as a child. Creativity wasn't just encouraged, it was normalized, and so I think it was only natural that I would find ways to express myself in that environment.

My father would sing to me every night, and he would also read to me before I went to sleep. What I learned from that is that writing is also a kind of performance. In some ways, I don't think of my writing and music as being separate pursuits. I've always felt that my songs and my stories came from the same emotional place. That said, my music was much more about pure self-expression, and when I began to write fiction, the biggest challenge was facing all these questions about narrative and plot and character. You can get away with being much more abstract in a song.

What has being a musician taught you about finding an audience and building a career?

When my first book came out earlier this year, it seemed like there was a purpose to all of those years I spent visiting community radio stations and giving local press interviews when I was playing in bands. It gave me a comfort level with that kind of publicity activity that perhaps a lot of writers don't come to naturally. Because of my music background, I see the promotion of my work as being part of my job. It's easy to be cynical about publicity and "building an audience" but I really think that it's also an opportunity to meet other minds and have conversations like this with other creative people. Genuine points of connection *can* come through that experience.

What did you study as an undergraduate?

I originally enrolled as a journalism student. I was not shy, but the form of journalism that they were teaching seemed quite aggressive to me. If I had been able to read people like Joan Didion, who talked about how being quiet or accommodating could actually be a way to get the story… I don't know. But all this is to say that I'm a journalism dropout. After a semester, I switched into what my university in Sydney called Writing and Cultural Studies. It was the closest thing we had to a creative writing degree.

In your 20s, you decided to come to New York and to earn a graduate degree in creative writing at Columbia. What was that like?

It was mainly just really exciting. It was something that I always wanted to do but didn't think would ever be possible for me, so I was sort of pinching myself the whole time. Having had to come such a long way from Australia, and being on a scholarship, also made me conscious of not taking the opportunity for granted. I came into the MFA with a desire to make work and have something to show for it. I couldn't be blasé. I was determined to make it a positive, generative experience.

What was the process of writing your novel like? It began as a short story, and I'm curious as to how it evolved into a longer work.

I wrote the original short story in the last year of my undergraduate degree, when I was still in Sydney. At the time, I was satisfied with it as it was. The three main characters in the novel are the narrator; her older boyfriend, Jude; and their dog, King, and they were there from the very beginning. After I moved to New York, I kept finding myself wanting to go back to that story. I'm not sure what it was, but it felt like there was more to say about those people, about their relationship. I just kept finding myself drawn back there.

As you know, I'm a big fan of linked short story collections like *Cities I've Never Lived In* by Sara Majka, Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, and Alice Munroe's *Runaway*. I had my heart set on making a book like that. I wrote more stories over the years when I was doing my MFA, but I was trying to tie everything up too neatly into these little parcels, almost. I was using the form to let myself pivot out of moments of tension rather than forcing myself to stay in a scene and linger in those moments of discomfort.

I had maybe four stories when I realized that there was one arc, which followed the course of this relationship. I was very intimidated by the form of the novel. I came to writing as someone that loved short fiction. That's mainly what I read. I have such a high respect for the short story as an art form, but I also think that I felt like I wasn't capable of making a longer work. That I didn't have the stamina for it or was maybe second-guessing myself, like, Do I have enough to say? I had to find my way into the novel almost sideways.

And when did you realize?

It was after I finished the MFA. I was working on short stories that whole time. And then in my third year when I was a teaching fellow and I was working on my thesis, I started again from the beginning with the intention of writing a novel. I don't know if I could have seen that possibility while I was in the middle of that workshop process of having to turn in work in such quick succession. In the space of the MFA, I had this very fixed idea of the project that I was making. Once I got some distance from that, that urgency went away and I could find a form that felt more intuitive to me.

The feedback that you get in an MFA program can be so valuable, but there's also a certain point where you need to be alone with the work and learn to trust your own vision. Now I'm pretty careful about who I share my writing with in those early stages, and when, because I can get very confused by having too many voices in my head.

So who are your early readers now? Who do you share the work with?

Really only Robert, my husband. He reads everything that I write. Before I wrote the novel and I was still figuring out my process, I would show him bits and pieces a lot earlier because I had such a strong desire for validation and needed the encouragement. I trust his mind as a reader and he knows me so well, so he understands what I'm trying to do and where I'm coming from, even if the work is rough. Now I try and wait until I have a finished draft before giving it to him. Mainly for his benefit, because it's less chaotic than seeing three different disjointed paragraphs, but I think I've also grown more confident in my own judgement of what's working and what isn't. These days I'll share it with him and my agent and really that's all.

And what does the editing or revision process look like for you?

