Lucy Bellwood on the pros and cons of being an independent creator

August 1, 2017 - Lucy Bellwood is a freelance illustrator and self-professed Adventure Cartoonist, who was born 1989 in Ojai, California. Since 2007 she's been an avid lover of sailing and tall ships, working as a deckhand on the Lady Washington and many other historical vessels. She launched into a full-time freelance career in 2012 with the help of a Kickstarter campaign for _True Believer_, a 36-page comic about having the guts to do what you love. In 2015 she completed a second Kickstarter to print _Baggywrinkles: a Lubber's Guide to Life at Sea_. She has since produced comics about whitewater rafting, oceanography, social dance, pop culture history, and many other subjects via nonfiction comics hub _The Nib_ and her own online outlets. Her work has appeared in a numerous print anthologies and magazines, as well as on websites like _BuzzFeed_, _Macworld_, _The Stranger_, and _Medium_. She currently resides in Portland, Oregon.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3598 words.

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What does it mean to you to be successful as an artist?

My definition is changing over time. This year, especially, I've been thinking about how my focus has shifted over the last seven years I've been making comics, and how what seemed insurmountably successful at the start has come to pass. I've been thinking about how when I've achieved a marker of success I've thought, "Ooh, when this happens, I will really be successful," and how it's interesting to see what sticks, and what doesn't.

Some people might be like, "Yeah, I really made it if somebody knows who I am in a faraway place." That's a heady, weird experience to have, but it can also fade pretty quickly, or it stands out as like, "Well, this is a fluke. This is odd." There are different markers of success that actually get under your skin, and alter the way that you feel about making work in the world. I feel like all of those have come from interpersonal connections, for me. Hearing from people who made changes in their lives because of my work.

It's often happened when I talk to people who took up tall ship sailing, because they read a graphic novel that I did that was about my experiences doing that. I got an email from a guy that has stuck with me forever. He was writing it from a plane, having packed up and sold all of his belongings, and was running away to sea to go work on the ships that I worked on—which was like, "God, no pressure. I really hope that works out for you." Then, a year later, he came to my table at a convention in Vancouver, and it had worked out for him. He was about to take a job on a ship in Toronto. That kind of thing is really hard to escape.
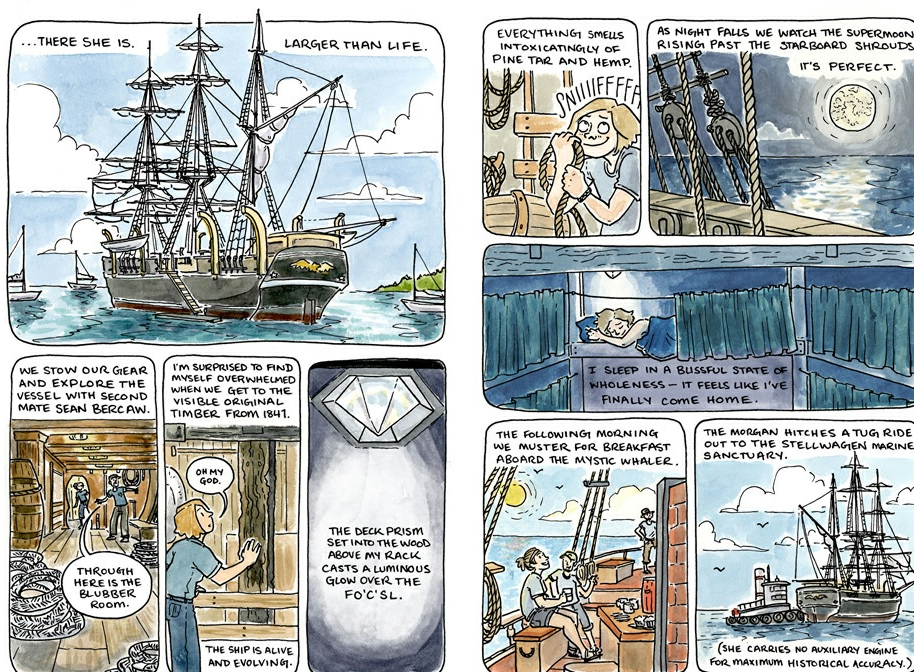
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I've been doing a lot of work with Inner Critic stuff recently, and the inner critic tends to say "That's a fluke. It doesn't matter. It was just one person, blah, blah, blah." But that's inescapably moving to me. To think somebody's life changed in a significant way.

