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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3123 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Collaboration, Mental health, Mentorship, Money, Education.

On trusting in yourself and your process

Author, sex worker, and organizer Liara Roux discusses making the most of your opportunities, going with your gut, and the value of a harsh but constructive critique.

When you have an idea, how do you know what form it's going to take? For instance, how did you decide to write a memoir as a book versus doing it as a comic, a form you've used in the past?

I'd always wanted to write a book, but it was something I thought I would do maybe when I was in my forties or fifties and lived a little bit more life. So it was really exciting to have someone just tell me that they would publish one if I wrote it.

Did you have any hesitation about doing it or you just got the offer and jumped right in?

I just jumped right in. I mean, I googled the publisher first to make sure they weren't a vanity press, because I've had vanity presses contact me before and I don't want to be paying to publish my own book. But the fact they were willing to invest in me, felt good to me. I'm sure they knew people would be interested in the book. So, that for me, felt enough.

How'd you organize yourself to get going on your first book project?

I just started free writing really. I'm taking a writing class now, but I'd never really taken any writing classes before. In high school, one of our English teachers would sometimes throw little writing things in. He would just tell us to do free writing sometimes and just write for 10 to 30 minutes just about whatever you were thinking about. And I would just do that. The first few times it was just me writing about how anxious I was about writing a book, but then eventually different memories came up. A lot of it was just really random things, like, "Why are you talking about the Founding Fathers for this long?" But it was just whatever was on my mind woven well with whatever memories I was writing about.

Did you set any goals for each day? Or you just allowed yourself to get used to writing the book and it just came about as it came about?

While I was really in the process of writing it, I would sit down and say, "I'm just going to write a thousand words today." It could be the same word over and over again if you I really didn't know what to write. But I would always end up writing something, and usually it was something that was pretty usable, which was nice. But often I would be there, I would look up and hours would've passed by and I would've written 5,000 words. I was classically trained in painting when I was younger, and I think I approach writing almost more like painting, if that makes sense.

To me, it was very easy to just write, and I'm like, "I don't care if this is crappy, it's something that I'm going to work on and refine." I feel like painting is very much about just getting something on the canvas and then once you have the underpainting done, then you go back and you refine it and refine it. And that's more how I approached the book.

That's the way that I approach writing, too—do a little bit each day and just keep refining it and moving it along. You're not going to immediately spit out a perfect draft. It's about going back to it and working on it. When I was a teenager and I thought, "I'm going to be a writer," I had a different idea where I'd sit there and look at the same sentence forever thinking, "I'm going to make the perfect sentence." Then you realize it's much better to have a bunch of imperfect sentences. Eventually, you can refine those and keep going, versus getting hung up on stuff and going nowhere.

I'm such a latent perfectionist. It's something I have to try really hard to conquer. If I was trying to write something perfect from the first get-go, I would just never write anything, or it would take me 20 years, which I guess for some people it does.

I saw you did an Instagram post at one point where you were going to go offline for a bit to work on writing. Are you working on another book already?

I am working on another book. Right now I'm working on 15-second elevator pitches. It's erotic satire featuring Hillary Clinton, and it's about cancel culture. It's really if Jonathan Swift had written *Lolita*, you know?

That's a good elevator pitch.

I think a lot of people were interested in the relationship I wrote about in the book between me and an older woman. I really wanted to explore the dynamics of that type of relationship where it's someone who's in their late twenties or early thirties dating a teenager. It's the question of, "Why do they want to date a teenager? What is driving someone to do that?"

Has it felt different writing fiction versus a memoir?

It's so much more fun to write a novel. Writing memoir was really painful because I was in this relationship and it was pretty bad. A lot of the reviews have said the way I talked about the relationship was really vague. I think that's a valid critique. She's a real person and anything I say is going to affect her. Even though she hurt me, I don't want her to suffer. But writing something fictional, because this person isn't real, I can be as ridiculous and mean as I want about them. And it's not going to harm anyone in any kind of way, which is really super satisfying.

Do you want to keep your practice multidisciplinary? Do you ever imagine focusing on just one part of it or for you do you find your creativity is more various or more varied?

