

On how family informs the creative process



Novelist Katya Apekina discusses how she researches her writing, how to balance family with creative life, and how to face rejection.

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As told to Giuliana Mayo, 4193 words.

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I heard an interview where you talked about being bribed to learn poetry as a child, and I wonder when you knew that writing was going to be your path, and if you think of that as maybe part of the seeds—this memorization of language and reverence of language?

In the Soviet Union, it was very common for school children to memorize poetry. It was just part of everybody's experience. And so I was bribed with sweetened condensed milk, spoonfuls of it to memorize Mandelstam, this Russian poet and others... It was probably a seed. And people in my family read a lot, which I'm sure also was a seed. But I was actually a lot more interested in the visual arts growing up. My mom's an artist. I wanted to be a photographer. I just ended up randomly taking a writing class at Columbia when I was a freshman because my neighbor and friend encouraged me to take it with him. And that was when I started to consider becoming a writer because I was doing photography and it was very cumbersome.

I wanted to tell stories with my photos, but it required a lot of other people, whereas writing doesn't. You can just do it alone and you don't have to coordinate anything. You don't have to be in a smelly dark room for hours breathing in chemicals. You're just there and you have an amount of control that was really appealing to me. So I think that was really when I started thinking about it. And when I was initially writing, I was writing mostly prose poems or poetry initially because I was still thinking of it in terms of I wanted to create a mood or an atmosphere or a moment, and then it took me a pretty long time to figure out how to put those moments together into a story.

And then you move on to short stories, right?

Yeah. Then I did an MFA. I took several years off in between. I was working on movies actually, and then I started this MFA program and as the model in an MFA workshop, it just makes a lot of sense to work on shorter things. I didn't feel like I could take on a novel yet. Taking on a novel takes a lot of... It's almost like a spatial type of skill because you have to keep so much stuff in your head at the same time. So yeah, I did not feel called to it at all. While I was in my MFA program, I was writing short stories and really enjoying them, but now I actually find writing short stories very difficult. I think the pacing of a novel just makes more sense to me. I feel like I'm also the kind of person where maybe it takes a while to get to know me, and it's the same thing with a novel versus a story. I think a story is just immediately there and it's very brief. A story can be so many things. I don't want to be reductive like that. But just a novel definitely gives you a lot more space.

You mentioned screenwriting. So you are a screenwriter, you're a translator, you're a novelist. Is the creative approach the same for each? Are there very different head spaces for each?

I would say they're very different head spaces, particularly with screenwriting. With translation, it's not something I'm actively doing at the moment, but I've done it on and off. And with screenwriting, it's something that I've done it with other people. It's collaborative in that way, which can be fun, but it definitely is totally the opposite in terms of how to do it. It just takes very different parts of my brain to do both of them. With screenwriting, you have to know. When I'm writing a novel, I don't know where it's going until I'm in it. And then I know where it's going a little bit or I know generally where it's going maybe, but it's definitely not fully structured and plotted out ahead of time.

Okay. So you're not doing crazy maps-

I *am* doing crazy maps. I'm constantly doing crazy maps to try to figure it out as I'm going. But these maps evolve a lot as I go and change radically. They're not these constant static things. They're something that as a helpful guide to be like, "Am I going in the general direction of where I want to go?"

And then I'm also constantly checking in to see if that direction has changed, if I want it to change. It doesn't feel like something that the way it does in screenwriting where I think when you write the outline, you want to pretty much stick to it for a lot of reasons. So being able to crystallize what it is you want to say is something that you do from the beginning in screenwriting. Whereas in a novel, it's usually something that I only know after I've already written the novel and it's sat there and other people have read it and I've talked about it. And only then do I really know, oh, this is how to reduce this to a log line. Whereas in screenwriting, you better have a log line at the beginning or else it's just not going to really work in that medium.

You mentioned that screenwriting is really collaborative. How collaborative is translation? Are you really working with someone closely or are you just getting handed something and taking your pass on it? And then, I don't know, do you feel like you're living inside somebody's head as you're going through their work?

