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As told to Laura Feinstein, 2586 words.

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On turning your art into a full-time thing

Author and cultural critic Xochitl Gonzalez discusses her Puerto Rican identity, not being afraid to treat your creative work like a business, and standing up for your art.

I have to break the rules and admit I'm a huge fan. I saw you speak at Novella [the free writing community] on the journey from day job to MFA to Olga.

Thank you! I love Novella. It's so great and truly, I wrote my first fiction, really anything, because of Novella. I have a lot of fondness.

So many are trying to squeeze in writing between the margins of our "real lives." It was inspiring to hear about the years spent in the work world before you even began professional writing at 40.

It was formative. I do think that some of my classmates at Iowa Writers Workshop, where I did my MFA, were younger and hadn't had a ton of years having to hustle and figure out how to live in New York, which is so insanely expensive. But because of that experience, even though I think of writing as an art form, I also still think of it as a business.

100%

Part of why it works for me is because I'm always thinking, "Well, what's our revenue this year? How can we diversify our product?" I got lucky that Olga was valued the way that it was. That gave me a setup, a base to start a business. Not everybody gets an advance like that. Not just that, an advance and then the chance to get money from Hollywood, which obviously is always a different business than publishing, meaner and cruel but more lucrative.

But, it should be stated, you wrote an amazing book.

Ok, I don't want to say it was luck, because it's a mix. It's a blessing. I had a story that I felt needed to be put into the world, and I was blessed that it came in a version where I could take that and use it as the foundation to start what I think of as my creative enterprise.

And working a hospitality job-or any freelance job-definitely primes you for a writing schedule.

That's exactly right. You're like, "What's the ROI?" Sometimes you get really cool opportunities that get presented to you and you have to think about the amount of time that's going to take, and then also, is it worth it? Because it can lead to new things if it gives you a new skill set.

That is the other part about doing this a little later: I listen to myself. You sometimes have to be your own compass. I have an easier time doing that at 45 than I would've had at even 30. I had to do a pitch for a TV show a couple weeks ago and one of my managers was like, "I'm just worried it's a little too grainy, too nerdy." It was an adaptation. I was like, "I think I'm going to lean into the nerdy. That just works for me." I ended up nailing it. They were blown away by the way that I had thought through the layers. I'm not saying that to brag as much as to say that I could have been intimidated, but realized, "No, I know my gut." I was a wedding planner and in owning my own business, I was a fucking salesperson. And I was a really good one, too. You have to go in and learn to hear what the people are asking for, even when that's not what they're saying. You get good at reading situations.

Very true.

My one bit of advice to people that want to transition, or are hoping to turn their art into a full-time thing, is to remember that it's a fantasy that any art is "pure" art. I just saw a successful visual artist do Chanel's backdrop for their product runway. And I thought "she's not just in her studio doing what she wants completely. In order to do that, she has to do these other things. All those phone calls and planning." Even when we think of "pure art," specifically pure visual art, there's still a job aspect. The realistic part of it. Luckily, I always kind of liked working.

Well, it's good to have money to pay the rent!

I think so, and I think it's also good to...not be bummed out by it. Does that make sense? As long as you can figure out how to time manage to do this part that you really love in that.

Correct me, but you turned 40, were working a "normal" job, thought "it's now or never" and the pandemic pushed you to get your MFA and start the book?

No, I sold my book a week before the pandemic started. I was having an amazing life but my friends were literally losing their businesses. It was a very unusual, difficult, stressful time where I was quietly winning but felt terrible because so many friends were in the event and hospitality industry. But I had been pivoting away from weddings and had started doing experiential marketing and was still in my company and had wanted to write, and then I turned 40 and I was like, "I think I need to change my life in order to actually make this possible."

The 40s reckoning.

There is a certain amount of needing to hustle that prohibits you from being able to be that creative. I was chasing down checks, new business—there was a certain level of panic. It's funny. I have a reputation for being nice, but if you want me to be a fucking bitch, it's when somebody, usually a giant company, owes me money. I am fortunate now that I'm not desperate for a check to come, but there was a time when I was. And I will never forget that. It's like, "How dare you assume that I don't need that money that you promised me contractually?"

I think a lot of creative folks identify.

It bothers me. Because of my background— I'd survived a recession. I'd survived a divorce. I'd survived so many crazy things that I was like, "I'm going to go and get a normal day job. My check will come every two weeks because that will be easier than running a business." I ended up getting a job and then deciding to apply to Breadloaf. This was all post 40. 40 to 41. Then the summer that I was 41 I went to Breadloaf and got so much better at writing. After that, I started to go to Novella. I took a writing class with Porochista Khakpour at Bruce High Quality Foundation. All these little things.

The Bruce High Quality Foundation is so iconic in New York. And so is Porochista!

Yes, and it was a free writing class. 75 people must have shown up. She did these prompts and I'd go every week for maybe four or five weeks. It was great. Then once I got the job, I would just get up every morning and write. After Breadloaf, I was like, "I'm going to apply and try to get my MFA." Then I was working on pieces for the application.

And you got into the Iowa Writers Workshop—what a dream.

I had a little writing group, and on a lark, I applied. When I was accepted, I was discussing whether I should go with a female friend who was married with kids. She said, "If I were you and not married and didn't have kids, I would go to Iowa." I realized, "You're right. I should take advantage of the situation." I moved to Iowa after being in New York my whole life when I was 42 and had 200 pages of *Olga* written. Then I spent a lot of time working on that book, and sold it my second semester. I came home for spring break and then, literally, went out with my editor and the next day everything went into lockdown.

