

On creative work as refuge



Writer, editor, and publisher Anne K. Yoder on setting boundaries between your day job and your art, the value of making lists, and finding joy in difficult times.

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As told to Shelby Hinte, 2786 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Editing](#), [Day jobs](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#).

I've heard in a couple other interviews that you occasionally work as a pharmacist and I know that in your novel, *The Enhancers*, pharmacology plays a big part. I'd love to start by hearing a bit about what it was like letting your day job bleed into your creative work.

It's something I avoided for a very long time. I didn't love pharmacy school and so going to work and working at a hospital was all shift work. I didn't bring work home with me. For the longest time I was just like, "Yeah, I don't want to write about work when I'm not working. I want to write."

I think it wasn't until I was in grad school and I'd stopped working as a pharmacist that I started thinking about ways to use this whole archive of knowledge that I had. I think maybe the distance allowed me to be more playful. I felt I knew the world so well that it was pretty easy and fun to extrapolate with the medical voice in my book. Even just thinking up the names for the pharmaceuticals was fun. Drugs have absurd names. I had a lot of thoughts and questions and conflicting ideas about the drug industry that I think I was able to bring into the book.

I've talked with some writers who say, "I need my day job to have some kind of overlap with my creative work." So I meet a lot of professors and a lot of people who do some form of writing in the hours that they're not working on their creative projects. I've heard other people say, "I need to do something so far removed from my creative project so that all of my energy in this particular skill set goes into the thing that I most care about creatively." Where do you fall on this idea?

I think I'm envious in some ways of people who have day jobs that are connected to their creative work. I guess it's something that I had always thought I would end up doing. It's something I always fantasized about doing, but the reality is, working in pharmacies has been really great for writing in the sense of having time and boundaries. I've always worked part-time as a pharmacist.

In the past, when I was living in New York, I was able to work with various literary journals and also write. Which is just really challenging to do if you have a part-time job. I had benefits at that point in time, which was crazy. It's like, "Oh, I have a part-time job with benefits and I'm able to work for a literary journal for basically nothing." It's been a gift to be able to work part-time and live in New York, or work part-time and work on my book. With the work that I do, it's not like I'm answering emails late at night about pharmacy. It's just, you go in for your shift and then you leave. Having those boundaries and time has been really important to me. I've mostly worked in hospitals or long-term care, like 24-hour pharmacies—so the off hours—which meant I could write during the day and kind of be fresh.

I love what you say about there being such a distinct boundary between work and writing. Sometimes those writing

adjacent jobs feel like they can bleed into the creative time and it's sort of hard to separate the two.

Right. The other thing is I always have other endeavors and they're all creative endeavors that are by choice. I am part of the Meekling Cooperative, and so I do a lot of work with them, but that's a choice, and also creative, and also really fulfilling to work on making books.

I've been really curious about your work with Meekling Press and what your role is there and how it has shaped your creative life and your community.

Meekling was started by two friends who were in grad school with me. They were ahead of me at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and eventually I became involved. It's a rather small endeavor and it has a really terrific community. Up until the pandemic it had a series called "Meekling Talks," which was a series of performative talks where the only stipulation was that some part of the talk must be fictional, or the whole talk could be fictional. Having come from art school and having friends from various disciplines, it could be more performative, or it could just be mostly storytelling. I think it was around that [series] that Meekling has developed a community.

As far as roles go, no one has a specific role. It's pretty non-structural. People wear different hats. I've edited books, I've done publicity, I've helped with collating books, or sending off books. I guess I would say that Rebecca Elliott is the book guru. They do design and have an incredible workspace with an offset press, a plate-in letter press, a few other presses, and a guillotine. [Meekling] is a really great space. I think for me, I love working with people on creating a physical book. It's influenced my perspective of what it takes to make a book and seeing the publishing of a book as more of a communal project. It isn't about just the author. It's collaborative. Working with a small press is really great for that. The other part about working with the small press is that it's creative and it's generative. The value is in creating the object, rather than how the book sells. It's not a capitalist enterprise serving the cult of the author.