I translated Mayakovsky, this Russian poet from the 1910s-20s, so it was not collaborative. And I've also translated my grandmother's memoirs, but it was also after she had died, so I've never collaborated on a translation. I can imagine that would be very cool. When my work was translated, it also didn't seem super collaborative. People would ask me maybe some specific questions, but it wasn't a back and forth. It is very interesting how people think so differently in different languages. And I think about translation is a theme in my new book, a big one, because it's about a translator, but it's also just she is talking to her great-grandmother's ghost through a medium who's translating that to her, and then she's also translating it from Russian to English. So there's double translations.

I think a lot in my work in general is about the theme of how people experience things differently, of different people's perceptions of reality and the limitations of being able to really know another person or their experience. And I think a lot of that feeling comes from growing up. So I came to the US when I was three and a half and living between cultures in this way, makes me more aware of the space of misunderstanding between people or the space of different perceptions, how different perceptions can be. Because when you're firmly inside of a group that sees things a certain way, it doesn't even occur to you that there are other ways of seeing something. But when you're already on the outside of a group, or if your family sees things one way and your world sees things another way, it makes you aware of the subjectivity of things.

Yeah, that's really interesting. I was going to ask how coming from Russia, even at such a young age, influenced your work?

I think it influenced it a lot in ways that I'm only now beginning to understand, but there's always that sense of disconnection and a desire for connection from people, which I think that's a universal experience, not specifically an immigrant experience, but I do feel like it's dialed up when you're an outsider. So it's something I think about a lot.

How did you decide that you're going to translate your grandmother's memoirs?

My grandmother left me these memoirs years ago before she died. She learned to type on a computer specifically to type out these memoirs in Russian to give to me. And I had them on my computer for years and did not open the file until literally the night of her funeral I started reading them. And then when I was reading them, I was also translating them because I was like, "Well, my daughter might want to have these." As I was translating them, I just found myself also making all these marks, footnotes, annotating everything as if I was having a conversation with her. Part of it was actually published in *LA Review of Books*, an excerpt of it with my annotations around it. And that feeling of being in dialogue with a dead person is what my new book is about. In my new book, it's a ghost, and I've embodied that person. But it was very strange to feel like I could be more honest with her when she couldn't talk back. And so it felt like this very strange feeling of a conversation back and forth between me and my grandmother.

So it is a collaboration of a sort.

It was really interesting too. I was thinking about that a lot. Why did it take me so long to read these memoirs? I was always curious about her life, and yet I just couldn't bring myself to read them. And I think it's because I felt like, "Oh, if I read this, I have to take it on emotionally in some way." It's a burden that is now mine and I have to carry it. But when I did read it was like, "Oh, I've already been carrying this burden. I just didn't know what it was." And then when I actually could see it, I could just decide.

It actually freed me up in some ways. There's so many things in terms of the way she wrote that were so interesting. There was the sense of the stuff that she wasn't writing about too, and an awareness of that.

Oh, interesting.

And she would write about my dad's constipation in summer camp for multiple paragraphs, and then she would write half a sentence about how she and my grandfather met. The things that got attention and the things that didn't were so interesting. Then also, these terrible things happened to her. She survived World War II. Her family was killed. She escaped from Poland on foot through Russia, all of this, and she lived in the Soviet Union. There were a lot of really difficult things, but then the stuff that she just describes in the book, it's all these moments that seem scary and alarming, but then just aren't. All of the fear and hyper-vigilance from those events are then just projected onto these innocuous interactions where she's describing passing someone on the street and being terrified, but literally that's it. They just pass each other on the street. Nothing happens. But that constant terror that is then being projected onto other things is something that I feel in my life very acutely.

And in my writing too, I feel like there's often these details that just suddenly things feel alarming, even though they're innocuous details, yet somehow they just seem terrifying all of the sudden for no clear reason. And it's like, "Oh, well, that's my grandmother's trauma sitting in me and me not knowing where that comes from, but just living that way in a state of hyper-vigilance when there's nobody chasing me." I've grown up in a peaceful place and all this other stuff. So yeah, it was very interesting to see all of that.

You've received all kinds of fancy fellowships and grants and residencies, and I wonder if you can talk a little bit about how one cobblestones together the time and the finances to spend this time sitting and creating these worlds?