I'm a big procrastinator, which I think comes from the perfectionism, but I've found for me the best way for me to procrastinate is just to have five projects going, one at a time. And whenever one feels stuck where I'm like, "Oh, it's not right." I don't want to keep just banging my head against the wall working on something, so I like to take a break and go and work on something else. Having something that's totally unrelated-like figuring out the branding for a perfume-is really great because it's just a complete and total head shift and a distraction. Usually, when I come back to whatever was blocking me, it feels just really easy and straightforward because I'm no longer caught in whatever rut I was caught in before.

As a self-described "perfectionist," is it hard to put something into print? It's easier to fix things on the internet.

When I was in, I think, third grade or something actually, I was thinking about who I was in first grade and I thought, "Oh my god, that was so humiliating." I was really into Minnie Mouse and all this embarrassing stuff and suddenly I thought, "Wow, it was so juvenile. I liked Disney princesses, that's horrible!" And then I started thinking, "Wait, is the me in fourth grade going to think I'm a total loser for liking Pokemon?" And then I started panicking and I thought, "Okay, I'm going to make a truce with my past and future selves that we won't judge each other."

There have been moments that are really cringey where I think, "Okay, I have to judge that." But for the most part, I try to just accept that it was a different person who wrote that book and I just got to love them. I try to treat it more like it's a book that a close friend wrote and I'm like, "I don't have to love it 100% or agree with every decision that they made." I think that makes it a lot easier for me to engage with old work, sort of an affectionate "Oh, wow, you really did that, huh?"

How do you structure a normal day? You have a lot of engaged followers on Instagram. Do you see social media as work, or is it how you take a break?

All of my days are totally different. Right now I'm working on this fiction, but more than that, I'm working on a show that's going to be based on the book, not totally. That's what I'm prioritizing right now. So it's like, I'll write if maybe if I'm hanging out with a friend and they're working on painting and I'm a little bored. Instead of opening social media, because I deleted it off of my phone, I'll just start working on writing.

If you replace your social media habit with something else, that something else-in your case, writing-becomes a more positive habit that you return to regularly.

I think I'm a much better long form writer. I'll be thinking about these things and I'm like, "Oh my god, what if the characters did this ridiculous thing?" And then I think about different people reading it and what they would think about it. It's what keeps me excited about it. It's almost more exciting than social media at this point because I'm just so excited to drop it.

What do you view as a successful project?

I feel like I am always trying to write for a younger version of myself. I do think about different people

in my life whose taste I appreciate and what they would think of something. But more than anything else, I want to write a book that younger me could have read. I think I relied so much on books when I was a kid to help me get through shit.

When people message me and they're like, "Oh wow, I was in a terrible relationship similar to yours. I was really able to relate and this helped me understand it in a new way. Thank you so much." I think for me that's the biggest success.

Did you ever feel burnt out? If so, how do you replenish yourself?

I used to really beat myself up when I had days like that. But I'll work on the weekends often, and so I'm doing all the things around the work itself, like talking to friends. I get so many of my ideas from conversations with friends and cooking. I'll be thinking things over. It's a very meditative practice for me. Or just taking really long baths or going to the spa, all these things, they end up being a part of doing the actual work in a way.

Do you have writing habits that you have to fight against?

I'm in this writing class right now. Finally. My friend was making fun of me. She's just like, "You're so backwards. You always do this thing where you put something out into the world, and then you're like, 'Oh, I want to do it again, but I'll take a class on it this time so I actually know what I'm doing.'"

I had tried applying to this class before and they didn't want me until I put the book out. A lot of the people in the class are in their fifties or something. I think they thought I might not be very serious about it. But yeah, there's a lot of things [the teacher] had been really ripping into me for. I think at first he was really regretting me being in the class was almost the sense that I got. But I was just like I really love super harsh, brutal critique that's very constructive. He totally ripped apart my writing the first day.

He actually sent me an email after class where he said, "Hey, I wanted to apologize. I think I was really too harsh." He was like, "I don't think you're writing is terrible, but I was digging in because I think there's these places where you can improve." And I was like, "No, I really love it." I really benefit, I think, from someone who's just brutally honest with what they think. And if I disagree with someone I just will leave it.

