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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3376 words.

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On pushing yourself until you get it right

Writer R.O. Kwon discusses the space and discipline necessary for getting work done, the differences between writing fiction and nonfiction, and why it took 10 years to finish her first novel.

It took you 10 years to write your first book, and you're three years into your new book. How do you maintain momentum over that kind of time period, and what does an average day look like?

First, I should say that 2018 was an exception for me, in that in a lot of ways I found it very hard to write fiction. I wrote quite a bit of nonfiction, but I kept having trouble finding the level of concentration I needed to be able to work on my second novel—because of some of the publicity around the first novel, and I was on the road so much.

At some point I tweeted out, “Oh my god, is anyone able to write while in their pre-publication months?” Everyone wrote back and consoled me: “Oh, don’t worry about it. No one can write.” Then Alex Chee tweeted back, “You know, I’ve been able to,” and I was like, “Goddamn it.” If it’s possible, I want to be able to do it, too. I’m hoping to change my ways with the next book, but yeah. So after the first book, there was a lull when I barely wrote any fiction. Only this year, and really only in the past few months, have I gotten back to a place where I’m writing every day.

I’ve been on the road a lot. The paperback came out about two months ago. I’m not complaining, but writing fiction, for me, requires space. My brain has to feel much more like a dreaming brain than a waking brain. So what I’ve been doing instead is, even if it’s a really, really busy day, I’ve been trying to write at least one sentence.

I know it varies wildly for other writers, and some writers find this oppressive, but for me, I find it to be most helpful to write every day. I’m trying to get back to a space where I can write at least 300 words a day. But we’ll see. I’m trying to get back into the rhythm of it.

There’s truth to the idea of: “Before this I was just writing for myself, but now that I have an audience, I’m writing for an audience.” Having success takes up time. A discussion, like we’re having now, takes away time from writing.

Yeah. And you know, again, I’m not complaining. I feel lucky for a lot that’s happened. I think I still haven’t entirely figured out how to find the quiet that seems to help me write. I’m very lucky there’s no one who’s directly dependent on me right now. There’s no one for whom I am a primary caretaker. In August, I was home for less than a week for the month.

I keep trying to figure out ways to establish more routines even when my routine isn’t exactly the routine that I have at home. One thing that helps a lot is—even if I’m on tour, even if there’s a lot going on—I try hard to write first thing in the day. Sometimes that’s just one sentence. But at least I know that I’ve broken that seal. I feel so often that that first sentence is the most terrifying sentence to put down at the start of a writing day. And so, if I have that one sentence, then at least I know I wrote so that takes a little bit of the pressure off, and maybe I’ve given myself enough of an entry point that I can keep writing later in the day.

After spending so much time on *The Incendiaries*, how did you know the book was done? Before it was, how

did you keep the momentum going through that whole time period?

For the book to be considered done, I wanted it to get to a place where I could open it at random anywhere in the middle and read two sentences and not want to change anything about them all over again. And yeah, that took 10 years.

But I realized part of the problem was this same technique is how I decide what I'm going to read next. Unless I have a concrete obligation to read a certain book next—because I'm reviewing it or because it's one of my closest friends or whatever it is—I have the giant piles of guilt that I'm sure everyone has, including you, of all the books I've bought, and all the books that people have sent me that I want to read and that, in a perfect world, I would already have read. But how I decide what I'm going to read next is I open a book at random and I read two lines from the middle. And if those feel alive to me, if those have something to them that I find to be interesting, then I keep reading. And so I realized I sort of screwed myself over because I had to apply that same persnickety test to my own prose.

You write nonfiction for publications. When you're working on a piece like that, do you use a similar test, or is that a different thing?

At this point I've written what amounts to a lot of nonfiction, relative to how much fiction I've written, but I still think of myself primarily as a fiction writer. I feel most alive when I'm writing fiction. The moments of great joy that come with writing—those come for me more often, not that they come often at all, but they come more often with fiction. For me, in non-fiction, there are facts and arguments and other things that don't necessarily have to do with what's going on at the syllable level. And so, if I'm writing a personal essay, I can't, for instance, make up the names of the characters. Names matter so much to me with fiction. I was reading a speech someone gave: it was by a writer and they said something about how they believe every word matters in your prose, except the names. And I was just like, "Except the names? Of course the names matter! The names, you have all the choice in the world. They matter so much!"

How did you come up with the names of the characters for *The Incendiaries*?

A lot of it for me has to do with sound. I also care a lot about how letters look on the page. I hesitate to say that because I think often prose writers don't share that concern, but poets do. Poets do, and so it doesn't feel all that strange.

