

On maintaining creative control

Author and recording artist Adam Gnade discusses the value of recommendations from friends, reading more to write better, and collaborating with people you trust.

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As told to Madeline Howard, 2477 words.

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You publish with indie presses. What are the benefits of working with independent publishers when publishing work?

You get way more money per copy sold. I'm able to make a living off my books, even though I'm on an indie press. Most people I know that work with major publishers have yet to be paid for their books because there's so many middlemen and expenses, and they don't make any money. Making a living is a big part of it, because I don't want to work a job besides this. Writing takes up all my time.

And beyond that, you get creative control with independent presses. For instance, if one of the people that I'm working with tells me they think something should be changed, it's coming from someone I trust. I know these people and I've worked with them. I don't want anyone that I don't trust and love telling me what to do, because they're probably not going to understand me or be as invested in what I'm doing.

The negatives are not getting as much mainstream press, like in magazines, but I feel like I'm doing fine. My thing is this: When I'm dead, the major publishers can pick up my books and that's fine. But for now, while I'm alive, and I have control of my faculties and my choices, I'm going to work with friends.

You've said before that, through your books and audio recordings, you want to tell a "personal history of America." What makes this important to you?

I first put it all together a long time ago, before I had a book published. I was working on my first book, I had my first audio record out, and I was on tour. I was going back and forth, because I was doing these things that they called "talking songs," which are audio recordings of writing, and I was doing books. I was like, "Should I quit and be a person who does audio, or should I just do books?"

I was in bed beating myself up, hating myself, and it hit me: I needed to combine the two mediums, mesh the plot lines, and have it be one giant connected universe. Now, all my books and audio recordings are part of one world. If you spend time with them, you'll start seeing the same characters pop up. The idea is all the books and tapes should be read as one chapter of a giant, larger book. I'm going to write until I'm not alive anymore, and then everything can be seen as a big saga. Or one giant mixtape.

The main throughline is that all my life I've been looking for safety, or the feeling of being safe, not just physically but emotionally. The big storyline in those books is a search for safety, looking for something that makes you feel like you're protected, like you're inside a big castle wall. That'll probably change as I get older and come up with new ideas, but life has just seemed like tragedy after tragedy for the past few years. I personally am looking for a little rest, and to not be so beaten in the face all the time by existence.

Who taught you how to write?

I've never had any teachers or mentors that were fundamental in my education. I learned to write by writing a lot, and writing really bad, stupid shit, failing, and having people hate what I do. I've also learned how to write by reading. I read a ton, and I think that's the best way. That's kind of an obvious thing to say, but it's just like any animal. A dog learns how to be a hunter by watching another dog.

What should an artist do if their tastes don't match their capabilities yet?

One of the most important things that you could have in any facet of your life, writing or anything, is to be consistent. Put in the work. Do it every single day. For a writer to develop, to get publishable, and find an audience, you have to do it like clockwork. Keep pushing forward every single day and don't take time off. This may not work for everybody, because I've personally structured my whole life around this, but I think you need to just completely live it. Everything in your life should be geared toward, in some way, furthering what you're trying to do.

Whether it's what you're reading, or your experiences, or the way you live, you should exist in your work and your work should exist in you 24 hours a day. That's a relentless, exhausting thing for a lot of people, but I'm pretty good at being relentless and exhausting. I know people that need more rest and want to have a more social life, which are two things that normal human beings do. But I like relentless, exhaustive work. Plowing yourself into the ground is the way to go. [laughs] That sounds like bad advice now that I'm listening to myself say it, but it works for me.

What does your daily writing practice look like?

It changes depending on what I'm doing at the time. Right now, I'm writing a really large, expansive book. And so my routine is: I try to sleep in as much as I can, but I can't sleep in very well. I usually get up at nine and I sit down and I just start working on the book until I start hating it, until it starts seeming horrible to me. And then after that I do all the other parts that are involved in writing, like answering a million emails, setting up tours, and talking to bookstores. There's so much office work that goes into it.

At some point maybe I'll eat food. [laughs] I live in the country, so I've got a lot of space and I'll go outside to my deck or go to a lake and work. I can do work anywhere. I used to need a controlled environment. Now I can work on an airplane, work in the car, work in hotels, whatever.

When it comes to my social life, I'm selling myself a bit short. I do hangout with people, but I feel like if you're being conscious with your work, it all comes into what you're writing. Don't worry about wasting your time, because all your social interactions are going to come back into your stories. Even if you're fictionalizing the hell out of your writing, even if you write science fiction, it's all going to come back, all of the things that you hear, experience, and see.

Since you work in so many different settings, do you write longhand?

Yes. Usually I use those black and white composition notebooks. Once I have finished a draft of something, I type it. For [my sixth novel] *The Internet Newspaper*, the first draft took four days. I wrote every day for six or eight hours in notebooks. I went to San Diego where all the scenes take place, and I wrote them in those places, so I knew the geography, physicality, and weather. Then I came back home to the farm with a giant stack of notebooks and I typed everything into a computer and edited it for the next six months. It was a pretty fast book.

