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As told to Jancie Creaney , 2235 words.

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On working with your pace not against it

Writer Jackie Polzin on the benefits of a slow process, the powers of revision, and why volume isn't just about the word-count.

Looking back, how do you remember the milestones that were reached during the making of your first book, *Brood*, from its genesis to when it finally held a shape in your mind?

I love some of the words in that question because now when I think about the beginning of *Brood*, initially I thought, Oh, it was cold. It was winter. I was struggling with infertility. I was caring for chickens and in caring for these animals, I wanted to capture the steps of it. It's so interesting, the things that are chores, that we do remotely, but to actually capture them, it felt like a good challenge. And I was in a certain head space, but that is just one story I've told myself about the book's beginning.

I had written this story called "The Clucking Bucket" in college, and it was about an old man who works in a fast-food chicken restaurant and has a pet chicken that he really loves at home. Clearly some of the ideas in the book were being born or at least played around with in that context. It was surprising to me, to very late in the game realize that I've been moving around parts of the ideas for a long time. And when you connect it to that college writing experience, it's much less simple to explain. It's not like these were the pieces of my life then. I'd never owned chickens. I clearly was a 20-year-old, not an old man. I had worked in fast-food, and that's it.

A few months ago, my sister heard me talk about that story and found an old copy of it that I had sent her because she's one of my early readers and I've been afraid to read it.

The other story of the story is it just began in winter caring for chickens with this very particular head space of feeling like motherhood wasn't going to happen for me. That is easy to link to the book, and it is easy to say, "Oh, I see how you had autobiographical parts." They're both true. A book's genesis is a memory and a story that we tell ourselves; it's not that easy to piece it together.

Do you feel that contributes to the difficulty in locating the moment that the project becomes something you can explain to somebody else?

Yes. And I chose not to explain it. I think not because I guard creativity...Well, maybe. I certainly think of it as somehow sacred, like, it's magical and unexplainable, the process and how it's happening. But I didn't say. I thought it sounded like a bad story idea. I would say, "Oh, I'm writing this book about chickens." That's actually all I would say about the book, which is part true, but it's certainly not the story of the story. It's not what's going on in the book. I was protecting myself somehow. I don't think I was protecting the idea. I think I was protecting my ego. I didn't want to have to hear how bad the ideas sounded out in the world. If you try to tell someone about a book you love, it always fails to capture some essence of it.

You've called yourself a slow writer and it took roughly six years to finish *Brood*. How do you balance accepting your pace with the worries that might come about in a long, drawn-out process?

I haven't accepted it. I feel like I'm trying to, and I can objectively say that there are benefits to working slowly. Part of it might just be perception, that I'm not accepting some of my process as work at all, or as products. But I want to accept it. Certainly, I've learned to work with it because it seems to

be my only mode.

I think habit is my healthiest productive mode, which is a routine practice. Some writers say, "I sit down only when I'm getting this burst of inspiration and I'm drawn to the page." Any time of day I might jot down a note on a scrap of paper, put it in this specific pile of ideas I want to return to. So, in that sense, it is part of my process to whip out a pen and get something down, but I really do believe in habit, in sitting down with nothing to say, to see what happens. Sit down when you feel this heaviness... It feels like a heavy weight to sit down. Almost every day I feel resistance. It can be an almost sick feeling, but it sometimes isn't. I think if I'm in the mode of sitting down every morning and committing to the work, the resistance is lighter.

What are the benefits of a slower process?

I think it's just the sheer nature of the mind and its working. Say you've got this story idea and you've got some of it on paper. You've got this little stash of ideas, and you're working on it over time. It's amazing how I will take the kids to the park, and my mind is writing possibilities for this story. It's in no way just the volume that appears in a little stack of notes or in a document that is growing bigger all the time. Generally, I would say, "Hey, you're better off getting a lot of that down on paper." But it doesn't change the fact that many versions of this story already exist in my mind, which gives me a lot of material to work with. I think there's a volume component, volume is good, because it gives you a ton of choices.

There's a lot of inspiration out in the world, so you're just having contacts with objects and nature and ideas, which in some ways is adding to that volume too, of what is possible for you within the narrative you're working on.

Sometimes I've noticed the immediacy of something that's happened in my life and the bigness of the emotions surrounding that, unduly weighted towards, I want it to appear in a narrative because it feels big and important, but time will restore some of the due weight of an experience. You could want to honor a huge feeling you had in a fictional narrative, in a very fictional way, and then later realize it didn't stand the test of time. Immediacy can be something we don't question enough.

I think all of that is the benefit of working slowly. The downfall is that you start to feel, because you've invested so much time in something, that you can't let it go.

