

# On finding the time to create

Writer Jenny Xie discusses finding balance between your work and your art, drawing themes from real life, and why genre doesn't really exist

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As told to Janet Frishberg, 2315 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Day jobs](#), [Time management](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#).

**One of the things I wanted to talk to you about was balancing a day job in writing or editorial with writing fiction. How do you do it?**

That's the eternal question. How do you balance writing with anything? I definitely have not figured it out. Excluding the year that I didn't work, I've always written on the outskirts of my day, after work, in the evenings, or on weekends. Weekend chunks have been really helpful for me. I'll usually post up at a cafe, and just have six hours to maybe write two sentences.

It really depends on each person, though. I'm not the type to dump a lot of words on the page and later edit it down. I need a huge chunk of concentrated time. That really doesn't work with any type of traditional nine to five job.

I do a lot of writing at residencies. It's like, "Okay, I'm completely divorcing myself from the normal day to day, and I'm just going to spend two weeks in a cabin where my meals are taken care of, and I'm surrounded by other artists."

That's the ideal way for me to work. In my current job, I'm editing for Figma's blog. I couldn't tell you if I would feel more refreshed and ready to write creatively if I did something that was a little less word-based, but when I have time to sit down with a manuscript or work on a short story, it feels so different. Even though I'm dealing with words, it's a completely different thought process and zone that I'm in.

**Also, being in an editorial role, I imagine you're editing other people's work and thinking about strategy, versus producing first drafts.**

Totally. For any short form thing I'm editing for work, I'm thinking about what the goal of it is. Versus with creative writing, hopefully you're able to play, and be a little weird, and surprise yourself.

The only thing I hate more than writing is not writing. I think it's because of the process. I really have to be on a very granular level—connected to the text. I have to like every sentence, and I'm constantly going back through a paragraph to think about the syntax, the images, the texture of the words, the cadence.

Now that I've done this for a while, I've made peace with that process. I realized I couldn't write the way I do if I weren't so obsessed with the minutiae of the craft. If it feels muddy or foggy and I'm not getting across what it is I want to get across, I can't move on from it.

**I can also imagine that if you're in an editorial mode all day, then it would be really important to go to a residency, or have a full weekend day to get into a totally different mode.**

Well, now that you're saying that, I'm like, "Oh, my god, is it that I'm just constantly editing myself?" Maybe I can never be fully in that space of first draft creation, because I always have my editorial hat on. I'm always thinking: What is the effect? What is this going to have in terms of impact on the page?

**You're kind of editing as you go.**

Definitely editing as I go. But there are so many strategies I've heard of that I think I need to invest in more. Like writing by hand, or writing in a notebook, where it feels less formal, and more stream of consciousness.

**Having read your piece in Esquire about being a professional cuddler, and knowing that you lived in the Bay Area, as I was reading *Holding Pattern* I was wondering how much of the book you wrote when you were there, versus reflecting later on your time there. How was real life influencing the book?**

I started writing the book in earnest in 2015 or 2016, when I was living in Baltimore, during my last year there. I could look back on the Bay then, especially that time of the Bay. It's hard sometimes to write about a space or time when you're a little too close to it.

When I started writing it, Instagram had just started, and personal brand wasn't a thing. We had just learned about Uber, and thought it was really wild that you would get into a stranger's car. You really did have to reminisce about the pace of that, the speed of that, the velocity of that, and how strange it was and how much resistance there was, especially living in the slice of Bay that I was living in, which was very much students trying to make their way in the world. We were really disillusioned by only having tech as an industry. We'd been in cooperative housing, just living by a completely different set of values.

My experience of the Bay, especially at that time, was this sort of war about how should the Bay be, and how should urban landscapes work, and how should communities work? Writing this was an exercise in looking back on that time, and embodying that question mark.

I would say for this book, and I feel like this is true of a lot of people's first books, you just have to write the book that's encapsulating all the things that you're thinking about at a certain age. Not everything that I put in there made it into the final product, but I was really just throwing in everything that was loud to me in my late teens to early twenties. Mother-daughter relationships, becoming an adult, dealing with the Bay and how much it's changing, relationships, sense of self—all of that I threw in there.

**With the autobiographical similarities between you and your narrator for your first book, has it been challenging at all within interviews, or in real life with people you know reading the book?**

That's a great question. People have a really hard time separating the writer and the narrator or the main character. That's true for poetry, too.

Of course, our biography and our lives are going to show up in the work. I think how I handle it is I try to remind folks that these are not true details. They're not biographical details, but the themes are true.

Marissa in the book is not my mother, and there are a lot of differences between them. But what is true is this theme of: What happens when the person you're closest to doesn't really have an overlap in your world, and you've grown up in completely different cultures, and you have a language barrier? You have completely different cultural understandings of basic things, like what success is, or what happiness is.