I feel like part of writing fiction is being able to remove yourself entirely from the world, and to escape into the zone of writing. I'm curious, do you have things you use when you're writing fiction? Like, "I need to listen to music, or I don't listen to music at all."

I usually listen to one or two songs on repeat while I write. The songs vary depending on what I'm in the mood for. When I'm casually listening to a song I can usually tell if I'll be able to use it as a writing song. I can usually tell from the start if it's going to be one that'll give me tens of thousands of plays or one that's more likely to give me hundreds of plays. I think the repetitive music helps me fall into more of a meditative state. The music itself fades away and it lets me get more immersed in the work. That helps a lot.

Again, when possible, not getting on the internet before I'm done writing for the day also helps. And I try to avoid interruptions. I'm always taking the 4:30 doctors' appointments. I have one dentist who takes appointments up until 6:00 PM and I'm just like, "Bless you." When I can have a day at home to write, that's ideal. I have rules about lunch. So much so that I think I'm on the verge of writing an essay about how pernicious having lunch out, with other people, can be to my writing. It's going to be an essay and it's going to be called, "Against Lunch."

I'm a pretty anxious person and if I'm going to have lunch, even if it's with a dear friend, that's on my mind as soon as I wake up. And then after lunch, again even if it's one of my dearest friends, I'll start thinking, "Well, was it okay when I said that thing? I feel as though her face shifted just a little bit. Was that offensive?" And then I'll text her and she'll just be like, "What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you apology-texting again? Everything's great." But that sort of dynamic, that's hours gone, when I could have just eaten some eggs at my desk and none of this would've happened.

I do that, too, where I look at my calendar for the week and then if there are certain days where you just want to get a certain amount done and you're like, "Oh no, I have to go do this thing three days from now." Then you keep thinking of that thing. It's a blip in the serenity of your focus.

Exactly. I've learned so much about myself and how I work best at residencies, where I've had the chance to have extraordinary expanses of time during which I can just think about and work on a book. The last residency I was able to attend was in late 2017. I love applying for things in general. I mean, not that I love it, but I find it to be a useful thing to do. And a good thing to do when it's late at night and I can't sleep is to look for more things I can apply to. A lot of what I love about residencies is having that uninterrupted time during which the default is the book. The default is my work and not the other way around. In my everyday life, almost no matter what I do, the default is still my life, and I have to find my way back to the book every day.

When I interviewed Jia Tolentino, she'd been on a residency—that's how she finished her book. I asked her if she found it weird to have so much time, because she's generally writing an article a week for the *New Yorker* and being online. I imagined disconnecting could put someone into shock. She was basically like, "I have no trouble with it at all." To her, it was an amazing thing she wished could happen all the time.

I do find that I think, "Oh, there are things I'll miss." But the second you don't have them—within like three or four days—you're like, "Oh wow, I've adjusted entirely to this offline existence, where I can focus on this one thing and get it done." It's almost like I fool myself into thinking I need all those things every day because I get so used to them, get obsessed with them. Like, "I need to keep checking my Instagram," or check this and check that...

I love reading studies about why we behave the way we do, why we are the way we are. There are a number of studies about our self-control. Some of what I've read claims we have a limited quantity of self-control for a given day. That quantity varies per person, but it's finite. So, if I have a cup of self-control, and if I'm using half that cup to stay off the internet and to not check Twitter, then that means I have a lot less to be able to do my work. To be able to do other things. This is part of the thinking behind why, during finals, one might eat a lot of candy, or something, that one might not eat otherwise. While I was working on *The Incendiaries* I used programs to get off the internet. I used to only use a flip phone. I used a program that completely locked my computer's ability to connect to the internet. I did a lot of things. That's less possible when I'm on the road, but I'm trying to get back to that.

There are so many dates on your book tour. Do you have ways to stay healthy on the road? When a band tours, they'll say, "We make sure we have this in our rider, or we drink lemon water and take vitamin C," or whatever.

I should say again that I feel very lucky to get to talk to people about the book. I love talking to students. I feel very energized during and by the events themselves. I'm very introverted, but for the events themselves, it's like a switch turns on and I can just be there. I really appreciate that people are giving me their time. It's a part of someone's evening—that's a big deal.

So there's that. But yeah, I do do a lot to stay healthy. Hand sanitizers. I use a spray one and when I'm on the road, I go through a bottle every three days, maybe. I have giant refill canisters of this stuff. Hand sanitizers are the first big thing. And there's this thing called 8G; it's short for Eight Greens. Perhaps this will sound overly sad, but it's just a lot of pulverized greens, and it's like Alka-Seltzer. You put it in a glass, you have it with water, and you get a lot more greens than you would otherwise. Often when I'm traveling, especially if I'm in a city where I don't really know the food, a really easy default is just to get a burger or something because it's like, "Well, that'll probably taste all right. It'll be filling. I'm just hungry, I'm tired." And so yeah, I've been consuming a lot of 8G. It has algae and kale.

