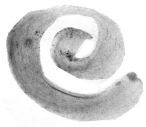
# On committing to getting your work into the world



## Author Kristen Felicetti discusses determining a book’s audience, the tenacity required to write a debut novel, and the fulfillment that comes with supporting fellow artists.

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As told to Hurley Winkler, 2970 words.

Tags: Writing, Focus, Failure, First attempts, Process, Mentorship, Time management.

**I want to start by asking about the structure of your debut novel, *Log Off*. The whole book is comprised of LiveJournal entries, including the book’s acknowledgments, which I thought was so clever and sweet. Did the structure of the book come first, or did you have a sense of character and setting and plot and then decided to use LiveJournal to tell the story later on?**

I think it kind of all came together very quickly and about the same time. First, I had started to build the main off-line story between Ellora and her friends. And then I had this idea to set it on LiveJournal. It was around late 2018, and I was feeling this nostalgia for the early internet. And I was like, well, that would be a really fun way to structure the book. I knew I could do some fun things with the format. I still planned the general main storylines of the book, but I knew I could do some of the fun things that happen in the book that are based on the format of LiveJournal, like the surveys and the shorter entries as their own little tiny standalone stories.

**Did you get your start as a writer on LiveJournal?**

I did have a LiveJournal, but I wouldn’t say that’s necessarily where I got my start as a writer. I was very into visual art on there. I made photoshopped collages that had song lyrics and just sort of poetic lines about my feelings, and so it was more of a visual art medium. But crucially, though, it wasn’t necessarily me as a writer there, but on LiveJournal, it was the first time there were other people looking at something I’d made and saying stuff and responding to it. And they were strangers, so it wasn’t like my friends, and they had no agenda to really say that it was good or not. I think that was actually really meaningful.

**You workshopped this novel at the Tin House Young Adult Workshop, but the book isn’t billed as a YA novel. I’m curious what the process was in determining you were writing a book told from the point of view of a teenager that’s actually for an adult audience. Did it have to do with LiveJournal being so nostalgic for people, or did it have more to do with the rather adult themes of the book?**

I’ve thought a lot about what makes a book with a teenage narrator YA, or what makes it an adult literary novel with a teenage protagonist, and I still don’t really know the answer at the end of the day. It’s definitely not based on literary merit, because there are really great writing and books in both those spaces. When I went to the Tin House YA novel workshop, I wasn’t done with the book yet. I think I just thought it was YA because it had a teenage narrator, and you never see her move past that age. She’s never looking back or anything and she’s always actually a teenager, and she’s also very in-voice, very believably a teenager. And I still think that’s, to some degree, a YA quality. I think sometimes adult literary novels have more of a looking back perspective, or

they jump from the adult perspective looking back.

I queried *Log Off* as a YA novel and I got a full manuscript request from a really great agent and then a personalized pass. And his recommendation was kind of like, “I’m loving this, I’m loving the voice, but ultimately, I think the audience for this is more millennials our age who were teenagers during this time. And I checked with some of my younger colleagues about that too.” So that made me think about how I would market, and that it would actually be an adult novel. I still feel like it’s sort of in an in-between space and I think people our age will like it. But I do actually want teens to read it. I think there’s something real about Ellora’s teenage feelings that I hope will cross generations.

**Did you want to be writing a book for adults, or did you have your heart set on writing for teenagers? And did any emotions crop up when you made the audience switch?**

I don’t think so. When I think about readers, I kind of feel whoever will really respond to the book could really be anyone or everyone for various reasons. And it doesn’t necessarily need to be a teenager, or an adult who was a demographically similar teenager at the time the book was set. When I’m picturing a reader, it’s not necessarily any age or anything like that. It’s more just someone who will find something that they respond to in the work.

**I mentioned those more grown-up themes in the book, and there are a lot of them in the novel: alcoholism, sexuality, guardianship, parental abandonment. Reading your book, I never felt like you had an agenda with any of these themes, but I did feel like you had certain things you wanted to say and represent. What’s your approach to writing about harder topics while avoiding that sense of agenda?**

Well, first of all, going back to that earlier question about audience, I would not define whether it deals with harder topics to be the space of either YA or adult books. YA books should deal with hard topics because teens really deal with them, and I feel that I would’ve liked to have been treated with that respect as a teen. But in terms of dealing with harder topics, I think you have to be honest about them. You cannot smooth the edges, if you will. You have to be honest.