Do you think that having such a tactile, collaborative project like Meekling Press, helps ground you when you're in the writing process?

Oh yes, definitely, definitely. Part of it is the tactile aspect of just creating and being able to say, "Oh, look, there's so many aspects to a book." Reading somebody else's book that Meekling is putting out helps me maintain a focus on the book itself. I think it's easy for me to have excitement about other people's books without judgment or without any type of question of its value in a way that's impossible to have with my own work, because I have no objectivity in relationship to my own work. [Working with Meekline] reminds me of the value in the process as opposed to thinking about, "How will this fly? Does this work?" Or getting hung up on those questions of "What is the value of this?" Or "Is this going to land somewhere?"

What about writing specifically do you think of as important to you? What would you say its role is in your life?

I feel that writing is this primal inclination that I've always had. When I am writing and actually engaging with it, I feel it is the way that I feel maybe most in the world which maybe also sounds kind of absurd because as a writer you're sitting apart, but it is a way of processing and being present. With creative work it's about ideas, about being able to think, but also about moving away from oneself, from yourself as center. We can try on different modes of thinking, and to see how those play out on the page and to be in an alternate world. For me, it all comes down to being able to perceive. And it's about communication, too.

I have a friend who shared an observation that she noticed a number of writers have had some type of speech disorder in their childhood. We were at a residency this summer, and it came up that three of us had met with speech therapists in our early childhood. So I wonder, too, about how much that plays a role—the desire to be able to communicate through words, but through the written word as opposed to talking. It is just a different form of conversation. I would say that I also read for a similar reason, which is to cut through the bullshit and just be able to get at what people are thinking. I know as a child that was really important to me. I came from a somewhat controlling family, but I could read anything that was at the library. So, it was this place of discovering so many different types of people and ways of thinking, or just ways of being in the world.

I loved what you said about writing as being a way to take yourself out of the center of the experience. That you're writing about your experience, and yet you're also being more present in the world. I think that comes across in your book in those textured chapters between the narrative chapters where there's depictions of fictionalized representations of common objects. There's also lists and advertisements for medication and sections that include instructions you might find on a pill bottle. It all gave me the impression that you are a person who catalogs the minutiae of the everyday. I wondered what your relationship to observation was and how that plays into your writing.

I think I am someone who can be really attuned to small details. I can be really obsessive about it. I do like list-making. I'm thinking of a story that I wrote in a workshop with Diane Williams, and the one thing that she loved that I wrote was a list. She was like, "Write more lists." I think maybe it does have to do with observation and materiality and categorization.

Georges Perec's book *Things: A Story of the Sixties/A Man Asleep* is basically a book of lists of things, and it's about consumerism and materiality and maybe part of it too is an attempt at building a world which is very much our world but is also a fictional town. I love the lists in [*Things*] because there is a way that a list juxtaposed with other lists tells you so much about a person. For example, if you just catalog a list of what's in someone's apartment it doesn't create a narrative, but I think it does create a fictional space where a reader can move through it and come to their own decisions. And I think maybe that's part of it. Part of my inclination is to create this pharmaceutical world where these lists, and the language where they're encountered by the reader, are artifacts of that world.

It's such a tactile way of building or representing a world. We were emailing the other day about coming of age under the current global conditions which is a major premise of *The Enhancers*. Hannah, one of the protagonists, struggles with the existential struggle to go on and function normally amidst global catastrophes. I was relating to Hannah and relating to that idea, but as a writer and asking myself "How do we carry on with creative endeavors in the face of real threats to humanity?" I ask a lot of writers this, because I don't think I ever get sick of hearing answers—maybe this is me creating a catalog for myself—but how do you find motivation to continue being creative despite the ominous headlines we are faced with every day?

