

On finding your path, even if it takes awhile



Author John Wray discusses working at a pace that makes sense for you, dealing with your anxieties, and writing about what you like.

May 23, 2023 -

As told to J Bennett, 3307 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, Failure, First attempts, Creative anxiety, Process.

When and how did you know that you wanted to be a writer?

I was not one of those people who knew they were going to be a writer from the age of three or something. But I think, from pretty early on, I did have a sense that I might want to do something creative. I was very interested in drawing. I think I spent far more of my childhood drawing and sketching all sorts of things. But writing wasn't something that I did too much of as a child. I think I just associated it with school and with work. And I still do, which is one of my challenges.

But in the course of my childhood and teenage years, I really tried a lot of different things. There was a period of time when I was convinced that I was going to become a Claymation animator because I found my parents' Super 8 Camera, and someone told me that if you just click on the trigger really quickly and then move the clay a little bit, you could make movies that way. It was all I could think about for about six months. But I was a kid, so I would fall passionately in love with some kind of art making, and then I would run up against the brick wall of my lack of ability and experience. And then I would become terribly frustrated because I was a child, and then I would give it up in disgust. And I must have cycled through, I don't know, a dozen different ideas in the course of my childhood and teenage years.

And that continued through college. I was a studio art major for a while in college. I played in about 15 bands. And I played different instruments in different bands, which meant I never got good at any instruments. And that was really my situation. I was just kind of a dilettante, really, from the ages of zero to 26 or something.

How did you eventually land on writing?

What happened wasn't so much that I had any sort of revelation or that any sort of magical door opened for me. It was more a sensation of various doors closing. I never pursued the animation thing. I was a really bad painter. I had a lot of fun playing in bands, but none of them were ever really anything that even I took seriously. When these doors quietly started closing for me—at least in my own sense of what I was capable of through my mid-20s—what I was left with was writing. Writing was the one thing that had consistently been more satisfying to me. I probably found a little bit more encouragement and a slightly warmer reception than the other stuff. So, in a way, I became a writer by default.

Which came first for you? Was it fiction or journalism?

I was never interested in journalism, actually. I consumed it with great pleasure, but it was never something that I aspired to do because I don't like telling the truth. What happened was, I published my first novel when I

was just shy of 30. And then a friend of mine, who I always had a crush on, became kind of a star in music, and had a record coming out. We'd lost touch with each other, but I heard an advance copy of the record and thought I would really love to write about it. And then maybe that way we'd see each other again.

So, my wonderful agent, Jean, pitched this piece to some magazines, and they all turned it down. But that led them to offering me other pieces. The first article I ever wrote was for the *New York Times Magazine*, which was a real thrill. So, I came to journalism through fiction, which is a very ass-backwards way of arriving in the journalistic world. And it meant that I had to really learn on the job. I mean, it's sort of like never having learned to drive a car, and all of a sudden, you're the chauffeur for the Queen. It's like, "What am I doing? This car is already rolling. What are these knobs and buttons for?" Fortunately, I never got into big trouble, but I always had to curb my urge to invent or shape the facts into a more effective or fictionally successful narrative, which obviously you're not supposed to do as a journalist.

Tell me about the process of writing your first novel. How did you approach it?

Well, a couple of years before I wrote the first novel of mine that was published, I tried to write a different novel. That was truly daunting, and it was a tremendous failure. I really didn't even have any idea what I wanted to say or write about. I was really only going off the sound of what I was writing. I had this vague sort of ambition to do something. My touchstones at the time were pretty random: William S. Burroughs and N. Scott Momaday, a Native American novelist who wrote what I thought was a beautiful novel called *House Made of Dawn*. But those are two writers don't have anything in common, really.

I just tried too soon, so I had to scrap that book. It was completely bizarre and strange, but also just a blatant imitation of those two writers and a few others. Some wonderful, honest people told me it was bullshit so I scrapped it. And then about two years went by. Without being aware of it, I'd been nursing the hope of giving writing another shot, since it was, by that point, the only art form that I felt I stood a chance at.

That summer, on a visit home, I went on a long hike with my parents. They were arguing or something, so I kind of lagged behind. As the hike progressed, a situation sort of presented itself to my mind, I guess, is the only way I can really put it. I began to think of three characters, and I began to think about writing a book that was set in a little town in the Austrian Alps, where my mother had been born and grown up, which had been a place that I always loved spending time in as a child. I had this idea that if I set a novel in a place that I really enjoyed spending time in, in my thoughts, that might make it easier or more pleasant for me to spend a really long time every day going back there and trying to put a story together. So, it came to me on a walk is the answer.

