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On writing for the sake of writing

Writer Jia Tolentino on what she learned from spending years writing for the internet, learning how to fully disconnect from the world in order to be productive, the value of hard edits, and why writing itself is its own best reward.

How do you avoid burning out?

I'm hitting that wall right now, and it's rough, in part because I understand that I've done this to myself. I started editing *The Hairpin* when I was in grad school for fiction at the University of Michigan, and I realized I liked the Internet's pace. I like being really busy. I prefer to be extremely busy or to be doing absolutely nothing at all. But I actually think that's a bad tendency and I'm trying to work on it. I'm trying to take less pleasure in extremes of capitalist production. Or I'm trying to take less pleasure in extremes of production that happen to be reinforced by these general rubrics of precarity and constant work.

With writing the book it wasn't that. I was over scheduled, I had no unscheduled time for the whole time I was writing this book, which wasn't great. But it's also like, I don't have kids. And I like writing. I really liked having all my time being fully swallowed up with writing. The agony of it I found very pleasurable.

But also, in regards to avoiding burnout, I'm really good at: When I'm off, I'm off. When my brain's off, it's fucking off. Part of learning to like to work a lot is really learning to always build in time to be with my dog in the park, and to get high and listen to a whole album in the shower, and to be with my friends, and not to look at my phone for two days. You know? When I'm not working I'm really, really not working.

Did you move upstate?

I am actually upstate right now, in a graveyard. After I got my book contract, I started renting upstate Airbnbs for four days at the beginning of every month, as a way to bang out the bulk of a shitty rough draft of each of these essays. That's the practical answer.

I found that I couldn't switch into book-writing very easily in New York, in part because I work at home. I needed to physically be totally alone and be in a different place to get going.

So I was renting all these Airbnbs and I was doing it every month and having a great time, and it felt kind of like a vacation even though I was writing the whole time. And then I was wandering through Kingston and looked at some of the real estate listings that were posted in the window, and I was like, "Huh." So me and my partner ended up buying a house last June, although we still mostly live in Brooklyn.

I hear birds chirping in the background.

The birds are really nice, there's a bright red one... but I don't know what any birds are called. I read Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing* earlier this spring, and it fucked me up in terms of what my attention is oriented to. I literally have no idea what this bird is called. But I'm up here right now to work and to chill out and open a window in my brain for a second. I'm hoping that being up here more often will make me a little more rooted in physical space, too. It's impossible to be up here and be like, "Okay, I'm going to sit in front of my computer and order Seamless at 9:30 PM." It forces me to physically take care of things, and I think I need that.

Do you treat something differently that's written for the *New Yorker* blog versus something you're doing for the magazine? Either way, I imagine it's taught you to write quickly—like a muscle that's been exercised.

It does feel like a muscle-memory thing. The *New Yorker* blog is much quicker than anything else they do, but it's still a weird hybrid. When I came here from *Jezebel*, I was like, "Oh, I can't truly toss this off the way that I used to." It tends to have to be a little more coherent and considerate, and it has to have the feel of a 1,200-word, thoughtful essay. I've come to really like that it's not as quick as the sort of blog I would've done before.

For every *New Yorker* writer, I think the relationship between what they do for the website and what they do for the magazine is different. There's a varying degree of divergence between the two, of course. For me they're pretty different just in terms of research. What I do for the site is usually not reported, or if it's reported it's not heavily reported—though this is also changing. The stuff I do for the magazine, at minimum, it's a few months of researching and reporting before I even start to write it. It's nice to have both.

One of the luckiest things about this job is that I've never before had the luxury of being able to spend months working on something and have it really be supported by institutional scaffolding. I feel like those jobs are getting super rare for writers in my generation, and I feel lucky to have it. I didn't really know how to report a long feature when I started. But I also do like writing quickly. It took me six months or so to really get a feel for what a *New Yorker* web piece was supposed to be. I've basically sorted it into a two-day rhythm. I like to spend probably the equivalent of two days thinking about something, letting it churn in the back of my head for a little bit, and then I take a day to write it, do another pass the next day, and then file.