Right. Oh god. I think that is the question. Or that is our current situation. Just today I was looking at my Twitter feed and there were a series of articles about insect extinction and the collapse of the environment, or the ways that insects are integral to frog populations, and I was just like, "Oh my god, this is terrifying."

And it's what you see all the time.

All of the time. This is definitely a question I had writing *The Enhancers* and writing Hannah and teenage girls in the book. How do you come of age knowing that we're in the sixth extinction and that really drastic measures need to be taken to prevent that? And we can't even get it together for a virus. It doesn't really inspire much confidence. I think terrible things happen in the world every day on both a personal level and on a global level, but there's a way that creative work can bring joy. It can provide relief—both as a reader and as a writer. It is a refuge. I think in trying to write about climate change and extinction was my way of engaging with ideas about how to deal with it.

I feel like in the end the book does end sort of optimistically or hopeful—more so than I imagined it would.

I mean, I think for Hannah, there is so much personal alienation and alienation from nature, coupled with an awareness of loss. It's an absence that she doesn't know how to categorize at first. I think the book is, in that way, a coming-of-age or a coming to find a place within the world and to learn what that absence is. I mean it is a somewhat optimistic end for the book, and I'm glad to hear you say that.

I was honestly surprised when I got to the end because there was a point in the middle where I was like, "Wow, this is really bleak and only getting bleaker," so it came as a relief that there is some levity.

I think that it's so easy to be overcome by the bleakness. And I think maybe Hannah finding a certain joy in life, or that no matter how bleak it is, there is also beauty, was an attempt at trying to hold onto those two things at once.

It's like what you were saying about creative work. It can be a refuge in all the ugliness. If nothing else, it's a reprieve. I recently read in your interview with *The Millions* that you worked on this book for ten years. How do you find the energy to sustain a project for that long?

Oh, psychotherapy [laughs]. I think it was really a stubbornness. Obsession. I've always wanted to write a book and to write books. In the beginning I wanted the book to be a poet's novel and I was resisting narrative, but inevitably I am drawn to narrative. My desire for the book changed and then I had to go back and rewrite it. It took me a while to come to terms with my idea for an experimental structure while also trying to write something that conformed more to a traditional novel structure. So it was about finding a way to be decisive. Ten years is a long time. I realize on some level how easily I could have abandoned it.

How do you not abandon the work after that long?

Well part of the ten years was thinking that I was done with the book, sending it out, realizing I have another revision, and then doing that. I would say it does kind of feel like a marathon of its own kind. Maybe not as strenuous all at once, but it is a type of marathon. I will never run a marathon, but a novel is the type of marathon I'm invested in. Also, I feel like there was a lot I learned about what putting a novel together looks like. I think a first novel on some level is also teaching yourself how to write a novel. I think you have to teach yourself how to write each book that you write or each work you write. It's hard for me to let go of work. I know people who would have probably been like, "I'm done with this," and move on to something else. That isn't always a bad choice. For me, I was just really attached to this idea. And then by year five I was just like, "I've put five years into this book. It's a book. I'm invested in it. It's going to be a book."

Anne K. Yoder Recommends:

[Pilsen Community Books](#)

[Kelly Krumrie's Figuring column](#)

[Four Queens'](#) Sunday Morning Creative Writing + Divinatory Poetics Hour (while you're at, it get a copy of Selah Saterstrom's *Ideal Suggestions, Essays in Divinatory Poetics*)

Annie-B Parsons' [The Choreography of Everyday Life](#)

Collaborative Novels: especially *A Roundtable*, *Unanimous Dreamers Chime In*, by Brenda Iijima and Janice Lee, excerpted [here](#) in *Annulet* (which I also recommend!) and forthcoming from Meekling Press next spring. (Also, *Diego Garcia* by Narasha Soobramanien and Luke Williams, published by Semiotext(e), which I've just begun reading.)

[Name](#)

Anne K. Yoder

[Vocation](#)

writer, editor, publisher

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Chiara Conner