Once you had the idea, did it go quickly, or did you struggle?

It came very quickly. Actually, it was night and day compared to my attempt of just two years earlier, because I had a much clearer sense of what I wanted to do, or at least of the mood that I wanted. And from the mood, I got maybe the sense of the sound that I wanted and the rhythm that I wanted. It's a little bit like playing music. I felt like I had just kind of dropped into the pocket. I could hit all sorts of false notes here and there, but at least the rhythm was right. It still took me almost four years, but I didn't really make a lot of wrong turns in that time. That's the only book I've written that felt really kind of magical. It just seemed to be the right thing to do, so I kept doing it.

I know you're a very research-oriented kind of guy. What do you enjoy about that process?

It's funny because I don't actually think I am a very research-oriented kind of guy. I have come to appreciate the research stage as the most pleasurable state of things because you haven't screwed anything up yet. When you're doing the research, you may not know what you want to do exactly. But insofar as you do have a sense of what you want to do, it's still this perfect thing because you haven't actually fucked it up yet. I think Cormac McCarthy once said that every word you set down on paper as you're working towards finishing the first draft of a novel is a step away from the perfect dream you had that got you started in the first place. Every choice you make reveals slightly more clearly the extent of your inadequacy for the beautiful dream that you were hoping to capture.

Do you sketch out your plots in advance, or just let them unfold as you write?

I do just enough research to get to the point at which I start to feel confident and comfortable making things up. With some books that's no research, and with some books, it's quite a bit depending on what I'm doing. But I do not make an outline or anything like that. I do very little written preparation because I'm an impatient person. Once I've got the fever, I want to get going. And I kind of trust in the facts that I will find out as I go [as far as] what I need to research and what I need to plan. Because it would be a colossal waste of time and effort if you were going to write a novel about the war in Vietnam, let's say. For you to master every aspect of the history of the Vietnam War, only to then after years of research decide you're just going to follow one little platoon through an anonymous stretch of jungle, which would require very little knowledge of the actual war... you know what I mean?

Totally.

I always like to just roll camera, and based on where the camera's pointing and whether you need a wide shot or a close-up, so to speak, then do the research you need to do. I mean, of course, you have to know what you want to do and have some general sense of at least how to start. But again, if I were to do too much outlining and too much planning, the whole thing would start to feel like homework again. And I always hated school.

When you're working on a novel, do you set aside a certain amount of time each day to work on it? Do you set a goal or cut yourself off at a certain point?

I think most writers who write book-length things—as opposed to poets, let's say—have some sort of protocol that they follow and some sort of quota that they impose on themselves most days. In my experience, it's sort of like in New York City when you want to put more money on your MetroCard and it says, "Would you like to add value or add time?" I feel like some writers focus on time and they say, "It's a regular job. I'm going to go to the office. I'll be there six hours a day or eight hours a day, or however long it is. And even if I get nothing done, I'm going to be in that damn room." I know writers who set timers for themselves. When they're actually writing, they'll hit the timer, and if they start daydreaming, they'll pause the timer. They're that hardcore about it.

I did a profile on Nick Cave once. He told me has an office that he goes to for eight hours a day when he's not on tour. It obviously works for him. He's hugely productive. But I can't do that because, for me, writing is not painful, but it's really effortful. I always liken it to holding your breath underwater. That's what it feels like in my brain. It's not painful, but I wouldn't choose to do it, either. It is effortful, and I can't sustain it for more than a few minutes before I need to kind of surface again. I'm a bank clerk-style writer, like bureaucratic writing: I do 500 words a day. That was Graham Greene's approach. If I do that, then I know that I have to do it. If I actually apply myself and focus, I could be out of there in an hour and a half, or I'm there for 10 hours. It all depends. Some days the brain just doesn't want to cooperate.

500 words seems like a totally manageable number.

Well, that's very important. I think Hemingway did it that way, too. And I think he said it was very important to pick a very reasonable number, so you can't come up with any reason why you couldn't do it. Who can't write 500 words? It's literally just a page. It's like a slightly longer email. But the catch is you have to do it every day that you're working. And also, you have to try to make it good. There are some sneaky little hidden complications there. But it works for me because I'm a very work-avoidant person who would rather never do the actual work and just reap all of the lovely rewards.

How do you deal with writer's block?