Something I found nice about being at *Jezebel*, or being at *The Hairpin* beforehand, is that it gives you a little faith in yourself that you don't have to belabor something. You can work within this idiom of, "These are the thoughts that I have right now," and you can figure out how to use that sort of weightlessness to your advantage rather than have it undercut the quality of your work.

Because some things are stupid, right? Some of the things I write about are just fucking stupid. Like, I do want to write about "Step on my throat Cate Blanchett" discourse, but I don't need to get too deep about it. You know? It feels like online publishing is a really good fit for certain subjects like this, especially internet-y subjects.

How did writing your book, *Trick Mirror*, fit into this other kind of writing?

It was like a third muscle between blogging and reporting. This was a third thing, and it felt distinctly like a third thing, even though having all that side reading for a year and a half meant that the things I was thinking about for the book ended up bleeding into my work for the *New Yorker*. Something would come up

in the news and I'd be like, "Oh, I read an entire book about this three months ago, I can do a blog."

But I really wanted the book to feel different as a writing experience. Because, number one, I had always been writing on a timeline of internet response. I had always had pretty instant feedback, most of which had been really nice, and I was afraid I had been accidentally blowing smoke up my own ass, or something. I just wanted to write in private for a while, and write just for myself, and see if it sounded any different. And to write it without knowing, without triangulating the subject against the place that it would run. I found it really pleasurable.

Why did you decide to write a book?

One of the only consistent motivations I have is that I like things that are hard in an interesting way. And I had never done this. It has occurred to me recently that this is the first time that I'll ever be really asking anyone to pay for anything that I've done. In one way it feels so scary and audacious to be like, "Give me your hard-earned money," and at the same time I'm trying to examine what it is about me that feels so fully indoctrinated in a post-2008 mindset that I'm like, "Oh no, valuing my work!," you know?

The book has all these essays in it that are too long to run anywhere else, right? I learned at *Jezebel* that there were certain subjects, where like twice or three times a year I would get something that I would just really want to write about from like eight or so different angles. At *Jezebel* I would end up writing these five- to six-thousand-word essays and it was great working there because I could just run them at that length, even knowing that maybe they were a little too long. But I liked it. I wanted to just do that again. And, I figured that a book was basically the only way to go as long as I wanted on the things that I wanted to go really long on, in the way that I wanted to go long on them.

Do you imagine writing any other kind of book? A novel?

I actually did write a novel. I worked on it for five years, and then I shelved it because it was bad. I would certainly try to do something like that again. I do miss fiction, but like any journalist, I'm thinking about writing screenplays and stuff. But there has been something about going so deep into my own interiority for basically everything I write, even at the *New Yorker*, that has made it harder for me... I don't think I could write a novel right now, because I think that the interior texture of anyone's mind that I could imagine is still too tethered to my own at the moment.

I'm really bad at thinking about the future. I've historically been incredibly bad about it. I don't have concrete goals. The book was one of the first decisions I'd ever made where I was looking as far as two years into my future. I've literally never done that before, professionally. I can barely do that personally, in terms of minor things, and the book was like, "Okay, try this on for size. Decide to do something and then just do it."

Mostly my work has just been lucky accidents of getting hired places and then me hamster wheeling myself into good standing by writing all the time—and then continuing to get lucky. I just haven't made that many conscious choices. Also, the world is so unpredictable and these industries are so unpredictable. It's like—what's the fucking use of plotting out a trajectory for yourself in a world where our food system's going to be completely disrupted in 15 years?

How do you edit your own work?

I worked as an editor until I joined the *New Yorker*, and so I'm an extremely tough self-editor. I also love being edited. I love a hard edit. It's a privilege to be edited hard.

With this book, part of the way I was able to write it on the side of work, was that I had help in the form of my friend and former editor Carrie Frye, who was the legendary managing editor of *The Awl*. She has this freelance book-editing service called Black Cardigan. And so I was like, "Oh my God, Carrie, hold my hand."

With this book, specifically, I was like, "I need to think of it not as a book, but as if I'm filing nine long magazine pieces every month and a half to someone." I needed someone to work with me the way Carrie

does. She's just a magical, magical editor, and I would rather die than disappoint her.

