

On not being afraid to start something new



Novelist, publisher, and trend-forecaster Emily Segal was frustrated with traditional publishing models, so she invented her own.

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As told to Colin Everest, 3310 words.

Tags: Writing, Publishing, Collaboration, Independence, First attempts, Business, Inspiration, Beginnings.

You launched Deluge [Press] in August, and your first novel and the first Deluge release, *Mercury Retrograde*, came out in November. Can you talk about the impetus for starting your press and the speed with which you got it up?

I had been in the process of writing my book, *Mercury Retrograde*, for around four years. More than four years, so it was a really long, large scale project for me. I was trying to get it published through the more traditional method of having a literary agent, and getting a publishing company to give me a publishing deal.

Concurrent to that, I was deep in conversation with two of my friends, Hannah Baer and Cyrus Simonoff, who had also written books in the two year period that I was working on mine, and we were processing a lot about what it felt like to write books that drew from our life experience in different ways. We were talking a lot about what it was like to create works like this, what we saw missing out in the world, the sort of misconceptions that people had about what was appealing to people to read, and the difficulty of the sort of Goldilocks problems of publishing, where obviously certain perks come with getting a traditional, bigger book deal, with a big established press, where you, in theory, can get a certain amount of money, and support, but then you also have a lot of strings attached, and you often don't have a lot of control over the final product, in terms of what it looks like, or how it goes out into the world. And then on the other side, if you publish with a small press, or like a zine or very indie press, that can be really cool creatively, but doesn't always allow your book to have the sort of presence in the world that you would want for such a big project.

I was on my second round of submissions with *Mercury Retrograde*, when COVID and lockdown hit. So, it had been sent out my literary agent to big presses first, and I got a lot of positive feedback, but no deal. And then we sent it out to indie presses, and I was starting to get responses, and rejections.

I just started researching, idly Googling, "How do you start a literary press?" And I discovered that it's actually rather straightforward, and not terribly different from starting a sweatshirt company. Because in this day and age, there are lots of tools that kind of expedite the process. And usually those tools are thought of as being the way that like, fan-fiction gets published, or like pulpy genre stuff gets published. It's not usually thought of as legitimate for "serious" literary works. But, I don't believe in those types of divisions, and I've always really enjoyed working with vernacular forms, and sort of just figuring out how to mess with mainstream formats, to make them appealing.

And once I discovered that it was possible to just sign up for a bunch of digital tools, and make a website, and that then my book could come out, and then I could actually do it with these two friends of mine, whom I adore, and who had already been giving me important feedback on my book, the sort of publishing process, which has been really frustrating, and overwhelming for me, became really fun again. And that's always a really good sign, and

really important.

Of course, you always are trying to distinguish between a fear impulse, and an intuitive impulse, and it can be difficult in art making, because we have a lot of resistance to things. And sometimes you have resistance to things that are actually really important for you to persevere with. But, sometimes you have resistance to something because it's just not working. And I was in that sort of puzzled, muddy space with the publishing process, where I was like, "This doesn't really feel like how projects that I've done in the past felt when they were working." I.e., maybe it's not working.

At the same time, I've never done anything like this, I'd never written a book, I'd never worked in this sphere. So, maybe it's fine. Those were the coordinates in my confusion. But eventually I came to the conclusion that actually starting independent projects with my friends is something that I've done many times, and I absolutely love doing, and it makes me feel empowered, for lack of a better word. Whereas trying to navigate these legacy systems always makes me kind of lose it. The other really essential element is that my very dear friends who run a design studio called Violet Office just hooked me up super hard with design.

It was just very exciting, and sweet, and transformational to basically free yourself of this riddle, or free yourself of the thing that you feel like is the process that's keeping you back from your dreams, or something, and realize, "Oh, I can actually just band together with my friends, and we can do it ourselves, and it can be really fun, and sweet, and positive, and constructive."

One thing about starting Deluge that I've read you say is: "Self-deception is required when starting out."

I think the enthusiasm that comes with starting new projects often can help generate this feeling that it's not going to be as hard as it is. And that's a good thing, because if you actually knew in detail, how much of a slog it is to create certain things, it would be hard to jump in and do it.

And I definitely had that feeling when starting Deluge, where I was like, "Oh, my god, this is so fucking easy. We can do this in two seconds." And of course, that is not the case, and publishing books is not supposed to be something that just happens lickety-split. There's a ritual element to it. No one's like, "Oh, I loved that Japanese tea ceremony. It was over in two seconds, and it was so easy."

So, there's a beauty that comes to laboring over every word in a whole book, and being intentional about every element, and how it comes together. There is a part of that that shouldn't be rushed, and there's a part of that that's just going to be difficult, of course. But I definitely jumped in by hyping myself up about how simple it was, and it has turned out to be not that simple, but very gratifying.

