On not multitasking

An interview with novelist Katherine Faw

March 13, 2018 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2911 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Focus, Beginnings, Multi-tasking, Independence, Success.

Was it challenging to get going on a second book after your debut did well?

For me, it's healthy psychologically to always be working on something. I started *Ultraluminous* before *Young God* came out, and I've been working on a third novel now for almost two years. It lends a detachment when the book comes out. I'm already working on something else and thinking about something else, so I've moved beyond what's just been published. It's a buffer between me and the outside world's opinion.

With your first book, you have no idea if anybody will want to publish it, so you're writing in this total void where you don't know if it's going to sell, if you'll get an agent, if anybody cares, if you're a good writer. That goes away, mostly, with your second book. You feel more confident.

But it wasn't easier on a day-to-day basis to write *Ultraluminous* compared to *Young God.* It still took five years. It was still such a hard thing to do: write a book.

Once a book is done, do you feel like it's over, and you move onto the next thing?

I do. I feel like it's dead because it's published and it's not going to change. It exists in amber. It's an artifact and not a living, unstable thing with every possibility, like whatever I happen to be working on at the moment.

If you get a bad review is it something that bothers you or you don't really care?

I'm a person, and it bothers me, but I don't dwell on it. It really does help to be working on a new book, to have already moved on mentally. Also, if the review is really bad, oftentimes the reviewer is not reading the book on its own terms but imposing something pre-existing that has nothing to do with the success of the book. That said, almost every book could be better. To have the ambition and drive to keep writing every day, I have to believe I am progressing and doing better work than I've done in the past.

It seems healthy to view each book as maybe imperfect, and as part of this overall career output. Eventually you'll have six books, or something, and will see the total of all those books versus just the one.

As an extreme perfectionist, I need that slippery room to think about each book as part of a process and a whole. Otherwise, I'd be paralyzed by anxiety and do nothing, which equals nothing. I hope I never write a book I think of as perfect. Because what comes after that? Everything that comes after a masterpiece is less than a masterpiece. I don't want to spend half of my life writing increasingly minor riffs on something I did in my 30s or 40s.

Do you have a regimented daily writing schedule?

I try to write every day from 10 am to 2 pm, and then edit what I wrote later in the day. Writing every day is what builds momentum and reverberation, which is what you need in a novel. If you leave a novel alone for four or five days, it punishes you when you go back to it. Or mine do. I have to work to get back into the particular movement of it.

You work at home? Do you ever go somewhere else to write?

I always work at home. When I'm outside, I'm too easily distracted. I'm amazed by people who can write in cafés or while listening to music. I have to be in a silent room. I want the rhythm of the sentences to come from my own brain and not anyone else's.

Because you're working every day how do you avoid burning out?

I'm very lucky because I'm able to do what I love every day. Writing is interesting to me every day. I always feel like there's something that I can take from life and sublimate into fiction. Of course, I have many days that feel like pulling teeth, like the worst dentistry. Days where I delete everything and start over. That usually happens when I've been away from the book for too long.

Taking one day off a week is good, too: going to a museum, or the galleries in Chelsea, or an afternoon movie, or walking around New York if the weather is in a good mood.

Have you ever gotten far into a project, realized it's not working, and just stopped?

I've never started a book and abandoned it. I have this sense when I start book that the idea of it is big enough to be a novel. I don't write short stories, so when I think about what I want to write, it's always something longform. The very first thing is usually a persistent image in my head. For *Young God*, it was a teenage girl sitting so insolently in an imposing chair, like a throne. And for *Ultraluminous*, it was a woman running away from a bomb exploding in the desert. I also write about my obsessions of the moment. The book tends to morph and fit my current thoughts and life and be flexible in a way that means it's always working.

How do you gather material?

Mostly from life: from experience and observation. I also read all the time. With the past two books, I have been resistant to research. Just because it often feels so undigested, whereas I want my novels to feel like emotional states, rather than information. That said, I do indirect research every day just by being alive and curious. Anything I experience or see or read might end up in the book in some way.

