On trusting your instincts

Author Brandon Sanderson on putting in the work, connecting to a community, and building new worlds.

March 8, 2022 -

As told to Margot Atwell, 2720 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Independence, Time management, Mentorship, Success.

Can you tell me a bit about your process? Do you have a favorite time to write?

I am a night writer. I've always been a bit of an insomniac, and I built my pre-publication career off the back of working a graveyard shift at the hotel, during which I would write books at the front desk. And this worked very well for me.

These days, I usually go to bed at four o'clock or five AM and get up at noon or one, depending on the day. And I usually do two writing sessions. I'll write usually from around one until five, and then five until ten is family time. And then about ten o'clock, I go back to work and I work from 10 until that day's work is done.

How do you begin building a new world?

It's different for every project for me. Books are a combination of character, plot, and setting. And every book I write, I could point out and say, *oh, there was the first idea*. Usually they're growing separately, a couple ideas for the plot, a couple seeds for characters. An idea for a magic system or a governmental structure. Those will be growing independently in my notes file. I know I have a book when these different elements start to meld together in my brain, and change each other in interesting ways. I'll start to say, *all right, these two ideas belong together. Here's this character who belongs in this plot. Is there a setting that I've been developing that also enhances this?*

Sometimes I just need to build one from scratch to match the story. Sometimes I start with a world. *The Way of Kings* began as two separate ideas, one for a character named Dalinar, and one for the idea of a storm, a magically powerful hurricane that hit this world every couple of days. Those two ideas grew separately from one another for a while, until I started to incorporate them together and say these two stories belong together.

You've just released *The Way of Kings Prime*, the original draft of the story that became *The Way of Kings*. How did you decide to scrap that version and start over? Did you feel like you had done the right thing?

Yeah, I have learned to follow my instincts as a writer. I'm sure that's very common in the writing community. I finished *Way of Kings Prime* in 2002, 2003. And that's right around the time that I got a book deal, it was my 13th novel. By then, I had developed instincts for when a book was turning out like I envisioned it, and when a book wasn't. I had some instincts that something was off, something was wrong. And when that happens, usually I get a few reads from people I trust. And the reads came back, my editor was one of these, saying, *Wow, this is big. There's a whole lot of exposition. There's a lot of characters to track. We're not sure about this*. Which is not the response you want.

They said lots of good things about it. The book was not terrible. The book just was not hitting the vision I wanted for it. And putting it aside was not a difficult decision at that point. I knew I didn't want that book to

be my second released book. I did *Mistborn* instead, I knew what I was doing with that, and it turned out very well. And I let *The Way of Kings* sit and simmer for another seven, eight years in the back of my brain before writing the 2010 version, which is completely different from the one I just released. The characters just needed more time to mature. There are parts of the plot that weren't working, parts of the world that needed more time. Just every piece of the story needed more time.

I worked on *The Wheel of Time* books, which involved a lot of heavy lifting and building of writing muscles, so to speak. And after I'd written one of those books, I said, *I think I can do this now. I think I have both figured out what I need to change in the plot, and I've grown as a writer to the point that I think I could do justice to this story.* And so that's when I sat down to write.

How do you know when a project is done?

Well, art is never finished, it's only abandoned, right? That famous quote. A project is done when I feel that I can't make significant improvements to the story, I'm only going to start taking sideways steps. If I revise it, it doesn't get better, it just gets different.

I go through, these days, five drafts. And at the end of five drafts, if a book isn't ready, that generally means it's time to put the book aside and not publish it, rather than try another draft. It probably needs more time. I just have enough experience with this, at this point, to know that if I can't fix it by then, then something more fundamental is broken and I need that distance from it.

What do you do in cases where you're creatively stuck? Aside from putting aside a project?

I don't get creatively stuck to that extent very often. For the average day by day, what people might call writer's block, most of what I do involves writing the scene anyway, writing it poorly, basically.

I've found that 90 plus percent of the time, if I'm having trouble with a scene, if I back up, write it from a different viewpoint, write it just completely different in some way, I will fix it. The trick comes in making that leap. What do I change? And usually to do that, I write it the way I was planning to write it, the way that feels wrong to me, and then let my subconscious work on it, dig at it for a day or two. And almost every time my subconscious will say, *Here's what you're doing wrong. You need to rethink how this character is approaching the scene.* But I can't do that unless I've written it poorly first, which is very odd.

But I do think it works for a lot of creative professionals, that your instincts aren't wrong, that oftentimes this chapter for instance, is wrong. Though sometimes they are, sometimes you're just having a bad day and the chapter's perfectly all right, and you'll get to it the next day and be like, *Why was I so worried about this? This turned out just fine.* But a lot of times you come back and say, *No, that was wrong.* But by forcing yourself to do it wrong, you give yourself the tools to fix it. It's generally a lot easier to fix something that's wrong, than it is to just figure out what's wrong without having tried.

How do you avoid burnout?

I avoid burnout by rapid switching of projects. I have very carefully designed my life so that I am never working on one series too long in a row. Generally, this means I finish one book and then need to write something else that has a very different tone and style to it, that's a challenge in a different way to focus my attention. This usually, these days, means adult book, YA book, adult book, YA book, with the occasional novella squeezed in there somewhere.

Have you ever been tempted to play in different genres?

Yeah, I'm always tempted to play in different genres. They always have some sort of sci-fi/fantasy element. But one of the things that you learn being a writer, is that there are different ways of explaining genre, right? And a lot of trappings of stories, which is the setting trappings, are different from the core and fundamental types

of stories often told in that genre.