"Queer" is part of the language around Deluge.

Yes.

Do you want to say anything about that?

I mean, I think that we are interested in creating space for queer writing that doesn't require queer writing to be about trauma exclusively. Obviously, if trauma is part of the mix, and a part of the vision of the artist, that is super important, and it's a universal human experience. But, I have felt like in mainstream spaces, that are in a frenzy to try to retroactively include more queer voices, there's been a sense of like, you have to justify your queer, or insert other marginalized identity here by being ultra explicit about your trauma, and I think that that is limiting.

And so, we are kind of intentionally trying to open it up, and we're just going to see where it goes. It's totally an experiment, and we don't have a hypothesis on what queer writing is supposed to be at all, except for the fact that we think that it can be much more multiple than it is at the moment.

We were talking about a little bit about the way that books metabolize time. Another thing that you've said about *Mercury Retrograde* is: "I'm a fan of looking at the book as a sort of [sic] ethnographical work that tried to account for the failed experiments in art, tech, and culture in which I was involved in the 2010s." One of the things that I appreciated about the book is just how specific [it is]. Like there are days that are described as unseasonably warm days in December 2015 that I can remember living because that's how specific the time was captured. I wonder if you want to talk about that as something you were trying for, that is to kind of seal this time in the novel.

I'm a huge fan of anthropology, and anthropologists, in part because it's a discipline that's had to question, and agitate itself so much, so I find it theoretically interesting. But also because ethnography is, to me, an incredible literary genre. It's almost like science fiction, where it's like, okay, you go into this other culture where you don't know what's going on, and you don't know the norms, and you have to ingratiate yourself enough that you can learn about it, and then you have to sort of explain how all the systems work together.

So, certain novels that I love, like *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula Le Guin are very ethnographic, and it's no coincidence that her father was an anthropologist. I also love books like *Mating* by Norman Rush, or Tom McCarthy's book, *Satin Island*, that have anthropologists as protagonists. And in a lot of ways, the work that I do as a trend forecaster, and the type of cultural analysis I do, is like a bastardized commercial form of anthropology. So, that's just a little bit of context for the quote that you read back.

It's funny writing auto fiction, because I started out just trying to write down stuff that happened in a sort of stylized way, but not a fictionalized way. But then, once I started trying to tell the story in a way that would be legible, and engaging, I realized that it had to be fictionalized, in order to make sense. It makes you think about how overdetermined, and incomprehensible our "real life stories" are, and it became kind of a puzzle. It's like a puzzle that started with chunks of my real life as the first pieces, and then to make the rest of the jigsaw puzzle complete, I had to create fiction to make it hang together, because the real story just doesn't.

I'm really grateful that I have this period captured for myself, because it already feels so far away.

From the pre-founding of Deluge, to releasing *Mercury Retrograde*, can we come up to the present, April, where you have, I might get some of these terms wrong: crowd-funded the advance for your second novel, via a limited NFT offering. I'm happy to be corrected on any of those terms.

I think that sounds pretty good. Basically, I got super stoked few months ago, because I came up with an idea for a second novel. I couldn't believe my good fortune to have an idea that I felt so passionate about. I just felt so excited to have a project like that brewing in my heart, and in my mind, because, it's different for every writer, but for me, it's a little bit like falling in love. You can't just decide that, "Okay, today I'm going to write my next book."

And then I was trying to do what I usually do, which is spend some of my time reading, and writing, and working on my projects, and then some of my time doing commercial work, which is basically the same as every artist on the planet, except for a very few. I was discovering the jumping in and out of working on the book was not working for me.

I basically felt really nervous, and bummed out, because obviously, I'm running this press, I'm really excited about the other books that we're publishing [Jeanetta Rich, *Black Venus Fly Trap*, *Deluge* (forthcoming, 2021)], I have the responsibility of holding space for the authors that we're publishing, and working with my collaborators, and being on the ball, and I have commercial work, and I want to do this big, crazy, complicated novel writing project, and it just seemed impossible.

I noticed the platform Mirror, which is sort of like Medium on the blockchain. What's cool about Mirror is that it has these tools that allow you, as a writer, to take something that you wrote on your Mirror page, and mint it as an NFT, that then can be sold.