In the span of time it took to write your first book, you stepped away now and then. What pulled you back to it?

I went to grad school, having worked on it. I bet I took a hundred single spaced pages [of the manuscript] to grad school. It was decided to use it as my thesis. That was my plan. And I had a three-year program. The first year, I worked on it a lot, in a loose way. I wasn't revising a lot and I wasn't polishing at all, although that's built into my process. So again, some of that was in order to get started, to be able to finesse. A sentence as an entry point, I was doing that kind of stuff, or maybe as a form of procrastination, I would polish a page instead of moving forward. And then I set it aside for about a year and a half. I set it aside, had a baby while in grad school, and when I picked it back up, this is exactly what you were asking, "but how did you know it was even worth returning to?"

It was like, every once in a while, a sentence or a whole paragraph, the idea of it was like, "Yeah, that's interesting." And truly, sometimes it was just a sentence where it was like, "Yeah, I could think about that for a while." But then I could also sense its bulk was too much and there was repetition and that maybe its shape hadn't come together. The ending wasn't there and probably the last third of it wasn't there, and I knew that. It's amazing how little it takes to keep me going, and in some ways maybe not, because I believed in the premise, and that should be enough, too.

Do you remember what it took to reach a place where you said, "I'm done"?

I remember writing a scene where a predator appears in the night, and that scene felt very important to me as a form of climax. I'm not saying it's a climax of the story, but it felt like, "Okay, that scene feels very important to me." I felt so good about having that established as a part of the ending sequence, and I worked on that actually just a few months after my thesis. I set it aside one more time because I was again pregnant with a second child, and I didn't really trust my mental state to do this, what I consider to be the most important work on the story, which was finishing it.

I think that was just an excuse for me, but then once I had the baby, I was like, "Okay, I really have no more excuses." There was a critical moment that happened when a new project I'm working on, which I decided, "Oh, I can commit to the very beginnings of this loose other thing while I'm having this baby, but I don't want to commit to finishing this other thing." You can see how that even sounds like I'm making excuses. And a couple of days before having Charlie, I accidentally deleted the whole beginning of the newer thing, which was maybe 30 single-spaced pages, but it felt like it had really good energy. It was there somehow, and I deleted it, and that was a sign to me that I was messing around. That was a sign, "Finish your story." And then I did.

I'd be interested to know, fear and resistance being naturally part of your creative process, even if it's just an initial hurdle, why do you think you're drawn to writing?

I think it probably alleviates a lot of difficult feelings for me. I think that it's maybe a response to

anxiety, generally. If I hear an artist mention that their process seems to be a movement through anxiety and therefore out of anxiety, my mind lights up a bulb. Like, that's it. But there are other things, too. That's not the only time I feel like, "Yeah, eureka." To give shape to ideas, I think my mind tends to overthink, and to give some form to it, feels very calming and essential, like basic pattern-making or meaning-making. I'm open to the idea that that's all just something the mind wants to do to ease the difficulties of this world. But I think still, my mind wants to do it. It wants to make some patterns and make some meaning.

Do you have any tips for anyone who is wading through the difficult tides of writing a novel?

Yeah, I think finish it. And I don't even want to say, right this minute, sit down and finish it, because that was not my process. I occasionally take stock of my work and think, "Oh, there are some things I'm just simply not finishing without good reason." Like smaller things. I think a novel is a big project, but hey, if you've done all this work, finish it. And if maybe that means seeking out a couple trusted readers, even before you finish it, there's no harm in doing that either.

Entertain the ending, get something down. Because I think that anyone who's put all this work into something big, deserves to finish, owes themselves to finish it. It's something you could give yourself to do that. It would be a way to be kind to yourself, to finish it.

Everything's changeable, fixable, mutable. Don't underestimate the value of great editors in your life and your own powers of revision, which I think are huge.

Jackie Polzin recommends:

The Creative Habit by Twila Tharp

"What Will My Son Remember of This Horrible Year?" by Alejandro Zambra

Zambra's article led me to discover his wife who is a poet. Her name's Jazmina Barrera, and the book I read was *On Lighthouses*. Don't give up on it. Read the whole thing. For me, towards the end, there was some wonderful feeling that came about, and a much deeper understanding grows throughout the course of reading that book.

CrunchyChiliOnion, which is a condiment. The one I have is the Trader Joe's version and it's basically what Sriracha was to the early two thousands.

Caroline Winkler's YouTube channel. She mainly focuses on interior design, but she is funny, audacious, and can transform a room, but very surprisingly, she has these serious moments in I would say almost every video, where you just feel like, "I'm glad I watched that," or just a little bit of encouragement or inspiration that slips in there very stealthily.

Name


Jackie Polzin

Vocation

writer

Fact

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