

On trusting in your journey



Author, entrepreneur, and activist Francesca Cavallo (Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls) discusses creating the things you want to see in the world and allowing for the time it takes to make them.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2217 words.

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

You have described yourself as a natural storyteller. What drove you to write stories, publish books, and make publishing your main profession?

I never planned on being a writer. I always enjoyed writing, but I never thought that it would be my profession. I ended up writing because I needed it in order to accomplish things that I wanted to do. If I wanted to create a play, I wrote a play. If I wanted to tell kids about current events and news, I ended up finding ways to tell them in a compelling way about the world. So over time, I sort of found that I had become a writer. But I never planned for it.

The books that you publish with your company, Undercats, are dedicated to children, but the ones that buy the books are their parents. Does it mean that you need to implement two different marketing and outreach strategies? How do you make sure that your work reaches the right hands?

Well, I want to build sustainable companies. And being a sustainable company isn't just about the environment. It is also about how you treat your employees, how you treat your customers, not just in terms of customer service, but also in terms of marketing. For example, do you use it to manipulate them into buying whatever product it is that you're selling? Or do you use your marketing campaigns to create community? The thing that we always try to do is try to educate our audience and to build opportunities for them to meet each other.

One of the things that we're doing for [Paralympians](#) is what we call "Disability Pride Talks" where we invite on our social media disability rights advocates, people with disabilities as guest speakers. And we have these very honest conversations about disability. And we try to build bridges between parents who have different experiences because what we found is that when you are parenting, for example, a child with a disability, or when you are parenting a child who's trans, there is a lot that you go through as a parent that you can share with parents who have children who don't have disabilities or who are not trans and still enrich each other's experiences.

So what we try to do in our marketing campaigns is we try to build bridges between these communities that are usually isolated and silenced, because we believe that by making parenting more inclusive and by offering families the opportunity to know a little bit better about what is going on in other households, we can sort of spark their curiosity for the kind of books that we publish. And at the end of the day, what does it mean to create a sustainable marketing campaign? That even if they don't end up buying our books, they still walk out the door with a bit more of a seed of inclusivity than what they came in.

When you have an idea for a movie, an album, or a book, this usually evolves over time, because you get to learn more about your characters or about yourself, or the ideas change. Has this happened to you in any of your books?

Absolutely. It happens all the time. We have a lot of ideas constantly, and it's almost as if we sort of put them on a burner and everything that stays after that we try to set them on fire. And we try to do only the ideas that can be game-changing somehow, that have some elements of novelty, of something that hasn't been seen before. So for example, for the Paralympian box, part of the reason why we decided to bet on this idea is that the representation of people with disabilities in illustrated books is virtually non-existent. And this means that for example, even illustrators who want to include people with disabilities in their books, it's really hard because they don't have a lot of references to go to.

So when they look at what other illustrators have done to illustrate non-conforming bodies, or the bodies of people who don't have a leg, for example, they really don't know where to turn because there is almost nothing out there. So we thought, okay. We believe that these books can be interesting, not just because these stories are amazing. Not just because these are not just stories about disability or all sorts of different things, but because they can create a reference. We always want to be pioneers in that we want to create work that can inspire other people to keep building on whatever it is that we're doing.

When I created "Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls", one of the comments that I received that made me really proud came from bookshop owners who told me that after our book came out, they had to create a new section in their stores. And then of course, when they create a new section, other publishers want to populate that section. And so a little bit, the point of Undercats is to create as many new sections as we need in order to make every child feel represented and seen in children's books.

Your company's mission is to radically increase diversity in children's media. Your books cover different topics regarding diversity, equality, and representation. And even though the books are for children, this does not mean that they are not provocative or that they might strike a chord for certain people. For example, I would say that maybe not everybody would like to read to their children stories that are associated with the word "rebel". Or not everybody finds Hillary Clinton, Frida Kahlo, or Malala a role model or inspiring. How do you deal with these risks of publishing something that might cause resistance?

That goes to the heart of my work. I am very unusual as a children's book author because I am not afraid of taking sides. And I believe that there are certain values that I hold to be self-evident and I am not afraid to defend them, even if they may be controversial to some people. And I believe we need that in children's books because if we keep on producing children's books that want to stay away from any potential controversy, we will keep on publishing children's books that have a very conservative agenda. I mean, sometimes people say that because my books include homosexual people or people of color, or people with disabilities that they are propaganda.

