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June 1, 2022 -

As told to Caitlin Wolper, 2288 words.

Tags: Music, Writing, Process, Identity, Mental health, Time management, Multi-tasking.

On balancing your daily life and creative work

Journalist and author Marissa R. Moss discusses juggling family, work, and COVID while researching and writing a music book.

Your book *Her Country* covers 20 years of women in country music: the circumstances they faced and the world around them. For you, what lit that spark: "I need to write this book"?

I've always wanted to write a book. I'm not the only journalist to say that. I had been covering this beat in Nashville for a while, and became so embedded in it in a way that I almost didn't see the possibility of turning it into a book right in front of my face—I was thinking about other ideas.

And then I got in contact with my literary agent, and she said something to me that was really useful: "This is your flag to plant, and you should plant it. If you don't, you're going to see this book written by some white dude two years from now, and it's not going to be done right."

Not to say that I even did it right! But I had an epiphany in that moment, and realized that there would be a way to turn all this work into a book that I feel would tell the story of the time period in the way that I felt that it deserved to be told.

Did you ever have any other iterations of *Her Country* in mind? Or other directions you thought about pursuing?

It definitely evolved a lot. There were a lot of things that I learned even in the process of pitching it to publishers, certain publishers. I think I learned a lot about what I wouldn't want in that process.

They were like, "Oh, make it about the friendships of the women and how they lifted each other up." And I was like, "Well, that's bullshit." You wouldn't ask that for a story about men. I don't really care what their interpersonal relationships are. That's not this book, in that way. So I learned a lot about what I didn't want it to be as I was learning about what I wanted it to be.

But the pandemic changed a lot of things. I got this book deal two weeks into the pandemic, so it was kind of a crazy period, obviously. And I think I had always envisioned when I was writing the proposal for the book over so many months, that I would write it on the road, go to shows, and interview people in real time. And it would be more rooted in the present in some way. And then when the pandemic happened and I realized I had to write it sitting at home between homeschooling my kids, I was like, "Well, this has to be a very different project than what I envisioned."

You wrote this book during COVID and while caring for your kids. How do you make sure you devote time to your work?

A lot of times really poorly, it felt like, to be honest. I mean, I'm lucky. I had a way to make enough of an income to keep myself and my family going. My husband and I had work. I always want to [be clear] that I'm grateful. But it was really fucking hard.

We don't have family [in Nashville], and obviously, no one really had family help during the pandemic, unless they had a bubble. And my husband works full-time at a job where he doesn't have flexible hours, so he was up on Zooms and in meetings more than ever for the entire day. And I was with the kids juggling two

different homeschool schedules and figuring that all out while trying to get this book off the ground. And by the time I got to the night, I was exhausted, emotionally and physically, and my brain was tired.

It was difficult and it was slow. And I joke that I wish for books that were written during the pandemic by parents, you could slap a sticker on it like Oprah's Book Club and be like, "This book was written during the pandemic. Don't be such an asshole if you see an error in it." But once I finally got my kids back in school, I had to make up for so much lost time that it was difficult. And I had to be super regimented in a way that doesn't feel natural to me.

But I just had to suck it up and do it and input words into an Excel document to make sure I hit goals. And again, not my brain at all. But it's creation, it's work, and you're balancing that.

How did you pick the women whose stories you followed throughout the book?

That went through a couple different iterations, and there's so many different stories that could still be told, and different ways I could have told it. I know there's a lot of people that [will be] mad: "Where's Carrie Underwood? Where's this person?"

There's so many different ways you could have told this story, but I settled on the fact that I really wanted to tell a specific story about women that were achieving success in country music in Nashville, despite the good old boys' club, according to their own rules, their own moral compass, their own vision—and one that doesn't really necessarily align all the time with what Music Row's is. I wanted to tell that story through The Chicks and through 9/11 to the present day and Black Lives Matter. It was really important to me to be able to get into those different cultural threads.

There'll be great books written about so many different women in country music, but this was the best way I found of telling this story and this line of success and how they defined it.

What was the research and information-gathering process like?

Research was the one thing I could do. Shifting to being that extremely research-based book was something that happened as a necessity during the pandemic. I think it benefited the book, but it was also good because I could do that with my kids around.

I can't write well with my kids around. I can't do interviews well with my kids around. It just doesn't go well. They end up always barging in every single time and drag me off, and it's just chaos. But research, I could really do. I could go down some serious research rabbit holes...in spurts, too.

And so it was a lot of time at newspapers.com, and going into archives. And I went to the Country Music Hall of Fame and did research there in their archives. And it was a pretty heavy period for the first six months of just research and then organizing all that research, which was a bear. But somehow it all kind of built up to this point where I felt like I could have the bones down.