Carrie helped me keep to a strict rhythm, but all the essays took shape in very idiosyncratic ways. There were some where I had to draft the first section for six weeks and couldn't get any further, and then wrote the rest of it very quickly. And there were some pieces where I wrote a first draft all the way through, edited it, did a full first pass, and then a full second. It was like each one had a different little feel on how its nature would reveal itself to me.

Do you have any writing tendencies you find yourself having to fight against?

I just read my audiobook, which was psychologically intense. You know, even when you love a writer, and you read them a lot, and then you start to notice their ticks? You know they use this one phrase over and over, right? In this book I was like, "Oh, I think I used the word 'dubious' in every essay." I hadn't realized that even though I'd read the book multiple times. I'm always embarrassed when I can hear myself leaning on cadence too much. When I was in college I was a heavy over-writer, I was so thick and lyrical. And that is a tendency that I have steadily tried to pare back.

There are also places in this book where there are digressions that I take that will not be satisfying to all readers, but that I was like, "Okay, I'm just going to happily accept that risk." Except that maybe half of the people who read this will think this is pointless, but half will like the digression. I will go on tangents that I don't know are always editorially sound, but I like to do it. For example, the UVA essay is very long, and I knew that there was a lot of that history that if I were, for example, writing something about that for the *New Yorker*, it'd all be cut out. I could have easily slashed that, and my editor at Random House, Ben Greenberg, was like, "You could probably get two thousand words out of this, just cut it down." And I was like, "No." And then I read it, and I was like, "Oh, of course, Ben was right." But, at the same time, it's okay. That's what a book is for. Basically the thing that I realized was the places where my editor was like, "Take three thousand words out," and I was like "I'll take one thousand words out"... I maybe should have taken three.

How do you judge something you've written as successful or unsuccessful?

I try not to think about things after I'm done with them. At all. Like really. This is luckily one thing that my brain doesn't let me overthink. Once I've written something I really don't think about it again. I think a great beauty of writing is that it clears your head out. I write about the things that I think about too much, and usually once I'm done writing about it, I stop thinking about it too much.

At a basic level, I think something is successful if I think I got myself anywhere new at all. Which doesn't mean getting anywhere conclusive. It doesn't mean getting anywhere definite. I could have just moved something in my mind. If anything of any sort was revealed to me as I was writing, I feel that is a successful thing. And if I rendered that accurately. In terms of other people, I think that my other metric is when I get people emailing me who are extremely conservative, or otherwise not disposed to think the same way as me, telling me that they appreciated what I wrote. That I find incredibly rewarding and very surprising every time.

Is there anything about being a professional writer that you didn't expect when you first started out?

I was slow to admit to myself that I wanted to be a writer because I didn't think I could. I always assumed, until I literally started editing *The Hairpin*, even when I was in grad school for fiction writing, three years out of college, even having known in college that writing was the only thing I was good at and that I really liked to do, I was still like, "I'll never be able to afford to move to New York. I don't know anybody." I always assumed that I would end up writing copy for a non-profit. Or I thought that I was going to teach. I never imagined what being a writer would be like because I really, really didn't even start to imagine that this could be my job until at least a year after it was already my job.

I wouldn't have expected that, via social media, my personality would have ended up being central to my writing life in a para-professional way that makes me uncomfortable and uneasy. But at the same time I recognize that I am constantly rendering my personality into my writing as hard as I can.

You've mentioned editors and friends who sound like mentors. Now that you're an experienced writer, and you finished a book, and you have a lot of readers, do you feel like you've become a mentor for anybody else?

This is one thing that I really miss about editing. When I was an editor, maybe the people that I would work with a lot might think of me as a mentor. One of the best things about *The Hairpin* was that you had so many first-time writers. Pretty much everyone who wrote there was a first-time writer. A lot of those people I ended up working with for years. I got to be inside the texture of their brains and their lives editing them, and I found that to be really rewarding.

Now, I don't know. I'm definitely on the phone and I talk to people who want to know about writing constantly, but I don't know if I actually am ever helpful to them because it's hard to know what to say. It's like, the landscape is so different now than it was when I was first writing for the internet. A lot of the places that are most friendly to inexperienced writers are gone, and the industry has never gotten out of its continual state of crisis.