So, there's that kind of spiritual success, and then material success, and perhaps the challenge is that people often want the material success before the interpersonal success or the spiritual success, and so the questions tend to skew towards, "How do I get more eyeballs on my projects? How do I get more followers?"

In my experience—and I've been talking to a lot of other creative folks who sing from the same hymnal—the relationships are the thing that drives that connection. I feel like we have to ask ourselves, "How are we going to be better community members?" "How are we going to be better people to one another?" "How are we going to provide solace, or enthusiasm, an injection of something new, or something nourishing to the communities that we're a part of, and focusing attention on one person, or one community, or one location?" Picking something and devoting your practice to nourishing that space. It's likely going to pay greater dividends than putting the cart before the horse and saying, "Well, I want the success in the traditional sense of the word."

It's hard. We don't see that labor a lot of the time. It's invisible, or it's nebulous. I don't see a great deal of the stuff that happens, because of my work, because people don't

tell me. That's not a criticism. It's just I think about this in my life, too: there are authors, countless authors, whose books I've read that have really changed my life, and had an impact on me. Have I ever bothered to tell them? No. There's this assumption of like, "Oh, that person's too famous." Or, they're like, "Well, their book was published so obviously they know they're great." The older I get, the more I'm like, "Christ, write to everybody you admire. Write to everyone who ever meant anything to you, because chances are good that even if they do get a ton of fan mail, it's still one more little pebble in the jar of "Hey, you're doing something worthwhile with your life. Hey, you're making a difference."

If you get too hung up on one success, that can be a pitfall, too. It can definitely stall you from creating more work.

Definitely, and being stuck in one mode is also challenging. I'm a voracious learner. I like getting better at things. I don't like being not good at things. Being a small business owner is a real trip, because it means being bad at a lot of things, and trying to get good at them very quickly because you're wearing 15 hats at once, and it's a challenge.

How do you find that balance between not burning out, but also staying active enough that you don't fall into creative lulls or blocks?

The thing that really helps me is developing an ongoing, creative practice. I'm a big fan of drawing challenges of any stripe. Like a "draw a thing a day" challenge, or draw 100 hands, which is an exercise that an art teacher gave to me when I was fairly young, and which I hated at the time, because I hate drawing hands. But now I make a point of doing it myself once a year, just because I think it's a really nice thing to do. Having fun, community-centric drawing challenges are helpful for getting me out of my head and worrying, "Well, does this project have to be this or that? What's it doing? What's its purpose?" Its purpose is to fulfill this drawing challenge, and beyond that, whatever.

The burnout thing is real. I went hard for the last year and a half. I ran a great Kickstarter, and had my first proper book come out, and then took it on a book tour, and traveled all over the place, and was gone, constantly. I feel like I spent maybe five days, every month, in my own home in Portland, and every other time I was traveling for a convention, or an event, or going to a tall ship to go sailing somewhere.

It was lots of adventure, but also lots of hectic stuff, and that definitely took a toll. I psychologically told myself that 2017 was when I would stop, and somehow, it took me all the way until June, pumping the brakes, to actually feel like I was slowing down. I think as a freelancer, you fall into the trap of thinking that your time and your schedule is very flexible, and I've started to come to grips with the fact that it's not. I have to set time aside a year in advance, and hold it sacred. That's advice that people give a lot of folks when they're saying, "Oh, how do you make time for a creative process when you've got kids, or a day job or a million, laundry, a raccoon infestation in your basement?" Whatever it is, you need to carve out time, and descend it. That's the whole purpose of that book, _The War of Art_.

The world is trying to take your creative practice away from you, and you need to defend it. You have to fight back against the voice that says, "This is selfish. This is useless. Why are you spending time on this time? You should be doing dishes. You should be doing _whatever_." I think the same holds true for bigger picture seasons, the creative seasons in your life. That it's just as important to, perhaps even more important than if you have a day job, to schedule that restorative time off, and to schedule creative work time, and that's something I'm still working on, but I'm starting to think about it, not just on the day-to-day scale but also in the bigger picture. I think it helps to really zoom out, and think, "What am I doing with each year?"—focusing on the minutia and then also taking a longer view of what you're doing.

