On adapting to distraction and uncertainty

Writer and teacher Tony Tulathimutte discusses forming his own writing class from home, writing the internet, and letting distraction feed back into your writing.

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As told to Ruth Minah Buchwald, 2595 words.

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You write, teach, shitpost, game, and lift. What is your daily schedule like?

I get up at 7:55am precisely, make coffee, eat, and fart around until 9:00am, which is when my internet blocker goes on automatically, and I work until noon. After that, lunch, more farting around-and when I say that, what I mean is reading and looking at content and stuff like that, then I go to the gym and come back.

From 4:00pm onwards, mostly just finishing up whatever reading I need to do and thinking about dinner. I go grocery shopping and usually make dinner with my roommate. After that, watch a movie, game, nothing too exciting, but sometimes inevitably there's wrinkles that you get in the schedule, and I'll have to do a phone interview at 10:00am for example, and that'll disturb things. When that happens, I try to be aware of my own difficulty with focusing on things if I know that I have an impending appointment and try to focus on something smaller.

You've written about rejection extensively, most recently about "The Rejection Plot" for *The Paris Review*. How and when did you decide that [your most recent] project, a collection of stories that was long-listed for a National Book Award, was going to be about rejection?

From the very beginning, way back in 2011, which is unusual for me. Usually it takes me one, if not several drafts to figure out what a story is trying to do or be about. These things tend to emerge organically out of the situation that I'm writing, but in this case, I just knew that I had the driving material to write that book. I had to sideline it for a long time because I was also working on *Private Citizens* at the time, so there was about a four-year period where I wasn't really working on it at all. When I got back to it, I had about three different stories. And as is typical of me, a ton of random notes and scattered fragments that I didn't really know how to organize.

I've said this in a lot of places now: I have this idea of approaching the subject from all different mediums, genres, and forms, but this eventually just got whittled down to the fiction parts of the book. And the non-fiction part ended up getting capped off into this *Paris Review* essay and another piece that's coming out in *Mixed Feelings*.

The internet is often a distractive rabbit hole but you've utilized it to your advantage. Can you talk about writing the internet in fiction?

Yeah, it's a chicken and egg question of whether I'm interested in this stuff and am able to adapt things that might otherwise be distracting into my own writing, or if it's because that's what's in front of me. I try not to let myself be distracted during the day. I'm definitely only successful about 40% of the time, but part of being

a writer is being adaptable, and if you know that you have bad habits of distraction that you've yet to fully resolve, then the next best thing is to figure out how to get the distraction to feed back into your writing. That's just one of those virtues of adaptability, where that's concerned.

It's been eight years since your first book, *Private Citizens* came out. Did you move onto this project right after? How do you maintain momentum when you have a completed project and might feel stuck on what to do next?

I'm usually not stuck on what to do next because I'm the kind of writer who has 50 things on the back burner at any given point. Speaking of distraction, another form of procrastination that's really common among writers is just working on other projects. For a while, I was working on four books at the same time around 2017. I was telling myself that as long as I was productive day in and day out, it didn't matter if I was making progress on one project over another. What I wish I had known at the time is that if you let things draw out too long, you can lose interest in them. Your enthusiasm for the project can die on the vine as your priorities shift and as the circumstances that got you interested in the first place change.

I try to be a lot more focused now, but I'm always keeping notes files for other projects when ideas occur to me. For example, I have a book of criticism I've been working on for a while, and if I have a thought or idea that's obviously literary criticism and not fiction, it's not going to go in the notes file for my fiction project. It's going to go somewhere else, so that by the time I actually finish what I'm working on and move on to the next thing, I have some pretty fertile soil to work with. I don't tend to lose momentum for that reason, which is not, of course, to say that I'm a fast writer–I think that my track record makes that pretty obvious. Just a consistent one, I'll say.

How do you decide whether a story is complete or if it's better to put it aside and come back to it? Does it ever have to do with the current culture/zeitgeist?

If I feel like my enthusiasm or my drive to publish a piece is because I want to hit some on some sort of transient cultural theme or zeitgeisty subject, I'm going to be very suspicious of it. I think part of why it takes me so long to write things is because I want to be reassured that what I'm writing about is not just something that is only going to be relevant to people contemporaneously, within a short span of time. Fiction is the worst possible place to do that because it takes so long to publish. Even if you were ripping stories from the headlines and sending them back to the editor and getting them approved, if it's a book, you're still looking at another year and a half to publication. If that's what you're chasing, you're rarely going to hit your target. I don't really let what's going on in the world dictate how ready a piece is, or use it as a yardstick for completion.

I think of finishing a piece as traversing a number of stages of doneness. You'd know this from taking my class, but I talk about hitting a first draft, which is the first complete version of a story, but you know that's not really done. The concept for the story is still totally up in the air, but you can see it a little clearer. After that, you go through one or a couple of drafts, and usually hit several walls. At that point, it helps to get feedback from somebody that you know is going to tell you the truth and not just offer bland encouragement, but is actually going to try and help you improve the piece and is capable of doing so. For some people, that's one or a handful of first readers. For other people, it's workshops that they'll sign up for, or writing groups that meet regularly. That helps a lot with getting a little bit of distance from the manuscript. That process reiterates a couple of times and you will hit a point where it's not necessarily shelf-ready yet, but you think that it's in a state where all of its virtues are pretty much legible. I'm not just gesturing at what I'm trying to do, it is substantially embodied in the text somehow. At that point, I would feel comfortable sending it out to an agent or editor, depending on what kind of project it is. And then the feedback is either rejection or acceptance.