And then also, there's a tool to do a crowd fund and then people can just very directly connect their crypto

wallets to Mirror, and just send in a contribution, and in exchange for their contribution, they hold a token that has a certain name, and that token is associated with the project. And there are all sorts of possibilities of what you can do with that token. So, I started taking a look at a couple of the examples of people using crowd funds on Mirror to sustain pieces of writing. One, it's called \$Essay that was written by someone named John C. Palmer. And then my dear friend, and former collaborator from K-Hole, Dena Yago, did a crowd fund for an amazing essay that she's working on about Billie Eilish, and affect theory, and that was really inspiring to me, and made me think, why not give it a shot? Why not basically spell out to the world, what it is that I'm working on, why I think it could be cool to fund it in this way, and see if we can make it happen? Because basically, any system is better than what we have right now.

I'm also a very learn-by-doing person. So, as part of my investigation, as a publisher, into what new models might work, I thought, I might as well use myself as the lab rat, and put my project out there, and then go through the process of setting all this stuff up, and seeing what works, and what doesn't work, and what feels like it could improve, and what feels like it's really great. That's how I decided to do a crowdfund for Burn Alpha, which is the working title of the book. Then I got a lot of help from the team at Mirror and they were just really generous with their time, and attention, which was incredibly kind, and I posted it on Thursday [April 8, 2021], at 2:00 PM, and it was fully funded within 13 hours.

Your book is your love affair, and now you get to spend all your time with your new love affair?

Kind of, yeah. I mean, it's amazing to me that it's something that I get to really work on seriously, very soon, instead of something that I have to really, really plan, and put off working on it. I also don't want to give the impression to any writers out there, who might read this, that you have to have tons of uninterrupted time to write. I think that that's a myth that is often self-limiting for writers.

People say like, "Oh, I would write, but I need six months off of work." I really don't think that that's true most of the time, I just think with certain projects you do. I learned early on that this type of project required a certain form of immersion that I wasn't going to be able to do, sandwiched between lots of other activities.

But yeah, I just want to point that out, because The Creative Independent is a place that I, while I was writing my first book, actually came to for writing advice a lot, and I think that it's done a really good job of myth busting some of the ideas that creative people sometimes latch on to, that can limit their experience. So, I definitely don't want to reinforce that. Just in this particular case, that's what I needed.

You want to talk some about some more important myths that need to be busted?

Yeah. Right, so we talked about the idea that you need a huge amount of uninterrupted time to write as a prerequisite, as a myth. The idea that people create works of art on their own is a myth. The idea that your work is only valid if it's supporting you financially, is a myth. The idea that it's shameful to ask for help is a myth. There are so many.

We've talked a lot about tech tools; do you have a stationery loyalty?

I'm a huge fan of writing by hand. I wrote the entirety of *Mercury Retrograde* by hand.

Not everyone can write by hand, but if you can write by hand, I recommend experimenting with it. Every different modality of writing is valid, but they all just bring different energy to them.

I was really helped in my process by reading the book Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg. She really recommends this particular methodology that has to do with her experience in Zen meditation, of doing timed free writing experiments, where you just keep writing, and writing, and scribble, and hold your pen really loosely.

She recommends buying crappy notebooks that you aren't too precious about from the corner store, which I also

really like doing. Anything that can keep you out of a scarcity mindset about your writing is important. So, being like, "Oh, this, this notebook is so perfect. Everything I need to write in it is perfect" is probably not going to serve you as well as just realizing that you can always write. It's always there for you.

If you accept that it will change its texture, and might sometimes be more like gibberish, and my other times be more lyrical or something, then you can, I don't know, get out of the sense that writing is this really pressured, precious thing, and I think that that's important, because writers, and I include myself in this, tend to drive themselves crazy, like feeling really guilty about not writing enough, or feeling like what they write isn't what they want to be writing, et cetera. So, reading that book, and writing a lot by hand, helped me get past that.

The Emily Segal character gives a shout out to her Pelikan pens when she begins writing the story..

Oh, yeah, well, I also love a felt tip, like a Pentel felt tip marker, because sometimes if you're taking yourself too seriously, you should just start writing in bright pink marker, because it's a way of breaking out of that. It's just like, it's fundamentally undignified in a way that I think is healthy. So, those are all...Everyone has to figure out what works for them, but anything that can jolt you out of being too uptight is important. You're trying to hit this stride where you're not too tight, or too loose when you're writing. You want to be relaxed and groovy, but you also want to be sharp and present, and that's just a very difficult place to learn to inhabit. It's a life's work. So, these are all just hacks that have worked for me, but they're going to be different for everybody.

Emily Segal Recommends:

Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg

Make Your Art No Matter What by Beth Pickens

The Artful Edit: On the Practice of Editing Yourself by Susan P Bell

"Goals of Life" by V Vale (of RE/Search Publications and Search & Destroy)

Pentel Arts Sign Pen

Name

Emily Segal

Vocation

Artist, Writer, Strategist

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