But in my opinion, showing kids the world in all of its natural and glorious diversity is not propaganda. What is propaganda is being deliberate in excluding some people that exist in the world because they don't fit within your ideology. Because in that case, you are doing propaganda because you are choosing not to show the kids the natural world, but to show them the world as you would like it to be. I realized that my books are not for everyone. But the fact that they are not for everyone makes my books for someone. And I put all my soul and my heart into them because if they were for everyone, they'd be for no one. They're not for everyone, but they are for someone. For sure, they are for progressive families who believe that we need to create a more inclusive world. If you don't believe that inclusivity is a value, you're probably not going to appreciate my books. And I'm okay with that.

You have successfully launched five crowdfunding campaigns. Besides the quality of the project, what do you think helped you to connect with the audience to commit and engage with the campaign?

I think that part of it is the work of audience development that I do through my social media and through the newsletter before the beginning of the campaign helps. In all of my campaigns, even the first one, there was this work of preparing the audience for what was coming. I do it specifically on the topic of whatever campaign it is that I'm going to launch. But part of it is by sharing daily posts on my Instagram. So you build a community because you share your vision and what would you like the world to be. And around this vision, over the years, I gathered a community, and these communities are usually eager to support me and to hold me. Every time I launch a

Kickstarter campaign, I feel almost as if I were jumping down a cliff.

The truth is that you never know what's going to happen with a crowdfunding campaign and you can crush really hard. And you have to be okay with the fact that the dollar amount that you raised in the Kickstarter campaign is not going to be an indicator necessarily of the quality of your project. So if you stand behind your creative necessity and the necessity for the world of whatever project it is that you're putting out there, you have also an opportunity to establish a very authentic communication with your audience.

What I've seen from other creators is that sometimes if the campaign doesn't go in the way that they thought it was going to go, there are lots of negative feelings that arise in relation to your audience. This doesn't happen with me because I realized that sometimes the stories that I want to tell will sort of meet the imagination of a larger number of people. Sometimes it will be a smaller number of people, but if you stand behind the work that you do, when you stand behind the needs that you have for doing it, then you are okay with the fact that the size of your community is going to be larger and bigger. And sometimes, it's smaller and that's okay because it's the nature of creative work.

In your current Kickstarter campaign for Paralympians, you mentioned in the campaign video that by giving "all children the opportunity to grow up exposed to the world in all of its glorious diversity... we have the opportunity to give birth to the cultural revolution we need." Could you elaborate on what you mean by that?

What I mean is that up until a few years ago, parenting was seen as a very private responsibility between parents and children. I mean, if you're a parent, you want to make sure that your kids receive a good education, that they eat healthy foods, that they have a decent support system. But over the past five, six years with the MeToo movement and Black Lives Matter an increasing number of families around the world started to see parenting as the most consequential political act that they will do in their entire lives. It's almost as if by parenting a child, you can give birth to a new world because we are realizing that we internalize a lot of homophobia growing up, a lot of racism, a lot of misogyny. So how do we make sure to stop these cycles of oppression? How do we make sure to raise our children freer from stereotypes, than we were raised? I think that there are millions of people that are asking themselves this question now. What I mean by this cultural revolution is that I want to provide these families around the world with a kind of content that allows them to look forward for inspiration and to share with their children stories that can help them dream together of the world, that they want to build a world that is more inclusive, that is more diverse, and that is more accessible for everyone.

You have plenty of experience with managing a company and making it successful and being sustainable. And you have learned a lot from each one of the books that you launch. What is one of the most valuable lessons you have learned during this process?

That it takes time. I was way more impatient in my first company. And now I am like, okay, I am doing the best I can. We are doing the best we can as companies. As a company. It takes time because the work that we're trying to do is not turn-key because you have to educate your audience to the fact that these products, these books, that we are creating, are needed. It is a cultural revolution and cultural revolutions don't happen overnight. And you don't understand how to create such an enormous project in one week or even one month, you have to trust the journey and you have to understand that you need to be in it for the long run, because it's not a sprint by any means.

Francesca Cavallo recommends:

The interview to Elizabeth Gilbert by Jonathan Fields on the podcast "The Good Life Project"

The DVD of the Confession Tour by Madonna

The TV show I May Destroy You

The book: Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy and the Fear of Female Power by Jude Ellison S. Doyle

living in Rome

Name

Francesca Cavallo

Vocation

Writer, entrepreneur, activist

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