100 Demons #41

Would you find it difficult to do what you do in a vacuum? Some people who create say, "I'm going to separate myself from the world." But for you, is it important to have this give and take from a community, and to bounce ideas off of, and also to interact with the community… like a "we're all in this together" sort of situation?

This is a question that definitely keeps me up at night, because over the next five to 10 years I'll be working on longer projects, possibly with publishers, possibly that I will not just have my own discretionary ability to share at will on the internet. I've absolutely been clicker trained by the internet into feeling like support for my work is dependent on feeding the online universe.

My big shtick is that people can't give you money if they don't know who you are. You really have to make an effort to put yourself out there. That being said, there's this creative cycle, where like toads, artists go underground and hibernate for months and make work, and then emerge, and make a ton of noise like "Raaaa, I made a thing!" And then they all go back in the mud again, and fall asleep for another year.

That doesn't necessarily have to be in total isolation, but I do fantasize about it. One of the things that I find difficult about Portland sometimes is that I am a super big extrovert. I am very enthusiastic, talkative, and outgoing in social situations, or at conventions, or doing events and stuff. I love it, but it takes so much from me, and the idea of living somewhere where nobody is ever inviting you to their gallery opening… There's never an interesting band playing in town. There's never a conference happening that you want to go to. There are no conventions. There are no airports. You're just there, and there are three other hippies who live down the block, and you just get to live in the woods and make stuff.

I fantasize about that all the time, and I worry that if I ever actually get it, I will go mad, but then again, I guess in that environment I would still have an internet connection. So, how much of that community is online? How much of it is in person? I do feel that it's very important to me to have interpersonal time in the real world. I do think having continued access to conventions, or events, where I can go and meet people face to face, and have this recognition of, "Oh, you're not a metric. You're a person. You're not a weird collection of bits liking my tweet. You are a human being with an entire, rich, internal life of your own who has decided to pay attention to the work that I do." That's pretty magical.

100 Demons #64

You're a positive person and have a good sense of what your process is, and what you're making. Do you ever allow yourself to say, "This project is not working," and just abandon something, or do you usually try to find a way to make it work?

It's only very recently that I had started to tackle things that I would consider capital "P" projects. My first book was a collection of mini comics, but when I was starting out, I did not intend to make a book. I was just making comics, because they were interesting to me. I'm maybe a little creatively ADHD. I skip around from thing to thing pretty constantly, and I think it's because I like to keep stuff from feeling old, or I'm tied to it. I'm a commitment-phobe about creative projects.

So, generally I think I avoid that by saying "Well, I'm not tied to this." It's like I don't have to decide if it's failing or not. I just wanted to do this one comic, and then I did it, and now it's done. There's not a lot of self-reflection there, and that is perhaps something that makes me nervous: I've been moving so quickly that I don't really have to stop and assess whether or not something is good, and then most of the time, miraculously, it turns out to have some appeal, and then other people buy it, and then I have enough money to keep doing whatever I'm doing after that.

There's this sense that I've been moving so quickly so that nobody will pay too close attention to what it is I'm doing, because if they were to look closely, they would decide that it's actually not very good, and that's why working with a publisher is terrifying for me, because I think, "Oh god, a legitimate creative person is going to look at my stuff, and say this is garbage, you have to change all of this."

That's the luxury and the curse of being an independent person: you don't have to work with an editor if you don't want to. I do think I should. I think it's good for you to have someone else giving you creative feedback, even if you're not working with a big editor, get a friend to read your stuff, or get somebody else to take a look at what you're doing.

I have this big collection of messy post-it notes on my wall that are all ideas and things that I'd like to explore at some point down the line… Most of the stuff I've done has either had an external impetus, like it's a freelance gig, but it's also a comic that I'm interested in doing, or it's a personal project that I then extrapolate into something larger, like a book, but so far, my stubbornness has carried me through the things that I have committed to do as projects, and that has been helpful, in certainly the 100 day project. I just finished my second year of it, and I am a huge fan of that, because a 100 days is long enough that you have to let go of the idea that everything you make in that series is going to be perfect.

It gives you permission to make lackluster entries, and I think that is what the creative process is about. It's reminding yourself that you are allowed to screw it up every so often, and that screwing it up doesn't mean you have to throw the brakes on, grind everything to a halt, cancel the project, and walk away. It means that you have successfully found something that didn't work. The idea is that the good stuff is sitting underneath an enormous pile of crap inside you, and the faster you can get that out onto the page, the faster you can get to the good space.