For me, all writing is very much rewriting and with my fiction, I can get obsessive about revising things down to the sentence level. When I was in grad school, I was lucky enough to study with Deborah Eisenberg, and she told us about how, in the days of typewriters, if you wanted to make a change in a story, you would have to go back and retype everything again from the beginning, but in the process you would inevitably change other little things along the way. That might be how I first came to this way of working, where I literally retype paragraphs from the previous day from a printed, marked-up draft before I lay down any new material. Sometimes those paragraphs will stay the same, but more often than not I'll make additional little tweaks and refinements. It also helps me warm up, get back into the rhythm and the voice of what I'm working on. It's almost like practicing scales on an instrument.

Are there any writing habits or tendencies that you have to work against?

I'm trying to learn when to leave things alone, when you've gotten them as good as they can be on a sentence level, on a book level.

There was a version of *Thirst for Salt* that I edited with too much of a heavy hand and ended up stepping on a lot of the mystery and ambiguity because I was afraid of letting any ugliness into the prose. I wanted it to be really chiseled and neat and perfect. Part of that might've been coming from a background in short fiction, because a short story is a little bit more contained. I thought if I applied that same sensibility to a novel, then wouldn't the novel then be perfect? But it didn't work that way.

If I remember correctly, you mentioned that Robert said a novel "needs a little fat."

Yes, exactly. I love works that are very slim and fragmentary but that's a different kind of shape to work with than a more traditional novel. In a more traditional novel, I think you need to allow the reader a bit of breathing room. Otherwise, it would be like an album where every song was a single. Those albums exist and they can be great but I feel like a novel is more like a concept album. You need to have an instrumental song in the middle just to give people a break.

How do you think about plot and momentum?

I joke with other writer friends that I'm part of the school of "no plot, all vibes." So, a part of me wants to say I don't care about plot, but I also don't know if that's true. What I'm really interested in is story, and I think of them as being separate things. When I think of plot, I think of series of dramatic events. When I think of story, I think of something larger and more difficult to pin down. It's easier for me to think, "What's the story of these two people?" than "What's the plot of this novel?" In my head, a plot always seems to involve these big cataclysmic events, but that doesn't often feel true to the day-to-day experience of being alive. Yes, our lives are marked by turning points, but the day-to-day shifts of feeling are a lot more subtle. Given the

right attention, the small choices we make can be as revealing as the big ones.

More than plot, I think about revelation. What will this piece of writing reveal to a reader? What kind of intimacy will they get from spending time with these people?

What is your reading practice like? What do you value in fiction?

When I'm working on a specific project, I try to read in the vein of what I'm trying to make. I've heard people say that they don't want to read while they're writing because they're afraid of being influenced, but I want to be influenced. I want to invite that in and I enjoy that sense of porousness.

In terms of what I value in fiction, it's a certain kind of voice that draws me in: a voice that seems to promise intimacy. Having worked for *NOON* for eight years now, attention to language and sentence-level writing are also very important to me, but there has to be a sense that there is skin in the game.

How do you define success?

For me, what I am aiming for the most is to just be able to continue to write and continue to live.

In artistic terms, success to me means feeling like I've expressed something in the truest way possible and that I haven't compromised on that for reasons that are outside of the art itself, that I've made the thing that I wanted to make.

How do you replenish your energy and enthusiasm for writing?

One of the strange things about publishing your first book is that your writing becomes public in a new way. You meet all different kinds of reactions to it, which can be equally exciting and disorientating, and in the short term that can feel like it changes the stakes of what you're doing or the reasons why you do it. As any writer knows, there's no instant validation in the writing process, but when you're at the height of the publicity cycle and you're getting reviews or you're doing interviews, or seeing people posting about your book on Instagram, it's easy to get addicted to the rush of feedback.

I wasn't really expecting that to get into my head in the way that it did, so as things settle, this time has been about reclaiming writing for myself as something that I have always loved to do and trying to let the noise of the rest of it fade away. For me, that looks like reading for pleasure and not for work. Just being more intuitive about it. Spending time in nature. Spending time with my family and with my dog. Doing all of those things that are good for you anyway. Taking breaks from being online. Trying to get back to that slower, quieter place.

Madelaine Lucas recommends:

NOON, the annual journal of literary and visual art founded by Diane Williams in 2000, and where I have been fortunate to work as an editor for the past eight years.

The New Yorker Fiction podcast, where writers read their favorite stories published in the magazine by other writers. I discovered some of my favorites this way, like "Emergency" by Denis Johnson and "Dog Heaven" by Stephanie Vaughn (both read by Tobias Wolff). There's a beautiful generosity to the way the guests talk about the stories that have meant something to them.

Making friends outside of your own generation.

Joni Mitchell playing "Coyote" at Gordon Lightfoot's house while on tour with Bob Dylan and the Rolling Thunder Revue.

Beach towns in the off-season.

Name

Madelaine Lucas

Vocation

Author and musician