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As told to Marissa Lorusso, 2754 words.

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On making your best work through balance

Writer and podcast host Kelsey McKinney (of *Normal Gossip*) on working across mediums, being driven by enthusiasm, and keeping your ambition sustainable.

I want to start by asking about all of the different realms in which you work: You're a reporter and a podcast host; you've written essays, you've written fiction. How do you think about balance in your work—both on a practical level, since you're doing a lot of different kinds of work, but also on an existential level: How do you see yourself as a creative person?

There is this concept, I think, that everything you write is entirely different, and the way you must approach them is entirely different. For some writers, that is absolutely true. But for me, there is no difference between writing a novel and writing non-fiction and writing podcast episodes, in terms of the actual drafting. When it comes to research and the way that you build the story, there are differences—but the actual writing itself is the same. The way I write my tweets is the same way I write my novel, which is: word vomit it out and then deal with it later.

For the actual workload portion of it, I don't believe in forcing yourself to do work that you don't like, or that you think is exciting but aren't ready to do yet. There's kind of a mantra in journalism that you don't actually have writer's block, you're just not done reporting. I think that that's true for every kind of writing. Sometimes you try to write an essay and you're getting blocked and blocked and blocked, and the problem isn't that you have writer's block; it's that you haven't fully emotionally processed the thing that you're trying to write about, or you haven't read enough things that are going to inspire you to help you do it. My balance mechanism is: Do the thing that you're the most excited about at that moment, and intake more than you output.

Your podcast *Normal Gossip* is based on true stories, but your team anonymizes them. Did your experience writing your novel impact the way you think about the gossip stories you tell?

There are two ways that are major for the podcast, both of which came from my book editor, Jessica Williams at HarperCollins. She's so good at plotting. My first novel is not a heavy plot book—it's a feelings book. And the problem with feelings books, often, is that they lose momentum. So Jessica Williams told me every chapter needs to be asking a question and revealing something. They're not the same question and reveal—the question you ask at the front of the book is the reveal at the end, or in the climax, or whatever. But in each section, you need to be doing that, because that's what keeps a reader interested. Something we talk about a lot when we're working on the [podcast] scripts is: What kind of questions are we setting up, and when do we reveal them?

The second way is how everyone says, "Show, don't tell"—it's a mantra for a reason, but I think about that a lot when we're working on the podcast. Can we ask another question and get a little bit more information here? Like, we know you hate your mother-in-law in this scenario that you've sent in, but can we email you and ask for other instances? What's the backstory here?

It's a perfect storm in the podcast, because we're reporting out stories that are being sent in, and we're restructuring them through the lens of having all the pieces of a fiction puzzle.

That's interesting—I wanted to also ask about how your work as a reporter influences the podcast, but maybe that answers that question?

All the skills work with each other. You asked before about the balance of my perception of myself as a creative individual, which I think is something that people struggle with a lot—that I struggle with a lot—when you're working for money. When I wrote my first novel, I wrote it on yellow legal pads in my terrible apartment in my free time, and it was easier to think about it as a creative pursuit, because there was no dollar amount attached to it.

Part of it, for me, is thinking about what I need to think of myself as to do the work best. Sometimes, the things I like are not necessarily what this book, this article, this story, this podcast episode needs to work best. So then, what do I need to think about myself as in order to give the stories what they need? For me, that answer has always been that I'm a storyteller.

My instincts and what I would like as a listener are sometimes different from what the listeners are going to actually like, and you have to know that and be able to modify for that. But it's hard, because even as I say that, I know that you do have to make decisions for the work to succeed on its own. There's an extrapolation of that, which is, "Make whatever people want from you." The problem with that is that people don't know what they want. People say, "We want an episode of the podcast every single day. We want a book from you every year. We want all of this stuff." And the reality is, if you do that, you will die, and then there will be no work, or you will live, and all of it will be mediocre. [laughs] So, having an innate, internal scale of what makes something good in your own eyes is what then allows you to say, "Can I make it good by the standard of, for example, this old episode—and not by what I as a consumer want?"

You have to find the balance between trusting yourself—your own taste, your own ability to produce—and trusting the audience, or what the audience is interested in.

Part of this, too, is that podcasting is a really interesting medium, because it is perceived externally as a team sport. People know that there's a producer who's putting sound effects in there, that we have an editor, that we have a production assistant. And people don't perceive novels and non-fiction and journalism the same way, because they say, "Oh, your byline is stamped on the front of this, and therefore you did it alone"—the solitary genius myth.

I think you can trust your instincts and work in a team. Every book is worked on in a team: you have an agent, you have an editor, you have a copy editor, all of these people whose hands go into the thing. So it's knowing your own judgment well enough and having little enough of an ego to know when someone else says something right. So that when someone says, "This isn't working," and you know in your gut that that's true, do you have the ability to overcome the ego that says, "But I'm good at it"?

You know, I actually feel like it has taken a while for listeners to perceive podcasts as a team effort. It's heartening to hear that you feel that perception is changing.

We're trying. It is true that often I have to email people and be like, "You need to credit Alex [Sujung Laughlin, *Normal Gossip's* co-creator and supervising producer]." These very basic things that no one would ever have to do for me, because it's my voice on the podcast. But I think the longer we act like the things that we do are solitary acts of genius, the easier it is for us to be exploited as workers. When you're saying, "I did this by myself," what you are saying is, "Pay me — only me, because everyone else is replaceable," and that's never true on any kind of art project. The people working with you at every level are important to the success of the project. And so, by giving them credit, you are creating a structure in which everyone can succeed.

You're also a co-founder of Defector, which is an employee-owned media company. What are some of the differences you've noticed between working in that environment vs. a more traditional media structure?