I don’t want to approach those kinds of topics with an agenda, or seem like I’m moralizing about them. I think the way to do that is to approach the characters who are dealing with those issues in an honest and empathetic way and be willing to, as a writer, show them as fully flawed people and not judge them. The same way that you would, I think, maybe in life.

**There’s so much depth to your protagonist in this novel. Were there any character exercises you did, or anything like that to get to know her and get in her head?**

I don’t really do stuff like that much, exercises to get in a character’s head. And I don’t think this will necessarily be true for the next thing I write, but I just knew these characters really, really well, pretty early on. Especially for Ellora, the narrator’s voice, this book is kind of ride-or-die by the voice. Obviously there were scenes or even storylines that I didn’t keep in the book that were exercises of just writing in her voice in those scenes and then editing it to be the book that it is now.

**I think writing a book is a huge leap of faith. It’s something you have to do on your own time with no guarantees that it’ll ever see the light of day. How did you cope with that reality and yet, at the same time, reach the finish line of this manuscript?**

I think I just really believed in and loved the story and the characters. If you’re having a good time writing, you’re going to have a good time editing and finishing it, even before you think about what will happen publication-wise with the book. I was having a good time finishing the book. I wanted to be in this story and be in this voice, so that wasn’t hard.

I think there is a leap of faith, though, in terms of what will happen to it out in the world. And yeah, that was

unknown. That took a while to sort of figure out in terms of querying or going with an independent publisher. But this was never going to be a drawer book for me. It's a book I really believe in. And if you believe in your book, I really do think that something will happen with it, because you'll make that happen in any sort of way, even if your first original plan doesn't work out. I really do believe that. I'm not just like, "Oh, motivational pep talk time." If you just believe in it so hard, you will not give up on that. It might take longer, or it might just be a different path than you originally thought.

**Was this your first attempt at writing a novel?**

It was. I'd written a lot of shorter stuff, or loosely began a novel, but this was by far my first and most serious attempt at writing a novel. There were things that were more narratively satisfying in the editing process, like looking at other books to see how they've navigated storylines and built tension. It was my first time at the rodeo with that, but it was kind of fun to learn. When you're like, "Oh, I can consolidate these two characters into one, and that works so much better." That's a great feeling when you figure that kind of stuff out.

**You mentioned that you're goal-oriented. Does that mean you're also deadline-oriented?**

Yes. I like to have a deadline in mind for a couple reasons. Without one, it could just go on forever. And it's also for accountability. Even externally, I feel if someone else wants something from me, I don't want any ambiguity. I want to know when they need it by.

**Can you give us an idea of the rough timeline of writing this book?**

Even though I had some loose ideas beforehand, maybe even as early as actually being a teenager, I think I seriously started the book around 2018. I had a goal to get the first draft done by the end of 2019, and then did that into early 2020. And then there was a pandemic, which was a great time to do editing, I think, because it's task oriented, versus having to be mentally creative. I did that, for the most part, through all of 2020, and some slight editing through 2021. But 2021 and 2022 is when I started querying and making changes based on that process. I did a full manuscript workshop in late 2022, and that was the first time anyone had ever read the book in full, so got that feedback too. The actual writing and editing of the book was almost just as long as figuring out what I was going to do with the book.

**Now that you've finished your first book, how are you feeling about writing your second? Do you feel less intimidated by it? Are you wary of it? I always think about the concept of the sophomore slump. Is that on your mind, or are you feeling really confident going into it?**

I do not feel really confident going into it. Every project, unfortunately—I mean, every book, but also every time I write a new essay or a short piece—it's like, "Do I remember how to write? Possibly not." So I think I do not feel confident for a couple of reasons. One, I think each book has its own different set of problems, so what worked for you on one does not necessarily work for the other. And then, this is kind of true to the sophomore slump for books, or for albums, but I think your first book does tend to be a little bit personal, so things are really close to your heart. But that also means you kind of have a fiery confidence in it, versus maybe in a second or third book, where you kind of branch out and go a little further, or try something more complex. But that means you're going to know some of the material of the book a little less and have to branch out in new skills, whether that's a multi point of view, or a different tense, or something like that.