Tell me about the lifestyle choices you've made to live an artist's life. I know you live in rural Kansas, for starters.

I'm from San Diego. And after San Diego, I'd lived in a lot of places with culture and a good social group. In

Kansas, it's not there. But the reason I came to Kansas was to isolate and get work done. You can live cheaply. I live on a six acre rural property, and for the price that you pay for something like this, you couldn't even get a shed in San Diego. I don't want to work in academia. I didn't even graduate college. I want to build my life around what I'm doing.

In the past, writers would go live in Paris when it was cheap. Kansas isn't Paris, but it's cheap, and there's a little bit out here and I've got some good friends and collaborators. We all live alone and get work done. People might say it's a sacrifice to not be living in a good city with a lot of culture. But I'm on tour all the time, so I get to go to all of those places. I think it's more rewarding to just blast through for a few days and see all your friends and have it be funny and wild and crazy, and then go to the next place.

In Kansas, how do you set up your home environment to foster creativity?

I'm very intentional about how my home functions. I want it to be beautiful, weird, and have a lot of art on the walls. I hate boring suburban houses and places that don't have character. The place that I live in is beautiful. It's got weird wall colors, sculptures, and weird ass shit everywhere you look. I need a fun house that feels like the inside of my brain. My home is a place where I can get work done. Like a giant studio space, it fosters what I need to do all day. I can write anywhere, but this is the place where I can get serious and feel motivated and safe.

What is something you wish someone told you when you began to make art?

I wish someone would have been like, "You gotta read more." Because when I was really young, I would just read the same authors for a year straight. I wish somebody would have been like, "You gotta be more diverse in what you're doing, or you're just gonna sound like a rip off of that person. Read more extensively." And I wish that somebody would have told me to read everything out loud, because your ear catches bad writing that your eye doesn't see.

How do you define success and failure with your work?

The main thing that I want from what I'm doing—besides wanting to keep doing it, because it's necessary to my survival and it's how I find therapy—is I want people to read my books. Success for me is just knowing that as many people as possible are reading my books, and that they have either enjoyed or are taking something good from the books is a big reward.

That's one of the cool things about the internet. People can reach out to you. It feels silly to say you like getting compliments, but everybody likes getting compliments, and to have somebody tell you something resonated with them feels great. I try to do that with people who make stuff that I love, too. I get in touch with them and say, "Hey, your record was amazing." Or, "Your book was incredible." I think if you like something, you should tell people about it. Don't hold it in.

What's your relationship to social media? You have a cult following on Instagram. I personally hate social media, but I love the ability it gives me to connect with artists I like.

I'm exactly the same. I hate it and I wish it didn't exist. But if it didn't exist, I feel like I would probably feel a need to reach out to the world in some way. Sometimes I think it'd be so great not to have to do all this stuff. But there's part of me that wants to be like, "Hey, look, here's a picture of my house." Or whatever else I'm doing that day. I like to reach out into the world, even to strangers. I've met some of my best friends through social media.

You have to use it, especially if you're trying to do artistic work, because this is how people will reach out to the world. If you're not doing it, you're hurting yourself. Some people don't because they're a big enough artist and it doesn't matter. That's great for them, but most of us have to hustle. That said, don't overthink it, like putting too much weight into likes or followers. That's poisonous.

How can people find creative inspiration, if they're looking for it?

As far as finding new stuff, I usually find it through friends. Get some friends whose taste you trust. Listen to what they're saying. I've got friends that are really into music, writing, or books, and if they recommend something to me, I immediately listen to it or read it. That's one of the best things you can do. It's also more special.

Do you have any advice for artists who want to work with independent publishers?

If you want to publish with independent presses, find one that you like and read all their stuff. See if it's a good fit for you. Always do your research first. Don't submit a manuscript to a press that you don't know anything about, because they'll know. Research, read, and be mindful of what you're looking for.

But if it seems like a good fit, most presses you can contact through their websites or social media. They're real people. They don't have watchdogs or secretaries. Most of the time you don't even need an agent to submit to a good independent press. In this world of indie literature, there's a lot of people doing real shit, and humans sitting in their houses answering a million emails a day. You should not be afraid to get in touch with somebody and say, "I wrote a manuscript. Can I send it to you?"

Adam Gnade Recommends:

Pokez: A Mexican restaurant in San Diego. Anyone who loves Mexican food at some point should eat at Pokez. It's like a cultural center in San Diego. Get a burrito. You won't be let down.

Sunset Cliffs: A beach in San Diego. As evidenced by the name, it's cliffs and there's an ocean that you can swim in if you want. It's quiet and serene and wonderful.

Trident Press: A really good publisher. Some of my favorite books have come out of it, like Until The Red Swallows It All by Mason Parker, Selftitled by Nicole Morning, Cactus by Nathaneil Kennon Perkins.

Three One G Records, Breads & Roses Press: the presses that co-publish my books. Check them out.

"Salton Sea" by Neutral Shirt—a song by a San Diego band that everyone should listen to. It got me through the pandemic.

Name

Adam Gnade

Vocation

author and recording artist

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