

On prioritizing your creative work



Journalist and critic Sophie Haigney on the value of multiple creative outlets, close observation as a starting point, and the necessity of being social.

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As told to Isabel Slone, 1540 words.

Tags: Writing, Journalism, Process, Multi-tasking, Day jobs.

What is it that you love the most about writing?

I really like turning interior thoughts into something tangible. I like being forced to turn thoughts or observations or critical ideas into language. It would be amazing to be an incredible painter and turn this interiority into something that feels real and touchable. But given what I'm capable of, it ended up being words. I love language. I think language is an amazing thing to play with and I feel really lucky I get to work in this medium. But I do think it's a very common thing for writers to wish they were painters.

I love this idea of writing being about translating one's interiority into language. Where does your interiority, or your interests, tend to lie?

Things that interest me are often the very ordinary features of everyday life. Someone once told me—and they meant it as a compliment, and I took it as one—that I write the mundane. What is the significance of lost pet signs? Why does the subway sound the way it does? Those questions are a lot more interesting to me than encountering culture in the often prepackaged ways it is presented to us. I do write about art exhibitions, and I love attending them. But as material for a writer, I think they often prove less fruitful because you're encountering something in an expected form.

What draws you towards finding meaning in the mundane? And what is your own perception of the work you create?

I started my career as a metro newspaper reporter at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, so I became very attuned to the basic metro feature stories about normal people who do something that's randomly interesting. Then as I moved into culture writing I just kept my eye on those sorts of things. I'm drawn towards things that form part of the backdrop of our everyday, things we get accustomed to and don't interrogate in any way.

I write critical essays or reported features with a critical lens. I often start with something hyper-specific—that might be something hyper-specific and weird like crypto bros buying Tungsten cubes, or hyper-specific and totally average, like lost pet signs. I'm always trying to ask the question, what does this actually mean? Why is this happening? Where can this observation take us?

You're also one of the most prolific writers that I know of. How do you manage to consistently produce such incredible work at an intense rate?

When I worked at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, I wrote an average of four stories a day, sometimes up to 11. They were really short stories, as opposed to what I write now, but I learned to construct my life around intense

deadlines. It also helped me to become less precious about things. A piece of writing is only a piece of writing. You're always going to look back at it and wish there are things you could change or that you would have taken it in a totally different direction. For me it's all really iterative.

That's one answer. The other answer is that it feels like I have to keep working in order to have money. I also think I work well when I have multiple things on the go. Some of my worst creative periods have been when I've been trying too hard to focus on one long project. I think dipping in and out of things is a weirdly fruitful mode for me.

It's relieving to hear that you're not a perfectionist because often people can get very bogged down in finding the exact right word or form of expression.

Sometimes I feel bad about it or I end up feeling like a little bit of a hack because I will take almost every assignment I am given. But I also think that's been really useful to me because you can learn a lot from doing all kinds of wildly different assignments. Being open to different forms of stories and different subject matter has helped me a lot in my career.

Tell me a little bit more about why focusing on multiple projects at a time is a productive way for you to work.

Part of it is I can't really focus on a piece of writing for more than a couple hours at a time. I'm impressed by people who can sit down and do a full day of work on one thing. Unless I have a crazy deadline, I can probably do two hours of good work on a project at a time. I actually think a lot of people are like that. When I've worked in offices before, I've observed that the actual work of writing can't happen for that many hours at a time. I also read an interview with Deborah Eisenberg where she said she writes for three hours a day. Somebody asked her where the rest of the time went and she said, "I can't really say." It made me feel a lot better, because she's amazing. That's kind of how I feel. I can work on different things, like a book review and a reported feature. It's easy to move between those two modes and not burn out on any one thing. I also think different forms of work can inform each other. It's not always totally straightforward but if I'm writing a book review on extinct objects, I might get ideas from it for other possible pieces in the future.

Speaking of creative burnout, is that something you ever struggle with?

I guess periodically. I definitely feel like after long periods of intense work I need a break. I also feel like, frankly, I don't work that many hours in a day. I'll work for a couple hours, then go do something else and that's my time to re-energize and then I'll come back to working on something. I've definitely gone through professional periods where I feel exhausted and I can't keep freelancing. But it comes and goes in waves. It's never felt so severe that I wanted to stop doing what I am doing now, or that I wanted to get a full-time job. Actually, I think one of the main ways I've avoided having really severe burnout is by not having a full-time job.

When you say you don't work that many hours—what does an average day look like for you?

I tend to wake up early, especially if I have a lot of work to do. I think of myself as being very alert in the morning. On an ideal day, which has not been happening lately because I find winter very hard, I will be working by 7:30 or 8am, drinking my coffee, excited about the prospect of the day. As soon as I break for lunch, which is maybe at 11:30, my day shifts a little bit and that's when I do more administrative work like responding to emails. In the afternoon I go for a run or a walk then come back and finish doing a little bit more.

What are some activities you find creatively refresh you?

Definitely running. I've had various running injuries in the last few years and have noticed that I work a lot less when I'm not leaving the house and exercising. Reading can be part of my work, too. If I'm having a day where I can't get anything done, I will sit down and read for a little bit and I find that resets me. It helps bring me back to a place where my mind is clear. I feel like it's really important for me to see friends, because I spend so much time working alone. I enjoy having plans in the evening. Days when I don't leave the house or talk

to anyone can feel bleak. I've had a lot of them during the pandemic, but I also had a lot of days like that pre-pandemic and I know those days were hard on my creative life.

Earlier on you mentioned being envious of painters. Do you have any other creative outlets besides writing?

Sadly, no. I wish I did. I always toy with the idea of taking a woodworking class. I have a close friend who is an amazing writer and she also does a lot of weaving. There is something really beautiful and balanced about pouring your creative energies into multiple things even if it isn't your profession or even something you're particularly good at. But that's not me.

Which is totally okay!

One thing I do periodically is take beginner Italian. I've just had this long-running desire to speak and read Italian. But I have also learned from this experience that it's difficult to learn Italian if you're not really committed to learning.

Sophie Haigney Recommends:

Painting Time by Maylis de Kerangal

Caucasia by Danzy Senna

This Bon Appetit recipe for kimchi udon noodles

This version of "Goin' down the Road Feeling Bad" by The Grateful Dead

The Mother's Recompense by Edith Wharton

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