

On believing in yourself and your work



Writer Allie Rowbottom discusses developing a sustainable process, dealing with rejection, and paying attention to the marketplace without succumbing to it.

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As told to Elle Nash, 2931 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Business](#), [Success](#), [Failure](#).

So how are you feeling now that your book is making its way into the world?

My god I feel good. Every step of the way with this book nobody but my nearest and dearest seemed to believe in it. So it feels vindicating that readers and other writers I admire are engaging with it now. More than press, readers represent the truest test to me. They are the true tastemakers.

When you say that, are you talking about publishers in the process of submitting it?

Yeah, but even agents. While writing this book I left my first agent, the agent who sold my first book, *Jell-O Girls*. I queried a select few agents with *Aesthetica* in a relatively early but still somewhat conceptualized form and it seemed like everyone I reached out to loved it right up until the main character goes through with her boob job. After that they passed, save for one, my now agent Erin Harris.

Personally, I think the reason so many people “stepped aside” on this book was a moral purity one, like, industry people thought a boob job was not the “right” choice for the character to make. And I was determined not to judge the character, nor moralize in any way. Which has turned out to be one of the elements of the book people resonate with the most. All to say, every step along the way, there’s only been one person who wanted this book, which has been a really good lesson. Because all you need is one.

How did this project start out for you? I know we’re both obsessed with plastic surgery, but in the more the craft sense, how did you start this and how long ago did you start working on this?

The first time I started it was in late 2018, but then my computer was stolen and I didn’t back anything up. So I started it again in early 2019. But it had a completely different plot, which wasn’t taking my character to the emotional place I wanted her to get to. Once I realized that, I started it again in early 2020 and that is the version that became what the book is now. Early on with this novel, I was trying to avoid writing another mother-daughter book because I was like, “I’ve already done that. I don’t want to be a one-note writer.” But it turned out I still needed to work out some stuff about mothers and daughters. Once I accepted that, the plot became what it is now.

You also have a Ph.D. in creative writing. How and when did you know that this was what you wanted? When did that start for you?

I started writing toward the end of my undergrad years. I guess I'd been writing throughout, like, I was good at papers and would write them for my friends, a little side hustle. And I had a job blogging for a now defunct luxury lifestyle magazine. But I didn't take it seriously as a career until my roommate was like, "You should be a real writer, like Carrie Bradshaw." Hilarious in retrospect, but at the time I was like, "Oh, that would be nice. I would like to do that." So I started taking writing classes. Then I went to an MFA program and afterward a PhD because I was like, "They pay you to go to school and teach and write, why wouldn't I do that?"

I didn't start thinking about framing my *career* until after *Jell-O Girls*. That book taught me that if you don't take a hand in spinning the narrative about yourself and your work, someone else is going to do it for you and they're going to do a questionable job and you're going to feel bad about it.

I think as you get further into your writing career, there becomes this fear of being pigeonholed or being a certain type of thing.

I know, and I think particularly as a woman, it's hard to nail, hard to avoid getting pigeonholed. I did it "right" with *Jell-O Girls*. I was buttoned up, professional. I wore fake glasses to events so people would take me more seriously. Some people loved that book. Some people skipped the book and hated me, reduced me, spun what I'd written about—which is privilege and its complications, something very very common in the writing world, but hardly ever owned up to in a nuanced fashion—to fit the vision of me that made *them* feel safe, which when it comes to women is always one dimensional. An heiress. A bimbo. A nepo baby, which is what it is but for the record, yes, my mother came from a long line of highly diluted Jell-O inheritors, the nuance of which is explained in the book, and my dad was a mechanic before he worked for FedEx as a driver, delivering mail, and then he was a traveling auto parts salesman who couldn't afford to heat the house or keep the lights on. That doesn't mean I'm not privileged, only that it's never one thing.