I'm never able to say anything other than, "As a writer, the only thing that you can guarantee yourself pleasure and challenge from is inside your own writing process." My advice is always like, "Do whatever you need to do in your life and your writing to open that space for yourself." I don't even know if that's good advice. But it's like, there's no right move to make right now. There's no, "Here's what you should do." It's just do whatever you need to do so that your writing itself will be a source of pleasure. I really do think that if there is anyone who's telling you, "Here's what you should do," they are somehow lying to you about the mercuriousness and the precarity and the sort of entrenched structures that this industry's built around.

One thing we'll often want to ask people is if they think it's okay to abandon a project. And you had mentioned that you had worked on a novel for five years, and then stopped. Did you learn anything from that?

You know, this did give me some fear when I started to write this book. I was like, "Fuck, what if the same thing happens? What if I write it for two years and I'm like, "Oh, it sucks?" But, yeah, I think it's so good to abandon projects. I never feel sad about not trying to publish that novel.

The work itself is important. This is part of what I try to express to anyone I talk to about writing who's looking for something. The writing is important in and of itself. This industry is such a nightmare; it's so punishing. If you can work in such a way that the process will be pleasurable enough that even if nothing comes of it, the work is an end in and of itself—then you'll be ok. It's not a means to an end, the work is an end. I guess that's part of graduating from college in the middle of the recession. That mindset is really stamped on me—the total uncertainty will be with me forever.

And I loved working on that novel. I learned a lot. I got a lot better at writing because of it. I learned things about being devoted to a project and how that's worthwhile in itself and fulfilling. You can also think of it as a little secret. Like, "I have this little secret, I have a little secret world that I spent time in for four years and no one knows about it but my agent and it's kind of nice." It's also like, we're at a time where maybe it's especially valuable to abandon things now that there's such an economic mandate to monetize every bit of work and play that you do around the clock. Abandoning a project, if you can afford to do so, is a special way out of that.

When you did a writing residency, did you find it weird to suddenly have all that time?

No. It felt amazing. I am distressingly social, but I also love to disappear, to be alone—that's one impulse that pushed me towards Peace Corps. One thing I like to do is go away by myself on Super Bowl weekend somewhere warm, because everyone is talking about the fucking Super Bowl and it feels like time stops. Everyone's busy doing some bullshit and no one is texting you. I get a lot of mileage out of even a long weekend spent working by myself, just maxing out that sense of solitude.

But having a month at MacDowell, oh my god. You could only use the internet in one building, they brought you your meals, and everyone there was so nice. It was all these visual artists and composers and playwrights and it was the most indulgent and pleasurable thing. I felt like a lizard sitting on a rock in

the sun. I felt like Ramona in the Beverly Cleary books squeezing out a whole tube of toothpaste in the sink just for the pleasure of it. It was like floating in a completely still freezing-cold swimming pool on a hot day and just staring at the sun. I was like, "Should I quit my job? I've organized my life all wrong." So, no, I have no trouble, no trouble at all, disconnecting.

Jia Tolentino Recommends:

5 things that make me feel reassured when I'm writing

□ • Conrad Schnitzler's "Ballet Statique." I love this record, a minimalist ambient gem from 1978—the gorgeous title track in particular sounds like what it feels to have the beginning of a thought, to let it iterate, to let it magnify and fade.

• A group text with my friends Puja and Samer where we exclusively send each other photos of Pomeranians.

• Thinking about all the people in my neighborhood who are working at the same time, as if we were in a Richard Scarry book. I love the guy at Bagel World on Dekalb who answers the phone with "Hello bagels?" when you call for a pickup order. I love the woman at Modernage Drycleaners on Myrtle, who always tells my dog she's a "nice doggie" and waves at me like we've been friends for decades whenever I pass by. I love the very kind man at Bella Rosa Flower Shop, also on Myrtle, who has an aura that makes me want to be a plant thriving peaceably in his shop.

• Remembering that if I'm in a bad mood it'll go away if I look at Perfume Genius's Twitter.

□• The feeling when everyone goes to bed and you can finally think.

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Jia Tolentino


Vocation


Writer


Fact

Elena Mudd

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