When you're working on a book do you find that you're able to do other things? Are you able to write journalism or do a review?

Ideally, I prefer to focus only on the book. I don't feel the need to break up my writing by working on something else.I'm not a multitasker at all. I like to do one thing completely before I move on to something else.

You don't do social media either.

I've never done any social media. I'm 34, so I'm a little bit older than people who grew up with social media. When I was in high school, I had dial-up internet; I didn't have a cell phone. But the real reason I don't do social media is that I've always been resistant to the popularity aspects of it. I've always been a loner.

One of the good things about getting older is caring less about what other people think. Social media stunts that in a way. Because it's a constant feedback loop of what other people think of you and how many followers you have.

That said, I know I'm limiting my audience by not being on Twitter and Instagram. It's a total trade-off. As a writer, I'm isolated by not doing social media. I have to hope people will find out about the book through reviews or interviews or word of mouth.

One thing I do love about social media, or technology, is that no one talks on the phone anymore, which I always detested. I love Seamless.

Because you're not on social media, you don't hear back from your readers. Do you have an idea of who your reader is? Do you have some generalized ideal reader in mind?

My ideal reader is myself. I try to make myself happy because I am actually the only person I can please.When I'm writing, I try to surprise and please myself. And I try to do something new and fresh and alive with this form that really can be anything, which is the novel.

It seems like everyone's multitasking at this point, in good and in less-than-productive ways. You've picked this one thing and stick to it.

It's what works for me. I know myself well. I know what I'm good at. I know that I'm best focusing on one thing and doing it well and then moving on to something else. I have a lot of other interests—art, film, dance—but I approach them from the perspective of writing. I don't think how can I paint something like this, but how can I describe this painting in words. Also, devoting your day to doing one thing as well as you can is enough for one day.

Do you find in your writing you have any tendencies that you have to work against?

I find when I'm starting something new I'll often write sentences that belong in the previous book, which I will then immediately cut. My books are such snapshots of who I am at the time that it's almost like I have to evolve into my next incarnation with new interests and obsessions before I can write the next one. And there's an overlap period where I'm not quite there yet and the previous book and the new book have a porousness.

I know my writing is working if I feel like I'm on a tightrope—I will either pull it off or fall off and it could go either way. It has to be challenging. I have no interest in repeating myself. Every day I want to wake up and face the prospect of writing something that I've never done before and that I've never read anyone else do either.

Your books are cinematic.

I love movies. I watch a movie every night. And I agree that my writing is cinematic. I conceive of every scene in my head fully choreographed before I write it. I am very visual that way.

What I love most about film is that the viewer supplies the psychology. You are shown a series of events and then you draw your own conclusions, in the best films. You can't get inside the characters' heads except through dream sequences, which are generally best avoided.

I try to write novels in the same way. I have always felt rebellious against the mainstream idea that a good novel is one of psychological "realism" that is meditative, reflective and ultimately and always reinforces bourgeois humanism. I want to do something new.

In *Ultraluminous*, there are chapters that end where you aren't expecting a chapter to end—like a dissolve. You turn the page and a new scene starts. It feels like you're leaving space between sentences and words for people to fill in some things on their own.

I've always preferred books where as a reader I have to do some work. My favorite books are those that teach you how to read them within the text. Those are the books I try to write.

As much as you might try to describe something as a writer, books are not visual, and the reader is bringing his or her whole life to reading the book, and this life has nothing to do with yours. Everything is happening in the head of the reader, which is filled with entirely foreign memories and information and experience. There's this gap between writer and reader with any book. I've always been interested in making that gap really big and seeing what happens.

When you're working on a book, do you have people you share it with along the way or do you not show anyone until you're done?

I don't show anyone until I have a whole draft because otherwise I'll get confused by the input. I need to know what it is myself before I show it to someone else. And I never know what it is until I write through to the end. Only then can I step back and see what I've done or what I'm having the tendency to do.