So with my first book, I got a grant from the Elizabeth George Foundation when I was pregnant. It allowed for me to have childcare and finish the book, and it would've been very difficult without that sort of thing to do that. In terms of other grants, I find that starting a book takes an enormous amount of energy. I know some people, they love starting stuff, and then it's like the keeping going that is difficult. For me it's definitely the starting and allowing the projects to cohere and build enough that it develops its own engine. So for that reason, I've started both my books in residencies and I've started major revisions, the kinds of revisions that feel like you're just setting the manuscript on fire and starting from the beginning type of revisions. I've done those at residencies because it just takes so much mental energy to do those things. But then the actual writing, I integrate it into my life, into my freelance writing schedule and childcare schedule and all of that. So I find that very helpful. Am I answering that question in full?

Yeah, absolutely. I just think that they can seem really unattainable or only certain people are in the know about how to get them, you know what I mean?

Yeah, I feel like there's a lot of online resources or just looking at writers I like at where they went and then just googling those things is probably how I've done it. I was in an MFA program, so I do feel like I did have access to a lot of that information and knowledge, but that was also a really long time ago. I graduated in 2011, so it's been a while since I've been part of that structure where I think it can be easier to know about those opportunities. So you do have to just seek them out or just ask around. There's so many different ways of doing it. Some things are more or less applicable. When my daughter was really little, I couldn't do certain things, and now that she's older, I can go on longer residencies.

But also, I think I should just say that I apply to a million of these things and get a couple. So I think when people apply to one and don't get it and then are just like, "Oh, I guess that's it." You should probably know that most, I'm not talking about myself, but just this has been helpful to me to know that writers who I admire a lot, whose career I also admire a lot, they still get rejected from stuff. Rejection is just part of the process.

There's so many things that I've applied for dozens of times and never gotten, and I think it's annoying to apply for stuff, but I think part of why it feels overwhelming is because you feel emotionally like, "Oh, I'm putting myself out there and someone is going to judge me and tell me I'm not good enough." So if you can just take that out of the process, it doesn't actually feel as much work. And sometimes I'm able to do that and sometimes I'm not. Sometimes I do feel discouraged by rejection. And it is funny to hear you say like, "Oh, you've gotten so many fancy things," because I'm just like, "What? Me? Little old me?" What are you talking about? But I think if I looked at a piece of paper, I would be like, "Oh, yes," but that's not how I'm experiencing things. I'm just getting the same rejections as everyone else and feeling the same amount of discouragements.

I feel like people don't talk about the amount of rejection that comes in any artistic endeavor enough. And if someone could teach a class and how to take the emotion out of it, that would just be a gift from above.

That would be really helpful. Yeah, I remember someone telling me when I was sending stories out, they're like, "For the number of rejections you get, send it out to that number of places or twice that number." And I do feel like there's a certain slot machine type of energy that you can get into, which can be more fun than personalizing everything. Because having read for magazines and been on the other side of prizes and stuff, judging a prize, it's just like you see how subjective it is, you see how many factors go into it. You see just the fact that it's not in any way a judgment on some objective value of the work.

What does a day of writing look like here for you?

I think when I'm in the middle of a long project, I find it really helpful to write at least five, six days a week. And I usually set word counts or sometimes I do it scene by scene. It depends on the project and what makes sense because it's hard to sometimes switch gears on things, but I divide it into manageable pieces and work, probably it's two hours of writing a day, three hours of intense writing a day. I don't think I'm usually able to do that much more than that. And then the rest of the stuff is other types of things that I need to do, whether it's freelance projects or admin type of stuff or whatever else needs to be done.

Usually there's things that I'm reading that get me into a certain head space, whether it's research or whatever. And so even if I'm writing for two hours, say, I might be reading for three hours.

Are we talking research reading or just vibe?

It can be both. Yeah, it can be both. Sometimes with my first book, for example, I was reading a lot of Bolaño, and that's in no way connected in terms of the content or in terms of the style or in terms of anything really, other than it would put me into this dreamy head space that I found really helpful. I don't think you'd be able to really tell in my book that that was necessarily a big inspiration for me, but it was.

With my second book, I had to do a lot of research into Soviet history and into the revolution, and I was reading

a lot of books that were written at the time period and about the time period, and I was reading a lot of fiction and nonfiction and journals and oral histories. But doing that research, having a rhythm between the research and the writing or research I'm using broadly is I think the key for me to being able to get into a good rhythm with writing. I can't just usually just sit down and just start writing. I usually need to get into a certain head space, and that can take some time. And for me, reading is the best way to do that.