Talk about timing!

Yeah. That night, I went out with my editor, Megan, who acquired *Olga*, and my readers. As we waited, I got the call that the book had been optioned. That we had an offer from Hulu. I went into the pandemic with a giant amount of work and had to revise and write a pilot. I had to learn screenwriting. I was super busy and it was surreal. My life had already changed—I'd given up my apartment, gone to Iowa. When I moved out of New York in the summer of August of 2019, I had one version of life and then by the time things reopened, it was a completely different existence.</sapn>

It's a little bit surreal. Internally, there were a lot of knocks and bruises. But I learned a lot. At Iowa I got really lucky because there was a novel workshop. I've lived in New York so long, I had always known a lot of people in publishing. My childhood best friend had been a book publicist for 20 years. But learning about the entertainment industry, that was a lot harder. Literally, the summer of '21, I was on set executive producing the pilot version of *Olga* and I'd never been in any situation like that before. Having to stand up for myself and for what I believed things needed to be to television executives. I was the only Latino woman involved in the whole project besides Aubrey Plaza.

That must have been intimidating.

Again, that age thing. I had experience asserting myself in a lot of professional situations. You just have to steel yourself.

In the book, *Olga* is a wedding planner. You were a wedding planner. This is where I'm going to again nose myself in. When I first graduated I did high end wedding catering for Abigail Kirsch.

Oh, oh my god. Yes. Tapan Hill! Yes. Oh, that's so funny.

Personally, it felt discombobulating. With this particular type of catering, which you captured so well in your book, you have access to this insanely elite world—as an outsider. Sometimes they really let you know

it. A lot of outlets have talked about class and race in *Olga*, but was it also cathartic to talk about this hospitality work experience?

I'm at a loss for a vocabulary word for this. I'm not quite sure if it was cathartic. I felt really proud to put on the page what I thought was a well written book, that work experience. There was something about that, this invisibility to all the people that make these things run, to all the cater waiters, to all the guys in the floral market. They're constantly in service to the very, very wealthy. They're even less visible than planners and waitstaff. This is the world that I knew well. How hard everybody in these industries worked behind the scenes. How much they cared about doing great work. I felt good putting that out there and not just as, "I want to do a good job because I want to please this wealthy person." It's more, "I want to do a good job because I have pride in what I do and I'm showing up." That was cool to me, and also as a way to talk about class where I felt everybody had dignity. I tried to make a point that this world is as reliant on all of those anonymous waiters that you don't always meet as it is on planners like Olga. She needed all of them to do her job. It made me happy to have a chance to give that world some life. I spent a lot of time there.

Many writers feel daunted when they have something they want to say but it's layered. Did it feel overwhelming having many themes in your book- the diaspora, middle age love, family relations, work, class- and trying to tie them all together?

Yeah, the overwhelm was not so much in, "How do I do this?" As much as it is, "I have to put this all in." I will say, I wrote this book from a place of rage. I was absolutely infuriated by what was happening in Puerto Rico around the time of Maria. And I was disgusted by what I was seeing happening in Brooklyn. I felt like I had to write as fast as I possibly could because if I were to take five years no one would even know what Brooklyn I was talking about. It would be a historic artifact. I don't know that I had an agenda other than I was going to talk about Puerto Rico and I was going to talk about Brooklyn. The third goal was to paint a portrait of these people's lives, these Diasporicans of a certain age. It was very organic. I thought about all that has happened, and continues to happen, in Puerto Rico-where the population's being eradicated and the island is being decimated-and felt an urgency.

For some readers, this will be their first intro to basic Puerto Rican history.

Before I'd even had the idea for the book, I remember lying in bed and watching the Coachella feed from Beyoncé's performance and thinking "Oh my god, she must have felt this giant intensity to put this work out, to highlight the Black experience." I found it inspiring in terms of what I wanted to show about the Puerto Rican Diaspora in book form. It's so layered and nuanced. There's so many details and it's so full, and yet, at the same time, it all comes together. I wrote *Olga* primarily for Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora. It's so sad that so many of us don't know our own history because it's been completely removed from the way we talk about American history.

I don't want to say it's a Trojan horse, but there's something for everyone.

I designed it that way, to be honest. What was happening with Maria. I was so tired of seeing Puerto Ricans yelling in the dark. The only people listening were other Puerto Ricans, on Twitter, in op-eds. Unless it was written by Lin Manuel, maybe not even then, it was just two seconds of, "Isn't that sad?" and then they'd turn the page. Many didn't even realize that Puerto Ricans were Americans. I thought, "You know what's not working? The news is not working, so entertainment might work. Traditional media is not working to change awareness of what's happening in Puerto Rico." Bad Bunny made a documentary that he disguised as a music video. I wrote this book. *Olga* was a Trojan horse because I was not going to be able to get people interested in, "Oh, this is a political book about Puerto Rico." But "A wedding planner falls in love, and guess what?" Yes. That was very conscious. And I hope it works.

Xochitl Gonzalez Recommends:

The Day The Crayons Quit. It's a kid's book and it's so creative in a way that makes you wonder if you should open your mind up to how you see the world.

I've been very into Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou's music lately. The songs sound exactly the way the titles feel.

I've re-read George W.S. Trow's New Yorker essay, "Within the Context of No Context" recently because I've found, in the current moment of entertainment, it has haunted me and felt more relevant than ever.

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Vocation

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Fact

Mayra Castillo

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