In some ways, at least with this first book, everything is true and untrue, if you're looking at it from different altitudes. There's also the other annoying thing that I think, which is that genre doesn't really exist. Fiction, non-fiction, poetry... yes, you can get down into the nitty-gritty of asking, "Is this fact?" But when you're really thinking about it, what you're doing as a writer is experiencing the world. You're learning, and you're gaining experiences, and you're having emotions, and you're working through them. That is your material.

Then, however it appears on the page, whether it's verse, or an essay form, or an experimental speculative short story, that is still truth out of matter. It's this human truth or this lived truth, which is very different from fact. I feel like genre is just the form, but the medium and the matter that you're dealing with is the same, which is your lived experience.

**That makes sense, although I bet some memoirists would have a really hard time with that idea.**

I know, I know. It's a little spicy. We could argue it [laughs].

Another way I like to look at it is that as a writer, if you have an artist palette, the colors on your palette are basically things that you've experienced. There are things that I would never write about, like being Black in America, for example. That's just not in my palette.

There are certain things that I feel like I can speak to, because there's something about me that I can understand in a deep way. That's on my palette, and I can use that in an essay, or in a short story, or in a poem.

**Are you working on another book already?**

I am. It sucks in a way, because writing this first book from beginning to publication was probably eight years. Again, I can't overemphasize enough how slow I am. I didn't do a lot of side projects during that time. I didn't really work on short stories, which I love working on. The whole time, for the last couple of years of working on the book, I was like, "I cannot wait to get this out the door and just focus on weird, short stories."

That's all I want to do. I wrote one short story, but now I'm expanding that into a novel. I'm in the same space where that's all I want to focus on and work on. It's wild to think that I'm strapped into another five to eight year project though, where it consumes every waking hour, so maybe I should break away from that. Sometimes it does feel like there's pressure, but there's no timeline.

This new book is speculative fiction, which I didn't think I would be working on, but the seed of the idea came from where I grew up in Southern California in Irvine, which is a master plan community. It has this sort of sinister, dystopic flavor to it because it's so perfect. It's so meticulously planned.

I would go to these model houses with my family, and so there would be just dirt tracks. None of the houses had been built yet, but these development companies would have House A, House B, House C, and they'd be modeled. You could walk through, and it'd be perfectly staged. I remember thinking, "Is this what an American family should look like?" I was still very young, grappling with being Asian American.

You would go into these rooms that were the kids' rooms, and they'd be so obviously coded with a personality. The boy's room would be staged with NASCAR posters and model cars, and then the little girl's room would be staged with ballet shoes, or horses. I'd always wondered, "Who are the people living in this house?" The short story I wrote was about a model family that lives in the model house.

Not to talk about it too much, because it's very early stages, but it explores themes of biotechnology and AI. It's very different from the first book. I truly didn't ever think that I'd be writing anything speculative, but that's been a fun exercise to do more world building.

**Do you feel more oriented to the writing process now that you've already finished one book? Or no, because it's a different genre?**

I will absolutely say that this process already feels very different and it has more direction. In me mapping out the contours of the world, I have to think about what the characters want, and what the forces are at work. With the first book, I was driving with headlights, where you only see three feet in front of you.

There's also something about having gone through that editing process once, and having thought more deeply about the themes at play. Front-loading that question, I think, has been helpful in terms of thinking about the scenes I want to build out and play with. Whereas before, it was truly just throwing stuff at a wall.

#### **Is there anything else that's different about writing this second book?**

This time around, I have a little bit of a writer's group going, which I did not with the first book. I kept it so close, and maybe that's also what took me a long time. I refused to send it to anyone, not even an agent. I was like, "I know what's wrong with it." I wouldn't show it to anyone until I at least fixed that.

Looking back, I could have saved myself a couple years. Having a little group to be encouraging, or to point out what's interesting, has been really helpful. Especially moving to New York, I found that just being among writers and being more of a literary citizen—going to more readings, and talking to folks who are working on different projects—has been really inspiring.

At the same time, it can make you feel like you're writing when you're not really writing, so there's a balance there, too. I've done so much book stuff this week, but I haven't actually written anything.

The group is very light touch, and it's more about getting momentum and feeling accountable. Because writing is a very lonely thing to do. And it's too easy. It's too easy to not write.

#### **Jenny Xie Recommends:**

*They Called Me a Lioness* is a gut-wrenching and incendiary memoir co-written by a teen Palestinian activist, Ahed Tamini, and Al Jazeera journalist Dena Takruri, who also happens to be a friend.

Another friend turned me on to this gorgeous olive oil soap from the Palestinian Soap Cooperative—a good way to honor an ancient tradition.

I've been nourishing myself with a return to indie sleaze, namely to the tune of Pinegrove.

Putting Fly By Jing's Zhong Sauce on absolutely everything.

I always recommend buying yourself a seasonal bouquet and calling your mom more often.

#### Name

Jenny Xie

#### Vocation

writer

□

Cheryl Chan