But in this case, I feel my writing has just gotten so much even over the course of the four weeks that I've been in it, and that's really great. I guess one of my writing habits that's bad is I use a lot of "I" sentences. So it'll be like, "I put on the kettle to make some tea." And he said, "Nobody cares that you put on a kettle to make tea." He asked, "What is the actual experience of putting on the kettle?" It's all about the dynamic.

I think, for me, all my best work has come from people where there's creative conflict and this productive, generative conflict. What I read is different than what you read. What I appreciate is different than what you appreciate. I think it's all about letting go of the ego, and then it just becomes 10 billion times better. I love collaborating. I very rarely do projects that aren't collaborative in some way.

It's hard it to edit yourself. I find it hard to work entirely on my own. One thing you were saying before is how you make money off of everything you do. How do you make sure that you're able to pay your bills and that the things you do are valued and you're getting what you deserve for them? Is this something you've always been good at, advocating for yourself? How did you learn to make that part of what you do?

I think, honestly, doing sex work really made me value my work so much more. The amount of money you're getting paid is in a lot of ways totally crazy. Very few careers have an hourly that's \$2,000 an hour. Even very high paid lawyers. And so, I think I was just spending all this time with people who had a ton of money and observing how they interacted and where they were willing to spend it and where they weren't. So much of it is just having the attitude of, "I deserve this much." And knowing when people have it and when people don't. It's like who is the right person to be like, "All right. I'm going to give you a discount because..." When writing the book, the advance was lower than I would ever accept for anything, just about, but because I thought, "Yeah, I'm a totally untested writer and you're going to hold my hand through this process," My editor said, "You can just call me whenever you want. If you're freaking out, I'll just help you do it." For me, I was just like, "That's great."

Then, when I'm working on other things I think, "Okay, this is a company that is not a small press, that is not going to be holding my hand through it; I need to advocate for myself a little bit more here and be firm." It's a "If they value me, then they'll accept it. And if they don't value me, then I don't want to be working there anyways" sort of deal.

In an ideal scenario, you finish the next book and do you want to keep doing all your variety of work, or do you want to just narrow it down?

So much of it, for me, is just gut sense, where I think, "Is this a right time for it?" And my gut will tell me, "Oh, maybe now it's time to work on music. Maybe now it's time to write a book. Maybe now I just need to go on a trip with my friends and do nothing for three weeks in a row and be completely unproductive but also be having all these conversations and making memories that will no doubt inform my

work later on."

Are you okay with abandoning a project?

I usually keep all of the stuff that I've been working on around it. When I was 17, or something, I had written this big outline. I was like, "Oh, I'm going to write a memoir just about my childhood or whatever." I wrote an outline and I thought, "Oh, it would be cool to write this." And then I thought, "No one's going to want to read this." But I just had it in my Google Drive, and when I was writing [my memoir], I remembered, "Oh, I know I have that." I found it and the outline was so useful. It was really this case of, "Oh, I didn't even remember that this thing had happened, but that's the perfect imagery to put in there." So it's over a decade later I might end up revisiting something. And especially now that you can just store everything digitally, I'll just toss it somewhere on Dropbox. If I come back to it, I come back to it, and if I don't, it's fine, too.

Suppose you did your projects and there was no audience and no money. What have you gotten out of them on a creative level? You were saying before, you write these books for your younger self. What have you learned about yourself from doing this work?

It's definitely been great for processing things that happened to me in my life—obviously not all of it. My comic is just really fun to write in and of itself. I guess that's what I got out of it...fun. But when I'm writing something like a memoir, I hadn't processed a lot of the stuff that had happened to me over the years when I was doing sex work and that relationship and just writing about it and being forced to put a narrative to it. I was just, "Oh, wow, reading this, that was messed up." Whereas before I had just been trying to, I think, be like, "It wasn't that bad." Being forced to write down everything that happened, I realized, "Oh, this was messier than I thought it was."

Liara Roux Recommends:

Five things that can turn my day around in an instant

A spritz of Annabel's Birthday Cake perfume by Marissa Zappas

A pot of Shinki Yamashita Gyukuro from Tea Dealers

Bath with Muddy Blue Bath Salts by Bath Roman Yakusen

Getting the premium scrub/massage combo at King Spa in Palisades Park

Brunch at Oxalis

Name

Liara Roux

Vocation

sex worker, organizer, and author

Fact

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