

On changing your attitude towards your work



Writer Anna Dorn discusses being prepared for a bumpy path, incorporating feedback, and how anxiety can drive work forward.

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As told to Ariel Courage, 2505 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Beginnings](#), [Failure](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

When did you first know you were going to be a writer?

I started writing when I was really young, like a child. Basically as soon as I learned how to write, I was writing creatively, or trying to. I attempted a few novels in high school, but never finished one. The computer I wrote them on doesn't exist anymore. There was no Cloud or anything, so I have no way to access them.

For a long time my writing was a secret, private thing I did. It wasn't until I tried to be a lawyer that I was like, "I'm not going to be able to do this for the rest of my life." I had the idea of writing a law school novel when I was in law school. I wrote maybe a chapter, but I didn't write a ton in law school.

Then, in my first job as a lawyer, I started writing manically because I wanted to get out. I finished a draft of that law school novel during my first year as a lawyer. That was when I started admitting to myself and others that I wanted to be a writer. It's been pretty dedicated since. That was about 10 years ago.

What was the reaction that you got when you, I don't know if "came out" is quite the phrase I'm looking for here, but when you came out as a writer?

The reception wasn't great. People were definitely like, "What the hell?" Especially since I'd been so private about my writing before. It seemed random to people, but to me it wasn't random because I'd always been doing it.

Your trajectory interests me because I had a similar experience of writing in private for a long time and then getting some pushback when I told people about it. I suspect for anyone embarking on a creative path, that's a common reaction.

I think so. At the time I was kind of pissed about it, but now that I'm further along, it makes sense why people told me not to do this. It's a fickle, unstable, emotionally challenging path, full of disappointment and rejection. At the same time, I feel lucky that I get to do it. It mostly makes me happy, but I can see why people were like, "No, don't do that."

There's no such thing as an easy job, but this is definitely not an easy path to pick. Have you found any tips that have made it more stable for you?

God, it's tough. I think the passage of time has been helpful because I've had to shelve multiple books. It's devastating, having something you spent years working on only to be like, "This wasn't it." Now that I've done

that multiple times, I have more faith that it doesn't mean the end. It's easy at that moment to be like, "Okay, it's over. I suck, I can't write." I'm starting to accept that part of being a writer is just generating work no matter what.

Especially if you write as fast as I do—and I write fast—you generate a lot that's not going to end up anywhere. You have to accept that as part of the process and accept that things are going to take longer than you expect.

It's hard to be patient. I'm not a patient person, so I picked a weird path; it's the worst path for an impatient person. I'm trying to be more patient and trust that just because I'm failing, or feel like I'm failing at a certain moment, that doesn't mean it's over for me.

I've looked back at the books I've shelved and been like, "I'm glad that book didn't end up published," either because it wasn't good enough or because it would've embarrassed me. Not to sound totally woo-woo, but I think the universe sometimes protects me in certain work not getting published, because it would've been challenging.

I try to trust the process and keep writing. A good way to handle the uncertainty is to channel it and the attendant angst into writing itself.

I think about that often. Every rejection stings, but there are silver linings. You might be protected from things you don't even know you need protection from.

You mentioned that you write fast. Can you describe your routine and how you kind of keep up that pace?

I'm not the most structured. I don't have daily word counts, but I do have a loose routine, which is that I wake up every morning and write for two to three hours. Every day of the week, including the weekends, even when I'm traveling. I never take a break from that.

For some reason, I can't write well in the middle of the day or afternoon, at least not creatively. I'll do meetings, eat lunch, exercise, student work, stuff like that in the middle of the day. Then I'll often write at night after dinner for another few hours.

I tend to try to finish a very rough draft of a book within a loose deadline of a few months. Then I edit for a year or two. The revision is the much longer part. The draft is fast and messy.

I've had moments where I'm concerned about how much I'm writing in a day, wondering, "Am I in a manic episode?" And then I count my words to be like, "Is this normal?" Otherwise I don't really keep track of it.

Do you have a way of knowing, after you've been revising a piece for a year or two, that it's reached a point of completion?

I don't know if this says something about my attachment style, but whenever I start writing a book, I love it and think it's the best thing I've ever written. Then, as time passes, I hate it more and more. It makes promoting a book difficult because by that point, I really hate it. I tend to find more and more flaws as time goes on. I never feel like it's done or ready.

Do you gather feedback from other people?

It's a huge part of my process. Normally I won't do it until I have a draft, but my drafts are sloppy. I probably should be embarrassed to show them to people. At a certain point, I'm like, "I can't see this clearly anymore." It stops reading as English to me, so feedback is crucial.

Each draft, I'll try to get five or six people to read it and go through their edits before I send it to my agent. I have a writing group with about seven people in it. I'll often give them a whole draft or a few chapters,

but I get their input on at least part of everything I write. It doesn't have to be perfect; I'll let anybody look at my horrible drafts.

In a weird way, I was much more confident when I was writing in secret because I had no feedback. I was like, "I'm great at this. Once I show people, I'll blow their minds." There probably are exceptions, but for me, the only way I can get better is with feedback. I'm motivated by criticism. It doesn't paralyze me, it fuels me. I don't need people to tell me what they like about it. I just want to hear what's wrong.

But the more I write, the less confident I am about my writing.

A funny phenomenon is that the more I know, the more I'm aware how much I don't know.