The best example of this is *Star Wars*, which has science fiction trapping, but then uses old school Western style plots. A lot of stories do this. And so while you will usually see some sort of sci-fi or fantasy element [in my work], because I enjoy that in settings, I switch up the plot structures quite a bit. *The Way of Kings*, it's three different books stapled together. Each character has their own plot going on, but at its core, the main plot is an underdog sports story, right? Which is very different from some of my other epic fantasies, some of which are heists, some are romantic comedies.

Switching up a little bit, what was it like to realize that you had readers that were fans of your work, and what are your favorite ways to interact with your fans?

This was different for me than most writers because I had a very long journeyman stage. What was unique about my journeyman stage, the years I was unpublished but getting very close to professional quality, was that I had a strong community of readers at the college where I was going, and I started sharing my books with them. In the years before I got published, these books started to spread through the community to people who I had never met. And I started gaining fans without having sold any books. I got a chance to experience some of the fame and all of these things in a smaller and easier way to deal with. It let me hit the ground running when I actually started publishing. By that point, I knew what it was like to have people reading my work and becoming fans of my work.

And as a product of the early internet generation, I was very comfortable interacting with them on the internet. This also distinguished me. I was a lot younger, and a lot closer [in age] to that fan base than my [writer] contemporaries. And so I started doing book signings where I had had a mailing list, and I had internet forums that I frequented, and I had a blog. And this was all before this was done very widely among authors. And I'd do signings with my writer friends, and I would have as many or more people at the signings as they had, though they outsold me by a factor of 10 to one. It was really shocking to them that I was able to mobilize these crowds, but it's not a matter of me really mobilizing anything. It's just that I spend a lot of time on the internet.

You're really transparent about your process, and even your progress writing your novels. I think you were one of the first authors I ever saw who had a writing progress bar on their website.

I'm very proud that that has spread. That began because I was a *Wheel of Time* fan, and waiting for the next *Wheel of Time* book and not knowing how far it had to go was very frustrating for me. Once I got published, one of the very first things I did was start putting up those progress bars so that people would at least know where I am in the process. I find it way easier if you know how much time you're going to have to wait.

You get a lot of goodwill from the community by being upfront about those things. Not every author can do it. I tend to be what we call an architect, an outline writer. That's George [R. R. Martin]'s term, architect versus gardener. Gardeners nurture a book and shepherd it along, and they're never quite sure when it's done. Architects tend to do a lot of that work in free writing, so the uncertain point comes when we're planning. And when we're writing, we tend to be more certain where it's going and have already worked out some of those problems. Not always, but usually. And so it allows us to have a better instinct for when the book's going to be done, because by the time we're writing it, it's a matter of *It's this many pages most likely, and I'm this percent of the way through the outline*.

On your website you talk about your writing philosophy, and show how an outline works for you, and include some synopses or outlines from previous books. I was just struck by how generous it was for you to put that out there.

Well, you have this strange conundrum as a writer in that you're going to have to relearn everything every writer before you has had to learn. And you're generally going to have to do it without strong mentorship. Writing's a very solitary profession. It's very hard. People often ask me, *Can I come be your intern?* And I'm like, *There's nothing for an intern to do. The process is so internal to my head, you wouldn't learn anything. You got to teach yourself these things.*

When I was breaking in, there were writers who gave me some really great advice. Dave Wolverton is one of these. Some writers were very good doing what they could to help mentor me. And I'm well aware of how hard it is to learn how to do this on your own. This community survives because authors pay it forward. And that happened to me, and so I try to do my best to do the same.

That's great. What made you want to create leather-bound editions of your novels?

The Wheel of Time had leather-bound editions with very, very limited print runs, and you could just never get ahold of them. As a fan who wanted to collect things like that, I'm like, *Man… I want to have my books done in editions like that, that are a little more widely available*. This isn't really a dig at *The Wheel of Time*. It was a hard market back then, in the pre-internet days when you couldn't get to the fans directly with these kinds of premium products. In the modern era, I can directly reach the fans.

The way the internet has shaped and changed this business is incredible. Ten years ago, I couldn't probably have done this. 20 years ago, I certainly couldn't have. But now I can create my own leather-bound. I can reach my fans directly and say, *Here's this kind of high price item, are you interested?* The margins on these are so much smaller than a regular book by percentage, so traditional retail percentages would make the book unprofitable to publish. But by directly reaching the fans, it becomes profitable for us to be able to do that.

Howard Tayler, the author of *Schlock Mercenary*, was the one who suggested I use Kickstarter to do this. I know Michael J. Sullivan has been doing Kickstarters. I am learning from them, and following in their footsteps. I am not a pioneer in this, I am benefiting from my friends who really have paved the way. If I'm doing anything, I'm bringing attention to the fact that the fans will buy a premium product like this, and want to be involved if you can find a way to get it to them.

What do you enjoy most about being a writer?

It's a kind of telepathy. I think of something. I dream about it. I turn it over in my head, like T*he Way of Kings*, for decades sometimes. And then I get it on the page finally, in a way that I'm excited by, and someone else gets to pick it up and read it and see the same thoughts that have been in my head, and experience those same emotions and those same stories. It's a way of connecting to people on a very intimate level. That is just wonderful to me, fascinating, interesting, and exciting.

Essential Brandon Sanderson:

The Mistborn Trilogy

The Stormlight Archive

The Skyward Series

The Reckoners Trilogy

The Emperor's Soul

Name
Brandon Sanderson

Vocation
Writer

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Isaac Stewart