Anyway, after feeling so roundly misread I thought, why bother playing it safe, I'll just do what I want. It does suck that no matter what I do, some people are like, "Fuck this bitch." But it's easier to stomach when I receive that response for really being myself. I also think the impulse to put a woman down when she's putting herself out there and displaying confidence is not just common, it's baked into our culture. We're all programmed to feel threatened by powerful women. I feel it too and then I check myself, ask myself why this woman putting herself out there is triggering me so much. Often it turns out that I don't hate her; I *actually* admire her. I don't *actually* want to diminish her; I want to join her.

How did you know when this book was done, it was ready to go out?

I had this sort of...vibe in my head that I wanted to get onto the page. It wasn't even an image, not even that concrete. It was almost like a song that I couldn't hear. The spirit of a book that wasn't yet written, but wanted to be. I felt that way for *Jell-O Girls*, too. It was an energy I wanted to translate. I knew *Aesthetica* had come together when I saw and felt the vibe on the page. I don't know if this makes sense, but I think now, after going through this process of channeling the vibe into a book twice, that there's no way to force it. It's a matter of time.

What's your day to day process when you were working on it?

I would wake up, go to work and then take a break, a walk break, a breakfast break, and then go back to work on it. I was pretty obsessed and focused during the writing of this book. Part of that was because I had broken my wrist in two places. I had a full arm cast and I started writing the draft that *Aesthetica* is today in long hand. But I also started taking knockoff Adderall, which I later realized was basically meth. It was making me hallucinate and my hair was falling out. So I stopped. But by then I had generated enough pages that I was in an editing phase, which was good timing because I can always focus on the editing phase. It's exciting to me to rearrange the puzzle of the book.

How are you going to handle the next book?

I wouldn't do the drug thing again. I think the worst part of taking that knock-off Adderall for me was that I lost my faith in my own ability to just sit down and write without it. And that faith is precious to me because if I can sit down and write and focus at pretty much anywhere, then I can escape whatever situation I'm in. If I can't do that on my own, if I can't escape, then I'm fucked. A huge coping mechanism for me has been taken away.

What is one writing habit or tick that you always have to fight against when you're working?

Something that I got into after *Jell-O Girls* was over-explaining, which I'd always been taught not to do, but I think a lot of big five, more financially pressurized books, like what *Jell-O Girls* became, are pushed in a more commercial direction while in production. It's a dumbing down for the audience that is murderous on a sentence level and when it comes to the flow of the narrative. Now I find it really easy to spot. There's an extra line at the end of every paragraph, or even every image, interpreting material for the reader that doesn't need interpreting.

How do you train yourself out of that while you're working?

I think it's intuition, honestly. I would rather give someone an image and let them interpret it themselves than give them the same image and be like, "What this means is..." It's trusting yourself and the reader to be able to do the work-but not too much work-it's a balance. Finding that balance is where the real craft comes in, the real mastery of form; for people destined to be writers, the balance is intuitive. It can be honed in the classroom or with practice, but is already there naturally. Self-doubt, or the marketplace, or edits that are geared toward preparing your book for the marketplace can get in the way of that intuition and change how you see your work, how you see your readers, how you imagine what they are capable of. This is especially true for writers at the beginning of their careers.

How much do you think about the marketplace when you're working?

Honestly, too much. It is such a hurdle once you've published a book. I don't know if you feel this way, but after I published *Jell-O Girls* I had this voice in my head that was hard to silence. It was the voice of every age related list that ranks authors as hot or not or rising stars or best of this or that. It was the voice of the Karens on goodreads that called me self-indulgent or whiney or said I was blaming patriarchy for my problems rather than take responsibility for them, or capitalizing on my mother's death or morbidly dwelling on depictions of her illness in writing my first book. Part of what makes *Aesthetica* work, though, is that I found a way to channel all that into writing the book I wanted to write and to read.

I think the challenge of selling *Aesthetica* was an experience that ultimately wound up pumping up my confidence in my vision as an artist. Because every pass, every closed door, was in direct conflict with what I believed about the book, and what I now know to be true about the book, which was that it is highly sellable, a novel a lot of women-people-want to read and a novel the media wants to cover. The market is so fickle and the people who gatekeep or make lists or whatever are wrong a lot of the time. Or if not wrong, they are looking for something other than what I want to produce. They are looking for books that are like other books, books that make them feel good or safe, which are never the books I want to read.