I'm dropping all these pearls of wisdom from far better writers than me into this conversation, but I was once doing an interview with Haruki Murakami when he was visiting New York City. After the interview, we were sitting in this German beer garden kind of thing on Bleecker Street. I confessed to him that I was really in a jam with

this book that I was writing and had no idea how to go forward with it. He listened very politely to what I was saying. But then it seemed as though he hadn't been listening at all because the next thing he said was, "Do you like that bratwurst?"

I was like, "What? Excuse me. Haven't you been listening? I've been sobbing on your shoulder." And he just repeated the question. And I said, "Yeah, it's actually very good bratwurst. Would you like some?" And he kind of looked at me for a moment and said, "Put the bratwurst in the novel. Next scene of the novel, someone should be eating bratwurst." And it seemed like one of these Zen koans or something, like he was going to hit me in the head with a board or something and say, "Now, do you see?"

How I interpreted that was: Anything can go into a novel. One of the things that novels have that many other art forms don't is they're so expansive and they can metabolize anything you want to throw at them—especially a large novel. So, I did what he told me. In the very next scene, some characters were going to have an argument. And I made that happen over the course of a meal of bratwurst, and it helped me to go forward. I then cut that out of the book, actually.

You've talked about writing as a way to target your own anxieties. How does that apply to your new novel, *Gone to the Wolves*?

Oh, that's interesting. That's something I haven't actually thought about. I mean, with *Lowboy*, for example, which was a book I wrote about this schizophrenic kid who's obsessed with global warming, that was my climate change book for myself. In creating a character who was so much more obsessed, and not neurotic, but really actually psychotic about this question, it really allowed me to sort of exorcise these demons that I had surrounding that. Which didn't last, of course, because now who isn't freaked out about climate change?

And with other books, I can really point to certain things—my family history and things like that. The need to find an outlet for my anxieties is always a very potent motivator. I probably couldn't finish a book without that kind of compulsion. In the case of *Gone to the Wolves*, I wrote it during a time when quite a few people that I was very close to passed away. My father died, and my uncle—who was more of a role model for me—died, and a close friend as well. This is off the top of my head, but I think that may be why friendship and the sort of love one feels for a friend became so important in this book. I think I was having some anxieties about losing people in my life.

You did an interview with *The Guardian* a few years ago in which you said that when you're writing a novel, it's better to not to feel like you have all the answers going into it. Can you talk about that a little bit?

There are all sorts of reasons why that's true, I think. You need to leave some room to be able to surprise yourself because the process needs to be exciting and interesting to you in order for you to be engaged enough to write well. I think maybe that's part of why I tend to avoid too much planning and too much outlining. I don't want it all to seem like a sort of foregone conclusion. I always have a general sense of where I'm headed, but in the same way that you would get in the car to go on a road trip and say, "Oh, it would be cool to end up at Big Sur." But how the fuck are you going to get to Big Sur? I mean, there are a thousand ways to go. So, I just think that it has to be a bit of an adventure. On the most basic level, it has to be exciting. It has to be fun for you. Which means you have to choose something you're genuinely interested in, not falsely interested in because you think it's what people want to read about.

John Wray Recommends:

Kuroneko - "This is a Japanese horror film from 1968 by a visionary director named Kaneto Shindo. It's about these two women who are killed in a very unpleasant way and become cats who hang out on this enormous bamboo forest and just kill everybody. It's black and white and very moody and macabre."

Altar - "I've written about both of these bands, but I recently discovered this collaborative album by Sunn O))) and Boris. I fucking love this record. You wouldn't have necessarily thought they would fit together perfectly, but they really do."

Smilla's Sense of Snow - "I recently finished reading this thriller from the early '90s. It's a Danish book written by Peter Høeg, who does not write thrillers usually, but it's an amazing crime novel with an ending that is so weird and left-field and completely outside of the crime-fiction genre. They made a movie out of it, too."

Kiss Me Deadly - "This is a movie directed by Robert Aldrich, and it's from 1955. It's great movie, and really strange. It's also trippy in a way that noir movies were not always. The glowing briefcase in *Pulp Fiction* is a direct reference to this movie."

Acapulco Gold - "I recently bought what I'm certain is the last distortion pedal for guitar that I will ever buy in my life, which in part is because I'm old, but it's also because this pedal is so fucking great. It's made by a wonderful company called EarthQuaker Devices, and the pedal is named after the marijuana. You should look at a picture of this thing."

Name

John Wray

Vocation

writer

□