I've heard a lot of people who frontload the research and then write, but not a lot of people talk about reading and researching while they're writing.

I definitely did front-load, also. For my second project, I started with the research and was just looking for my way into the topic. I wanted to write about the [Russian] revolution, but I didn't exactly know what my entry point was going to be. So I was doing a lot of just general research, but then once I actually figured out who the characters were and what I was doing, then the research I was doing was really in balance with my writing because if you're writing something about historical fiction or something that's not directly related to your experience, it's easy to feel like, "Oh, I need to be an expert. I'm going to research forever, 'procrasto-research' endlessly before I start writing," which is definitely my impulse. So to fight that impulse, I really was making sure that I was doing it alongside the writing instead of feeling like I was "ready" or knew enough or was smart enough in this topic to begin, because I don't think I would ever have felt enough of an expert.

Your last book came out six years ago. What did the time in between look like? Did you know where you were going to go? You said starting can be really hard. How does that work?

So I started doing the research for this book before my first book was even sold. I was in Mexico City and I was visiting Trotsky's House, and I was doing a lot of reading about the [Russian] revolution, and I didn't really know what it was going to be exactly.

I was doing research for a while, but it wasn't really connecting into anything until after my first book came out. I think it's hard to start working on something for me, before something else is fully completed or finished in some way. So even though I was doing the research and thinking about it, I couldn't really start writing it until January of 2019. My book came out in September of 2018. So it was at a residency a few months later that I just began figuring out what this new book was really going to be and the different storylines.

I don't like to ask women about parenting and writing, but because you've brought it up so much, let's talk about it. And how, I don't know, have you read Monsters?

No, I can't wait to read it.

It's so good. Claire Dederer talks about balancing a writing life and a working life as a mother, and I wonder if you have any thoughts on the subject?

Yeah, it's funny because I feel like..people are always like, "I wrote a book, I didn't have a kid." As if those things are somehow mutually exclusive, which always annoys me because just because I have a child doesn't mean that that's my entire identity or that I have no interests outside of the child, but it definitely takes a lot of time to parent someone. And I'm in a partnership and I have a partner who does a lot of the parenting too, which is what allows me to be able to go on residencies and leave and things like that. So I'm grateful in that sense. And there's certain things in terms of household labor, what the division is. I don't do anything food related, but I do basically most of the other stuff, and that's how we divided it.

I don't do anything cleaning related in my house. My husband does everything.

Yeah, that's fair.

And it's sweet, I have to say, because otherwise it would be a mess.

I never learned to cook. I hate all of that stuff. So my daughter, now that she's 10, she will make her own pasta. I'm just like, "I don't know, I don't want to do this." I'm not going to starve her to death or something... I feel like we've figured out a way of making it work... Obviously there's the time that you have to do all this stuff, but then there's obviously the mental load, too, of figuring out what all this stuff is that needs to be done, and so you have to divide that evenly, also.

Katya Apekina recommends:

Therapy. My book is very inspired by Internal Family Systems modality of therapy. Also, I love self-help shit. I got a copy of *The Artist's Way* when I first moved to LA, and do my own version of morning pages and artist dates.

Psychics. I have never actually had a reading that resonated, BUT they have always ended up clarifying for me my own desires.

Libby. **Free books!** I love libraries. I love getting ebooks on my phone and reading them in bed, bathed in bad blue light into the wee hours of the morning.

I love to write curled up like a question mark on the couch, but this kills my neck and I have found (over and over again) that it's not worth it. So, I have **an external keyboard and a computer stand that are ergonomically better**. When I write by hand, which I do a lot, I found myself going through a million pens, so now I use a fountain pen with replaceable ink cartridges. Fountain pens always seemed hoity toity, but it's nice not to be so wasteful. Highly recommend.

My book involved a lot of research into **Revolutionary Russia**. I loved reading Janet Fitch's *The Revolution of Marina M*, and I found her bibliography that she generously posted on her website to be such a helpful jumping off point for my own research.

Name

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Vocation

novelist, screenwriter, translator

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Lena Rudnick