**Let's talk about writing adjacent things, too, because in addition to being a writer, you're the founding Editor-In-Chief of *The Bushwick Review*, and you've interviewed so many writers and artists, many for *The Creative Independent*. How do you balance these sorts of writing-adjacent things with the writing itself?**

I am excited to be doing this interview just because I've done interviews for this site, so it's really special to me. I think, for me, it's hard to balance. I will say that. I think it's kind of hard to balance the writing for yourself and the business and email aspects of writing, and then your day job, and then being kind to your friends and family and also just maybe relaxing.

Then there's also this element that's really, really important to me, which is supporting other writers. It feels really good to me. I mean, I like celebrating and supporting other people's work, but it's also fulfilling to me. When I did *The Bushwick Review,* it was so exciting to edit people's pieces, talk about people's pieces, have the release parties where they could read, and I could introduce them. And I feel the same with the interviews, where I learn things from artists, and it's really nice to engage with people in that way.

Supporting other people's creativity is one of the main things of my life, but it's not just altruistic. It's what I love to talk to people about. Sometimes it's more of a struggle for me to talk in small-talk contexts. But if you need someone to work out your project and talk about it, let's get into it. That's extremely my bag. We can really talk for hours about that. I'll be there for you on that.

**Same. I can't do small talk, but when someone wants to tell me about act three of their novel, I'm like, "Tell me more."**

Exactly. Right. Or if you're trying to figure out what the beginning of your novel you want to be, we can talk about that for three hours. I will very much be present for you for that and help you figure that out.

**You mentioned it's not entirely altruistic, and I completely agree. What are some things you've learned from the writers you've interviewed that have helped shape your process?**

When people have been really transparent about their struggles, whether it's in the writing, on the business side, losing faith or confidence in themselves, or just how long it took to do something, I think that has been very comforting to learn. It's also really great to me to learn about people's schedules. I love that part, the part where people just tell me the breakdown of their days. I am just generally curious about how other people live their lives, I guess. Knowing that other writers, even very successful ones, have had the same doubts, or been in the same kind of problems, or face the same kind of rejections.

I did an interview with the photographer Stacy Kranitz, who shared what her schedule was like, and I was like, "This is the ideal schedule." The morning, she devotes to the business and email side, and then she takes a long break where she exercises, and in the afternoon, she does the creative work, and nighttime is her intake, where she reads and watches movies. I think I would flip the morning and afternoon, personally, but I think of that structure all the time. Morning creative, long break, physical exercise, afternoon business, email, other people's work.

**I saw on your Substack that you participated in a manuscript bootcamp. How do you decide when it was time to have your full manuscript workshopped? I feel like a lot of writers will enter that kind of space too early, at a time when they really could have sussed some things out on their own.**

I have a perfectionist tendency. If other people are going to read it, I want it to be as great as possible. But that's not necessarily the best state for workshopping writing, because if you already feel like your book is polished, then they might, too, and there's not really much the workshop can do except for tell you that things are good, and that might feel good, but that's not actually the most helpful. Having done two of them now (the Tin House YA workshop and the full manuscript bootcamp at Writing By Writers), I'd say to have some secure footing in what your piece is, but to go in with some unknowns and some questions that having some readers would help you with, versus knowing every beat of the way what you want to do.

But I also think there's something to just wanting readers' eyes on something, even if you are confident with it. With the first full manuscript workshop, no one had read the full book. And so regardless of how confident I felt about it, it was just so valuable on its own to know that I was going to get a handful of readers to read the full book and be able to engage with me and give me feedback. Sometimes, just having readers might be the answer, regardless of what state the manuscript is in, because you need some sort of response.

**Kristen Felicetti recommends:**

The sculptures of Lois Farningham

The tunes of Casters

The sonics of Taleen Kali

The poetics of Oscar d’Artois

The madness of Beef Gordon

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