And you must end up with so much more information than you can use. How do you filter?

I had to really understand what my chapters were about. At one point, I took a bunch of colored index cards and I laid them all out and I went through each chapter: I had a colored index card for each person, each artist, and then sort of subcategories within that for different topics. And then I laid that all out in front of me—trying to figure out who's the serial killer, a little bit, but just to make sure I was touching on everything I wanted to and to be able to visualize how it all kind of unfolded a little bit.

The book has so much of a focus on authenticity, which is so central in country music. When you were writing, did you have that authenticity on your mind? Did it have any bearing on your process?

Authenticity is such a weird word. You can say it with good intention, and you can say it with malicious intention. It can mean so many different things. And in country music, authenticity, while trying to mean something good, can often be nefarious in how it's used. That was something I was really interested in exploring thematically in the book. It felt important.

Writing a book, you're kind of in this bubble, you're not doing the "write the [article], and then it's posted pretty soon after, and I'm going to know how everyone feels about it really quick," which I don't usually care about anyway. But you're so siloed, you're just like, "I have to write this the way I feel it should be written."

As with anything that highlights women, there are always misogynistic commenters and men who "know more" about music and all of those things. And I've seen you on Twitter already deal with that. What's your method for reacting to detractors, whether it's not reacting, responding, blocking?

It's hard. I know that women and especially marginalized women receive the bulk of this bullshit on the internet. Male writers just do not. So they can fight me. If you want to come with receipts, that's fine, but I just know it to be true.

I feel very deeply and personally about my work, and I take things personally because I'm human. There's certain blogs and things that will focus on talking about what women or any writers say on Twitter or wherever, or think it's fun to attack women writers as their cause for existence. It can be really painful and scary. I've gotten death threats, and gotten sent plenty of dicks and that fun stuff. People think

you're made of steel, and I'm not at all. I'm not going to pretend like I am, but I also stand by my work so firmly. I don't publish something that I don't stand by.

If you want to talk about my work, that's another thing. But it's never about my work. It never is. I block a lot of people. Block, mute, remove them from your followers. And in certain people's cases, I have a lawyer on the line. You should have a lawyer on the line. It's a good tool.

Was there one thing that surprised you when you were researching?

I'm very careful as a reporter to honor my hunches, but not to the point where I lose sight of the fact that it was a hunch. Hunches are important because there's some kind of weird chemical situation, a combination of things, that leads to a hunch. Maybe it's things in the back of your mind, or different ways your subconscious is putting together stuff. And sometimes you're just really off-base and the hunch is wrong.

I had certain hunches with this book in terms of how The Chicks played into this story and how patriotism played into this story, and I had hunches combined with knowledge that I felt comfortable pursuing extensively that I think ended up really bearing out even more than I had imagined. There's digging and reporting, and then there's digging the hole to nowhere forever because you don't want to admit that there's nothing at the bottom. And that's not good either.

I found a lot of surprising things in my research about the period around The Chicks. I was digging around the archives with the Country Music Hall of Fame and I found this one issue of, maybe it was *Country Weekly*, and there was a cartoon of The Chicks and this little blurb about them. And I was like, "Oh, this must be dated." And I looked at the cover and I realized that this had come out maybe six to eight months before they said what they said on stage.

I was like, "Oh wow, there was this really deep, already existing sentiment towards The Chicks." It was just a matter of time. And if it wasn't that, it would've been something else. And that is rooted in deep misogyny, deep fear, and so many other things.

Having written this book, how would you approach a new one? Is there any lesson you've taken away?

Gosh. Yeah. Don't write a book with two children at home during a pandemic. I would not do that again. The process of writing a second book would be just really fundamentally different than this book. It covers a big time period, 20 years, so it's not just all of these different people and stories, but it's 20 years. It's three main women. It's five other women woven into that. And then this whole layer of culture and politics woven into that. And that was a lot to take on.

I really wanted it to be that broad because it just felt important for the historical record for me. But for the next one, in terms of my own mental health and workload, something with a different kind of focus and structure might be welcome.

Marissa R. Moss Recommends:

Joy Oladokun's *In Defense of My Own Happiness*. I can't get enough, I'm an agnostic Jew and listening to this album has become a spiritual practice, almost.

Using whatever five minutes of alone time I have per day—usually the walk home from school drop-off or sitting alone in the grocery store parking lot—to blast Fiona Apple's *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* or *Wet Leg*.

Why Patti Smith Matters is an extraordinary appreciation from Caryn Rose.

A standing desk, which I debated about for nearly two years. As a very jittery, restless-leg person, it helps so much. I can't do focused writing standing up, but I do everything else that way.

Dad Grass.

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