Is it okay to abandon a project? Have you ever had a situation where you get many months into something and you're like, "Whoa, this has completely gone in a direction I'm not interested in anymore," and you move on?

There was a 100-page section of *The Incendiaries* that I took out. I'd worked for months on it, but it was told from the point of view of Phoebe's father and it took place in 1970s South Korea. I worked a long time on it, I read so much about the time, but for me, it's important to know what the characters' bodies are up to. When I'm lost, that's often a way for me to find my way back into the book: I'll actually try to forcibly eject myself out of my body and into a character's body. I just couldn't do that with 1970s Korea, which is a time and place I haven't experienced.

I threw all of it away once I realized it really wasn't going anywhere. But I love throwing stuff away. It's upsetting, of course, and it feels like a waste, but there's something so wonderful about the cleanliness of throwing something away. But again, I'm not the speediest of writers, so maybe this is part of why I'm so inefficient.

Can you imagine resuscitating that part and using it for something else? Or once something's done and you can't picture yourself into it, or you can't see yourself embodying it, you're done with it?

It depends on what it is. There are so many writers who have thrown away whole books... I didn't quite do that. But I did throw away the first two years of everything I wrote for this first novel and I started all over again with the same characters. They were the same characters in the same world, but the way I was telling it didn't feel right. I don't regret that. Well, I don't regret that I threw it away. I do sort of wish I'd figured that out a little earlier, but I at least like to tell myself that it's all a palimpsest, and that nothing gets wasted, and it all finds its way in. I'm not sure that that's necessarily correct, but at the very least it feels better to tell myself that.

Do you have writing habits you have to fight against? Sentence structures you use a lot, words you find yourself using throughout, or just general turns of phrase that you have to fight against using too much?

At some point I used a computer program that sorted all the words I used by how often I use them and, of course, the first words that come through are "like," "it," "be," "she,"—but then, quickly after that, the other words start popping up. For me, it wasn't necessarily that I had preexisting beliefs about how many times any words should exist; it was just that I wanted to know what I was doing and I wanted there not to be unintentional excessive repetitions. If there were repetitions, I wanted them to be very intentional.

There was one word that I am very fond of—"radiant." There was one draft when there were something like five occurrences of radiant. I was just like, "This is unbearable. The whole book is falling apart." It's a big word, right? It makes a lot of claims for itself. In what amounts to something like a 45,000-word document, five felt like way too many. I think I got it down to three or four and I was like, "Okay, yeah that's totally fine." Five was unbearable. Three or four feels exactly right.

I think a lot about punctuation. I'm fond of punctuation. Grammatically, but also spatially—like, an em dash is so different than a semicolon to me. And most often the two are not good substitutes for each other.

When the book was published was there a fear in going back to it and finding something wrong?

I haven't read the book since it came out, since the last copyedit round. There are the parts I usually read when I'm doing an event; those parts I know very well at this point, but I'm curious how the rest would read now. I love the thing Louise Bourgeois said when someone asked her how she knows a sculpture is done. She said it's when the questions stop. I'm not currently interested in rereading the book. It felt done to me because I felt no further need to reread it and to change things. Maybe one day that'll change. Right now, I have a lot of feelings about and around it, but in terms of going in as a writer, that part feels done.

It sounds like when you're working on a project, you're always working on it in some way, even if in small bits. Have you ever had times where you sit down one day and the momentum comes to a total halt?

All the time. I was raised very Christian, but the first variety of Christianity I grew up with was Catholicism. I'm not at all Catholic anymore, but there is one part of having been Catholic that does stay with me. It's Catholicism's faith in action. Catholics place much less emphasis on the feeling of faith and much more on the doing. I feel as though that carries over to the belief that if I keep sitting down with the work, even if it's day after day after day of nothing working out and of everything getting deleted, that it is still going to lead to something. Granted, that's easy for me to say because I'm not currently in one of those slumps. My feelings about that might change in two hours.

R.O. Kwon Recommends:

Five contemporary poetry books that I've been liking:

Nicole Sealey, THE ANIMAL AFTER WHOM OTHER ANIMALS ARE NAMED

Franny Choi, SOFT SCIENCE

Natalie Diaz, WHEN MY BROTHER WAS AN AZTEC

Tiana Clark, I CAN'T TALK ABOUT THE TREES WITHOUT THE BLOOD

Jenny Xie, EYE LEVEL

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