Sometimes you may have misjudged in your haste to get something published and it takes 20, 30, 40 rejections for you to take a closer look at that project or step away from it for a little while. When that happens, that's actually a good thing. It means that you have some kind of break on your impatience because your ego is always driving you to finish things and get bylines and have people read things, but it's good to have a moderating influence.

Acceptances and rejections aren't any measure of inherent merit. There's plenty of good work that is publishable and that gets rejected for all kinds of reasons. There can be a bright side to this sort of institutional block that is forcing you to keep on returning to the work and seeing what can be improved. Then after that, the clock takes care of the rest. If you get a piece accepted, then you just have to work on it until time runs out. And when it does, then you're done.

How did you first figure out how to make a living through writing?

Well, I didn't until maybe 2017, and that was just for one year. After that, I was still making my money from teaching. So when people say, "Making a living off of writing," what they usually mean is you're making a living from a number of different writing adjacent activities, like teaching, editing, freelancing, or being involved in some literary organization. When thinking about making a living from writing, people usually imagine that you are talking about being paid for a book or for stories that you're publishing and making a living that way, but I know maybe two people that that describes.

It is very much a feast or famine business. And it's something that you inch your way into. You have a day job and you support yourself that way, and eventually you either get a few lucky windfalls that give you a bit more security to transition slowly out of that work, or you just start getting more steady gigs in the writing world that supplement and eventually supplant the old work.

You've started your own class, CRIT, for prose writers, of which I'm an alum. Can you speak about your experience with teaching and what you found lacking in other institutionally-backed classes?

I think one thing that is missing from typical creative writing curriculums–the ones that you see in universities–is pedagogy. By that, I mean a concerted and structured attempt to teach different subjects within writing. I think when I applied to the Iowa Writers Workshop online, they basically said that writing can't be taught, and I feel a little differently about it. I think that there's a good reason why there's this perception that writing can't be taught because it's not the same as teaching multivariate calculus.

There are no hard and fast rules, there's no pure knowledge. It's just opinions, so you can see why an institution would want to avoid positioning themselves as pervading rigorous knowledge or education in that sense. But that doesn't mean that writing can't be taught. It just means that it needs to be taught in a different way. And I am somebody who thinks that about 40 percent of writing can be taught. To take an extreme case, you can learn the alphabet, that's part of writing. You can learn grammar, and that's a part of writing too.

And that continues up to a certain point, where you get to just fundamentals of craft, like the way that perspective works, or how to format dialogue, or what the purpose and uses of scene breaks are. It transitions into the much harder stuff that the writer needs to figure out for themselves. That dark matter, 60 percent of that cannot be taught. To me, that of course is the important stuff, but it doesn't mean that you shouldn't try and cover the fundamentals either. A big part of CRIT, in addition to the conventional workshopping, is dedicated to trying to thrash out different elements of craft in process. In craft, there's plot, dialogue, character, style, and so on.

Process is another thing that can be taught just by example. By discussing different ways that people go about getting writing done, establishing good writing habits, the mindset that has been useful for different writers to be productive. It's worth talking about that stuff too. I've been in and taught for different writing programs since 2001 and I've never really had an experience where that kind of stuff was covered in any systematic way, so that's what I wanted to do with CRIT. I make it very clear from the outset that it's a kitchen sink approach, that anything that you disagree with on dogmatic grounds, you should disregard–that it's all just food for thought to help the individual writer come up with their own attitudes and figure out what works for them. Because anybody that tells you that there are hard and fast rules for what constitutes good writing or how to make it is lying.

You've encouraged alums of the class to start their own writing groups, which I have with our cohort whom I love. Can you speak about your longstanding writing group and how that formed and evolved?

When I was in undergrad at Stanford, I took a fiction class with Adam Johnson, who was a Stegner fellow there at the time, and I really enjoyed it. I talked to my friend Alice Sola Kim, who lived on my floor, and told her to take it too. Through that, she met a couple of friends, a couple of whom decided to start their own writing group just because we wanted to keep on doing more outside of the classroom. So it was Jenny Zhang and Max Doty who decided to start the group and they just invited people that they thought would be fun to workshop with. We kept meeting pretty consistently every couple of weeks or so. I think I got invited in 2002 or 2003 and since then, we just kept on meeting.

Over the years, as people kept on moving away, there would be new people recruited. A lot of people moved away from the West coast, so it splintered into East and West coast factions–one in the Bay Area and one in New York. I credit this group with everything. There's probably no way that I would've had the motivation on my own to keep on pursuing writing in such obscurity with so much failure without feeling like there was somebody reading it and somebody responding to it. And that's all I needed at the beginning. We still meet on an as-needed basis now.

At that phase in your career, before you can get things published with any consistency, you just have to do whatever you can to keep morale up. That's just one way to do that. I think that works for a lot of people who enjoy creating things in some kind of social context. But for those it doesn't appeal to, there's nothing wrong with lone-wolfing it either.

Tony Tulathimutte recommends:

Loved and Missed by Susie Boyt

Hundreds of Beavers dir. Mike Cheslik

My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness by Nagata Kabi

Case of the Golden Idol by Color Gray Games

Other Minds and Other Stories by Bennett Sims

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