In 2019 I did this interview with my mentor [Maggie Nelson](#), author of many books I love and admire. It was right after *Jell-O Girls* came out and I was reeling from the publication process, which no matter what is a real psychic overload, and I was asking her about her books and her road to publication. She told me that only one person at a time had ever wanted any of her books and that when she was rejected, which she often was, her response was much more *your loss* than *I suck*. At the time I was like, "Okay, Maggie, easier said than done." And though now I am by no means impervious to the sting of rejection, I am much more inclined to be like *your loss* than *I suck*. Which feels like a win.

I also want to say that writing is a long game. It's not just this book, it's many books. When you build yourself up in the indie scene, every book is like climbing a rung of a long ladder. It can feel so painful when your peers appear to bypass all those rungs and get right to the top with a big book deal. But nobody is going to say no to life changing money for their writing if it's offered. And though to the outside world it may look like a

dream come true, a big deal for a first book comes with it pressure, alienation from your peers, and the inevitable fall from grace when your book doesn't earn out or meet your publisher's expectations, which is hard to do because their expectations are dumb and if your work is creative, they're going to try and make it less so. They want something that's like something else. They don't want something that's so unique that they have no comps to put it next to. All to say the best thing you can do is focus on yourself, your individual journey. It's a long game and *it all comes out in the wash*, my favorite saying.

I've thought what the publishing industry looks like where you have teams of people who are tasked with selling this product and most people likely have five people ahead of them breathing down their necks, being like, you need to reach this target, the performance indicator.

I just thought about that so much in terms of who is acquiring books and the people who are selling them and why they're choosing to sell them the way that they sell them. The book is a product in that way and it's unfortunate. Do you think that the book or the novel can ever transcend a place of being a product in a marketplace? Or do you think that we as writers will always be subject to it being that, we create an object and therefore it becomes a product?

I think probably the only books that transcend productness are perennial sellers over many generations. Like *Catcher in the Rye* or *The White Album*. Are those books products or are they just cultural touchstones at this point? Maybe if you are very like, "I'm just going to do this myself, I don't need a publisher," you escape the productness of the book because you're in such control over who gets it and how they buy it and all of those things that a traditional publisher does. I definitely see the appeal in that path.

I feel like my books are products, yes. They're also deep reflections of my soul and mind and obsessions at specific points in my life. It's a sad enmeshment, that of art and commerce. And a harsh reality. Because even as I say my books are products—they come with a pricetag, they are sold in stores—the thing I hate the most about publishing is the way that other people approach books as products. It's still very hard for me to wrap my mind around the culture of rating books on a scale of one to five like you would a dishwasher. Especially if the person doing the rating hasn't written before, hasn't experienced how lonely and thankless it can feel, how when finally the book is done, even if you earn a six figure advance, after taxes and agent fees and all the time you spent working, it's nine times out of ten not a living wage. Then your book is packaged and put online for people to award stars to.

Which isn't to say I'm not grateful for every person who has read and rated my books, at least so long as they've not personally attacked me in the process. But the democratization of art criticism is a relatively new phenomenon and can feel hard to adjust to, especially when it's the most poorly written mass market books that get the best ratings much of the time, just as they sell the most copies. It can feel very *Hunger Games*. I suppose the only salve here is to remember that if someone feels the urge to rate something they've just read, they've had an emotional response to it. Good or bad, it doesn't matter. It's moved them, which is what art is supposed to do.

Allie Rowbottom Recommends:

The ocean — because every beach has something beautiful to offer and it's primal to watch the water, our original home

Dogs — no explanation necessary

Carrying Narcan — because who wants to feel the tear of senseless loss, who wants to think if only after it's far too late

Eating whole foods to satiety — otherwise life shrinks and so do you when the goal is expansion, karmic and otherwise

Wyld Cannabis infused pear gummies, 1:1 THC:CBG — smooth, energetic, funny, no anxiety; my favorite edible

Name

Allie Rowbottom

Vocation

writer

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