Having the stability of knowing that you cannot be fired without a staff revolt against you gives the space for creative work to actually happen. In the past, I did not realize how much of my mental capacity was being spent on looking for jobs, pitching editors, worrying about whether publications were going to close. And you know while it's happening, "Oh my god, this is taking up all of my energy and all of my time." But to actually feel [that worry] be lifted—it's awful, because I realized I've spent all of these years so worried about where my money was going to come from—whether I would have money to pay my rent, whether or not I would have money for healthcare—that I wasn't doing great work. I was doing a lot of work that I wasn't proud of because it paid \$2 per word. And that work all takes time, and that's all time that you could be spending doing stuff that you're proud of, which sucks.

The second thing is that when you work for a worker-owned cooperative, there are no standards outside of... Well, since we're subscriber based, the metric standard is how many subscribers we have. But as long as we have enough subscribers, the standard is: Is the work good? Which means that you don't have some suit person coming into your editorial room and saying, "Everyone's going to write SEO headlines now"—which is what happens at every media publication—and then, instead of doing the work that you know you can do, you're doing this kind of vague work that a suit says is important.

There have been a lot of times when I will go to our VP of business, Jasper Wang, with the kind of apologetic tone of someone who has been traumatized in other media companies. And I'm like, "I'm so sorry, but my flight got canceled and I need to rent a car and it's going to be \$700. Is that okay?" And he's always like, "Yes! You need that to do your job. What do you mean, 'Is it okay?'" And that is a complete difference of life: not having to worry about whether or not the people in charge are going to destroy you for something small.

When Alex and I wanted to make *Normal Gossip*, Defector took it to all the big media companies and said,

"Do you want this?" And they all said, "Well, it's an unproven concept." Which it was—nobody had made a gossip podcast before. Now, you'll notice that there are dozens of them, and that's because it is a proven concept—ours was successful, so now these companies are willing to produce them, because there's no risk involved. But that also means that everything's the same, and that means that consumers don't have options, because everything is copying something else. We have the freedom to not do that, which is a huge blessing.

I know that you and Alex are also really intentional about avoiding burnout in the making of the show. Can you tell me why that is important to you and what guardrails you use to avoid burnout?

Everywhere I've ever worked has seen potential as a reason to drive you to an early grave. They think you're talented, and therefore you write all the time, constantly. Some of that is good; you get reps in. But we want the podcast to be good, and we learned very early on that the podcast being good is dependent on the two of us having fun doing it. When we get in silly, goofy mode, the art is better. Because we're like, "What if we made this a murder themed episode? And we just go fully in on that?" Those kinds of ideas come because you have the space to have them, instead of thinking logistically all the time. So that's why; the "why" is actually more business-focused than I think a lot of people think—it's that we want the product to be good.

The "how" is that we don't have a weekly podcast. That's a huge thing. Everyone wants us to have a weekly podcast, because that's how math works: if you have more episodes, you can sell more ads and make more money. But we take breaks from doing it. And some of those are working breaks—like right now, we're not putting out new episodes, but we're on tour and we're in writers' rooms for season five. So we are working, currently, but in August we won't be. We have a whole section of August blocked off where—well, I am going to do other work, unfortunately, but take a break from [the podcast], and let my brain reset, so that I can come back fresh.

In thinking about all of your work, I was struck by this relationship between sustainability and ambition. It feels applicable both to your own career and what it means to run a business. How do you think about that balance?

Another big difference in working at Defector is that we have no infinite goal. There's a popular tweet that's like, "Our goal as a company is to drain the oceans and kill god." And we make fun of it all the time, because we're *not* trying to drain the oceans and kill god. We're not trying to make a billion dollars. We're trying to fund people to do the kind of work they want to do, and that's a modest goal. We're doing it! We're successful. So we're not trying to grow the company, really—we're trying to maintain the company where it is, which is a totally different kind of goal. So I'm talking a lot about quality, which is obviously a subjective measure, but in my *own* ambition, it is no longer quantitative. I'm not like, "Oh, I want to write five books." I would love to write five books, if I had five good books in me—but I can't guarantee you those are there, at this point. It takes time to know what you have inside yourself.

And so, for me, the sustainability portion is connected to the ambition portion. If your ambition is to make things that you're proud of, at a scale that allows you to eat dinner out once a week, that is a manageable goal, because it isn't, "I want to be a millionaire and write Hollywood screenplays and do all of this other stuff." It's that each day, you're trying to do things that you feel good about.

Kelsey McKinney Recommends:

Cassandra at the Wedding by Dorothy Baker: This slim novel about twin sisters struggling to handle one of their weddings kept me up until the wee hours of the night reading. It was published in 1962 but feels like it could be the buzziest book of this summer. I won't stop talking about it! Everyone is annoyed with me!

Trent Reznor's *Gone Girl* soundtrack: This is the only music I can ever write to. The tension in every single one of these songs magically makes it onto the page while I'm working, and the vibes are immaculate.

Armenian Fried Cheese: This is a Philadelphia-specific recommendation, but who am I to deny people joy. This dish is served at my favorite restaurant, Mish Mish. It's fried cheese, kind of like if a mozzarella stick and a funnel cake had a baby, and it comes with this delicious spicy red dipping sauce. I dream about it every time I'm out of town.

Piano lessons: After I watched Tár this winter, I became obsessed with the idea of learning an instrument as an adult, and signed up for piano lessons. I've loved every minute of it! My teacher is in his 80s, and every week I practice to make him proud. There is something so nourishing and calming about having a hobby with absolutely no practical purpose.

Mezcal Ilegal: It's still hot out! Your spirit of choice should be clear in celebration of the heat! My favorite spirit is mezcal, and the best brand I've found that's readily available on the east coast is Mezcal Ilegal. I've been subbing it for the gin in negronis and having a very good summer indeed.

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Fact

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