And how hard it is to write a book. I used to be like, "Oh, it's just typing, it seems so easy." Now I'm like, "Oh no, it's really hard," especially since I read a lot more than I used to. I'm constantly reading novels where I'm like, "I could never do this. How did this person do this?"

I've heard you compare writing a book to writing messages, as in, the length of a book becomes less intimidating when you think about how much you write in texts, emails, etc. Are there similar tricks that work for you in terms of making projects less daunting?

I can be a pretty fearful person in my real life. I'm afraid of a lot of things. Writing feels like the place where, at least when I'm doing it, I'm the least afraid. It's this opportunity to be fearless. To me, that's a gift. I think that's probably what keeps me going: it's like this alternate universe where I'm not so afraid.

I think it comes from a place of control. Writing is like this world where I'm god and I get to control everything. I think that's why I'm more fearful outside my writing; I don't have any control outside of my Word documents. Everything is much more uncertain, and I'm at the whim of god or other people. I think it comes from my Virgo tendencies.

Do you keep a journal, or otherwise have sources of inspiration?

I'm not a journaler. I have trouble writing unless it's for an audience. I write for myself, too, but I don't really do any writing that I don't plan on people seeing.

I write to make somebody laugh. I guess my Twitter is the closest thing I have to a journal, though it's a performance for sure. Twitter is a form of note taking for me. Even if I don't tweet it, just the practice of making an observation more entertaining and readable is useful for me. Sometimes I'm like, "I don't want to tweet that because I'm going to use it in a book," but I also don't care. I know social media is bad or addictive or whatever, and it's not for everyone, but for me it's useful. I've met a ton of writer friends on social media.

I also have a good memory, especially for dialogue. Maybe not word for word, but I can conjure sentences people have said after a social gathering. I'm not great at telling their emotional state, but I can tell you what they were wearing and what they said without taking notes.

I think of you as a writer who's good at plots, particularly Exalted. How do you build plots?

I think of my writing as meandering, so that's nice to hear. I don't outline ahead of time; I don't know what's going to happen in the book before I write it. The voice of the character comes first, and the plot comes later. I think writing fast helps create a sense of propulsion. It's a trick because I'm writing the bulk of it in a few months, and then editing and revising it into oblivion. Writing that first draft so quickly gives it momentum. I'm writing it urgently to find out what will happen because I don't know. After I have the draft, I'll do some outlining and think, "How can I increase the stakes, or make things more dramatic?"

There's this cultural image of the writer alone in their room just churning out works of genius or whatever. The

more I do it, the more I appreciate the extent to which it's collaborative. Almost nothing gets done without other people.

People don't talk about the collaborative aspect of it so much, but once you talk to writers—or at least when I talk to writers about my experience—you'll find out that other writers feel the same. They'll say, "Oh, I send my draft to 20 people."

In terms of building a writing community, I recommend contacting authors you like by email or DM or whatever. Authors are not like celebrities, they're probably going to respond. I've become friends with writers that way, or asked to interview them for their next book. It doesn't mean you're best friends, but it's a way of expanding your network and having a writing community and people you can talk shop to or exchange drafts with. I also have become friends with people who've reached out to say they like my work, too. Often I find out they're better writers than me and I blurb their books. I recommend not being shy. The worst that could happen is that they don't respond.

I also recommend signing up for NetGalley or otherwise getting galleys. I get them often to get a sense of what's being written, what the marketplace trends are. If I like the book, I'll reach out to the author. This can also be a good way of extending your writing community.

Do you find it's helpful to keep track of what else is going on in the marketplace?

I'm envious of writers who only read Henry James or whatever, but my tastes have always skewed contemporary. I enjoy reading the hot book that's out right now. It's probably not my coolest trait, but it's what I'm drawn to. It's good to read books where there are no smartphones, but my work relies so much on smartphones and the internet, I don't think I could write a book without those.

Sometimes I get intimidated. I'm like, "Oh god, this person's so good. How could I possibly compete?" If you find it distressing in that way, don't worry about it. That is sort of what your agent's for, to keep up with that. It's more about connecting with a community for me. Sometimes I get sucked into what I think is trendy in a bad way, because when my book comes out, I'm cringing at it.

I think of your work not as trendy but as obsessed, and obsessions, like trends, are sometimes transient. *Exalted*, for example, seems like a product of an interest in astrology; *Perfume & Pain* like a product of an interest in lesbian pulp and perfume.

Obsession is the right word. I'm an obsessive person. It's annoying in my personal life, but very useful for generating words on a page. That's why I wrote *Exalted*, because I had an unhealthy obsession with astrology. It consumed my thoughts. Everyone's like, "You must have done so much research for that book." I was like, "I didn't do any, I just had independently researched all that because there's something wrong with me."

While I was writing *Perfume & Pain*, I became obsessed with perfume. I had a perfume phase, which thankfully I'm out of because my spraying stuff all the time was giving my girlfriend migraines. I tell my students, if you notice yourself becoming obsessed with anything—whether it's a celebrity or a band or a politician or whatever—you channel that, you use that. I find obsession very useful for writing.

Anna Dorn Recommends:

Berlin by Bea Setton

Hydroponic gardening

Sam Levinson's *The Idol*

Infrared saunas

Amaarae's *Fountain Baby*

Name

Anna Dorn

Vocation

writer

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