And when I do have a solid draft, I show it to one person, my agent, my two editors, and that's it. I find limiting the input to people I really trust and who I know improve my work is best. I know they will ask the right questions and push me and not try to turn the book into something else.

When does the writing feel successful to you?

When it has the feeling I want it to have, which is when I've fully carried out the idea I set out with in the beginning. Of course, I always think a book is done before it is. In the early drafts of a book, I'm too much in my head. I do need outside readers to point out where things are confusing and unexplained. A lot of the editing I do is adding, not subtracting, making scenes more explicit, transferring more information from my brain onto the page.

Do you ever feel any kind of anxiety like you might not have another book in you or do you not ever feel that way?

I feel anxiety all the time, but luckily it's rarely focused on the raw material of books. Maybe this is naive but I do feel like there will always be something to write about. Life is fascinating. It's complicated and weird and there is always something going on. Your brain is thinking or you're dead. I think the best thing about being an artist is you never have to retire. I feel like I have a potential book in me at any given time, just by being alive. Actually writing the book, finding its form, eking it out day after day, is another thing.

What's the appeal to you of minimalism?

I like precision and directness and open space. I don't like having a lot of stuff. I have very few things in my apartment. It's mostly clothes. I guess I'm maximal when it comes to clothing. But I've never been attached to objects. I can throw any object away. If it no longer has a purpose, I don't need it.

I love late works. I think artists' late works are fascinating because almost everybody's work gets minimal. When you get near the end, so much falls away, and then you wonder what the purpose of all that excess was, because the work works without it.

I think people have this idea that minimal art is easy and that only overwhelming, messy, four-hundred-page books are ambitious. I totally reject that. You can throw ten words at a reader or you can find the one that's right. To me that is much more difficult and a much more challenging task to set for yourself.

I also love beautiful shapes, structure. Every book I write I have rules that I adhere to in order to maintain its particular shape.

You're two books in and you have a career ahead of you, but do you find that you yourself are already getting more minimal as you go along?

Actually, my second book has twice as many words as my first. I think I will always be a stark writer, it's just my nature. But I do find myself relaxing or feeling less rebellious than I used to. I am starting to re-embrace adjectives. In the previous books, I shut down parts of my writing because they didn't serve the rules I had set up, but I am doing that less with this third book. I love lush sentences, too, but they have to do more than just look beautiful.

Katherine Faw Recommends

Hotel Monterey by Chantal Akerman is only 60 minutes long but like all the movies on this list it feels interminable like it might never

end and when it does it feels cathartic. It moves from the lobby of an SRO hotel up to the roof. The last long takes are of dawn breaking and traffic on Broadway. It's mostly corridors. It's silent, too.

Chantal Akerman's *D'Est* moves from East Germany to Siberia, just after the fall of the Soviet Union. It is mostly people waiting in lines. I visited Moscow in the '90s and what I remember most is enormous toppled-over statues of Stalin splotched with ketchup and mustard and also that our hotel had a consistent Space theme.

In Vanda's Room is the second film in Pedro Costa's Fontainhas Trilogy. Fontainhas was a Medieval slum in Lisbon that persisted into the 21st century. Before it was razed Vanda lived there with her sister in a cell-like room, scraping crumbs of crack off the pages of a phone book. The phone book paper got into their lungs. Vanda made it to the third film but her sister didn't.

I love Romanian movies. *Aurora* is a Romanian movie by Cristi Puiu. It follows a man who is planning a massacre of those close to him but the audience doesn't know it. We cannot get into his head because we are not him. We watch him consider painting his apartment. The man is played by the director.

Derek Jarman's last film is *Blue* and it is a single shot of blue with a voiceover that lasts for 80 minutes. He was going blind from AIDS but his mind was more than fine. The blue is bright like the sky can look some days when it decides it will be perfect.

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