100 Demons #82

You care a lot about printing—adding foil and nice bindings. But you also go out of your way to make your work affordable for the people who want it.

The irony of artist books is that they are these beautiful, sculptural, interactive situation pieces that often retail for hundreds or thousands of dollars. There's a run of 20 of them, and they get purchased, and they get put in collections, and they get kept under glass.

I remember viewing something. My college had a really big collection of artists books, but they were all in this secret room at the top of the library that you couldn't go to if you were just a casual reader. I remember my friend Gabe, the special collections librarian, showing me an artist book that was a collection of blocks of soap, and you had to use the soap to get to whatever textual object was inside them. It was such a cool idea, but then I was struck with this immense sadness, because nobody was ever going to use that soap. It was just

going to sit there, moldering away in this room for all eternity.

It's a nice thought experiment, but when things are meant to be used, they're meant to be interacted with. It felt a little contradictory to have this practice. It's like, "Yes, it's a egalitarian, and it's about giving people things that they can do with their hands, but we're not going to actually do that. We're just going to put it under a case, and you can look at it, and think about how cool that is, but not actually do it." That's why I love publishing houses like McSweeney's because their Quarterly Concern is a $25.00 artist book that people can actually afford to buy, but is also a wacko box in the shape of a man's head, or a collection of some stranger's mail that you can read through.

I noticed recently that I'm getting itchy to do another project that plays with that kind of stuff. I love print design. I love getting to produce zany things, and just say "Why don't we put a die cut here, and let's make it gold foil, and let's do this, and let's do that." Having that kind of freedom as a self-publisher is great. Finding a reasonable price point where you can make something like that, and compensate yourself fairly, and sell it to people for under $30.00 is more challenging, but it's a challenge that I enjoy.

Generally, my rule of thumb is that the cover price should be about three times the cost of production. The challenge, for me, is that I want to be producing work domestically, but for longer print runs of books, certainly, or the plush toys that I'm making right now, it's just not possible. Individual books would end up costing $30.00 to produce in the US, and then I would have to retail them for $90.00. That's not going to work. It's challenging because the folks I know who are printing, even in Canada, or locally in the US, have investors behind them who are pushing a magazine, or they've done a lot of crowdfunding to finance it.

Last year I did a project for the 100 day project, where I illustrated an object in my possession everyday for 100 days. For the resulting collection I really focused on "Okay, can I work with a local offset press to do the booklets, and can I get my friend who's a letterpress printer to help me design these boxes?" Basically, assembling a heist team where you can deal with that kind of stuff.

I like that a great deal. It's the kind of challenge that keeps the gears whirring in my head, but as far as the pricing goes, it's generally like I want to keep it under $30.00, or three times the cost of production, and I think for those books, they were about $7.00 bucks a piece, materials and printing. That doesn't include the time that it took to hand fold and assemble all the boxes, but I threw a party, and invited people over, and we got through it pretty quickly.

Making more small weird things is probably going to be the thing that keeps me sane moving forward, if I start transitioning to doing longer graphic novel projects—I just have to be making tangible objects, and the notion of working on a graphic novel that's going to take two years to produce, and then another year in publishing purgatory before it actually comes out on shelves as a book… there's such a disconnect there. I love the immediacy of self-publishing and being able to just tear into a project, finish it, take it to printer, have an object five days later, and be like, "Yes. This is the thing I made. I birthed this with my raw hands, and then let it out into the world," and you can let it go and move on.

Lucy Bellwood recommends:

Twyla Tharp's *The Creative Habit*, a lovely book of advice to creators about sustaining a creative practice over time. I think about it almost every week. (Sub-item: make a list of Books I've Read This Year. Put it up on your wall. Record everything. If you're like me you often forget what you've read by the end of the year, and the physical record allows you to trace the arc of your interests over time.)

Kuretake felt tip brush pens. Finding them felt like coming home to the drawing tool I never knew I needed, but had always missed.

Charging your smartphone anywhere but beside your bed. Hide it in the couch cushions in another room. Put it in the cupboard under the sink. Go as long as you can before looking at it each day. Get an analog alarm clock. Spend that first hour of the day exploring the sleep-addled corners of your brain. Other people can wait.

Ursula K. LeGuin's "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction", for a sense of spaciousness.

Sleeping out under the stars for at least one night of every year.

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Vocation
Illustrator, Cartoonist

Fact

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