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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2236 words.

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On getting your work out into the world

Writer Kat Gardiner discusses the process of putting together her first book, what makes failure a compelling subject, and why sometimes you need to find alternate paths for getting your work out into the world.

Did you always want to be a writer?

Pretty much. The gravity of my creative pull was always writing. I started writing stories when I was nine or 10. I remember that I wrote a 12-page "novel" back then. And it's always been something that I've gone back to. I've also written things for the stage and done some screenwriting. After trying to pursue writing for a long time, I got to the point where I just didn't want to wait for anyone else's approval. I wanted to write whatever I wanted, so I focused on fiction.

I was also doing music journalism for a while. That was the first professional writing I did. I loved it, but I found that when I was young I had the most fun writing negative reviews. But then after a couple months of that I felt really terrible. So I decided just to focus on writing about the musicians that I loved and the music that I loved, but those reviews started sounding more and more like fiction. At the same time, when I was in my early 20s, a lot of my friends were going into MFA programs or trying to use their writing in a more business-oriented way, like by becoming copywriters and things like that. I just decided I was okay if writing never paid my bills. I just wanted to pursue it as an art form and make the best art I could out of it. That's kind of the way that I've worked since then.

You do computer coding as a day job, which I'm assuming is good since you can do that sort of work from anywhere, right?

Oh yeah, I don't have to be in any specific place. If we didn't have a cat we could probably travel more, but doing this kind of work is really freeing. I just have to be on the internet. It's kind of a symbiotic relationship, doing this kind of work while also writing. The coding work doesn't use the part of my brain that I use in writing at all. I'm not tapping into my creative juices when I'm on the clock.

How did you get into computer coding?

I minored in photography and I've done a little bit of work in that world. I'd worked in photo editing and I knew Photoshop, but I didn't learn anything about coding until I was around 27 or 28 years old. I was interning somewhere—for free, of course—and someone was like, "Hey do you know HTML? I can pay you to do some coding." I was like, "I don't, but I can learn how to do that."

In some ways it's great to have a skill that is totally divorced from your creative work. It can be complicated when your creative pursuit is also tied up in how you make a living.

Yeah, it lets you make things on your own terms. For sure. Every artist has to go about their own process of figuring out if they want to sell their work or make money from it, and what that will mean for them. I definitely had a lot of people give me advice about making my writing more sellable, or more literary. I've had people all over the spectrum telling me that what I was working on would never be able to be published, because it's not categorically fitting into some kind of box that's considered sellable.

I made the conscious decision, especially with *Little Wonder*, to just be like, "Fuck it." I just want to make the art. I want to get it out there. I want the people in my life to be able to actually read my writing, which was something that was always so difficult. Sometimes you hold the work very close to the chest because it's such a scary thing to share, or you spend all of this time sending things to literary journals and publishers not knowing if it ever even gets looked at, all in the hopes that someday someone will actually pay attention. I had just gotten to the point in my life where I was tired of waiting for other people's approval.

Your book had an interesting journey—bits of it first showed up on Instagram and then it was later published by a record label. How did that happen?

Well, I had been working on a novel while studying and working with a writer named Tom Spanbauer. He lived in Portland for a long time and taught a writing class in the basement of his house. I was basically

hanging out in his basement for two years studying with a group of people and working on this very big novel. I learned a lot, but the book was really tough and unwieldy and I was just working really hard trying to make it better.

And then I got pregnant. When I was around eight months pregnant I ended up taking a break from the class to focus on, you know, having a baby. In the meantime, Tom decided to take a break from teaching to focus on his health and the writer's group I was a part of kind of fell apart.

So I had just had this kid and I was feeling very isolated. I felt like the entire world was basically saying, "Oh, now your focus is your child." Like, you have your day job and you have your child, and that's all you're going to have time for. And I was having a real hard time with that.

So I decided to get back into writing the novel. To get the creative juices flowing, I decided that I was just gonna write a micro-fictional story a day, and that I would post them on Instagram. My goal was to do that for 100 days. It was just a way to share my work and a way to have a creative community, even though I was kind of locked at home a lot of times, both working from home and having a child.

So I started doing that, which was really scary. Openly sharing stories every day is a lot. I had also decided to go with a theme of fictionalizing this year from my own life—the year that me and my husband opened a café in Anacortes, Washington. That's how the whole book started. My gauge for how long each little story would be was that I wrote them on my phone and if I could screen-cap for Instagram, then that was the appropriate length.

So I got through the 100 days, posting every day on my personal account, and Jessi Frick, the person who runs Father/Daughter Records, was like, "I've been thinking about putting out books." She'd heard that I was thinking about just putting this book out myself and she was like, "I'll do it." It just kind of fell together.

Giving yourself that kind of assignment—100 posts in 100 days—is great. It gives you something to strive for and it makes the process feel more manageable somehow.

Yeah, it's great. It keeps you accountable. Sure, "likes" are nice and all that kind of stuff, but it was more like something I just needed to do for me. Even if no one was paying attention, it's still out there. I still did it. I still met my goal for the day. A story could be a sentence long sometimes. Or sometimes they'd be way too long and I'd have to work really hard to edit them down to the right length. The great thing about this kind of micro-fiction is that it forces you choose your words with precision. It's about economy—doing a lot of work in a very small space.

Little Wonder is also interesting in that it's a book almost entirely devoted to examining failure. One of the most common things we hear from people at The Creative Independent is about not being afraid to fail. You have to fail in order to succeed. Failure is important. Still, to read a work that is explicitly about failure feels really unusual.

Totally. I think there need to be more stories about failure. It's one of the most universal human experiences. Some people succeed, sure, but everyone fails. Every single person fails. And it's not shameful. I feel like the stigma around failure should just be ripped off. If you never fail, success stops being important... or interesting.

Was writing the book a way of trying to better understand your own experience of failure?

I definitely felt some catharsis. There were a lot of questions I had after it all happened—we moved to a small town and opened a cafe, having no idea what we were really doing, and it failed spectacularly. It was kind of like a fever dream trying to do something like that. We were working 80-hour weeks and it went from being the best idea in the world to the worst thing in the world, you know? Some of the best times of our life and some of the very worst. Later you look back and think—what was that? How did that happen? So going back and allowing myself to fictionalize it as a way of getting closer to the truth of it really helped with the process of figuring out what happened. I don't know if I've gotten all the answers from writing about it, but I've definitely released a lot of demons.

You know, I was really young when we did this—I was 24—which isn't *that* young, but none of my friends at that age were trying to open small businesses in the middle of nowhere in places where they didn't know anyone. My peers were going to grad school or becoming bartenders or moving to a big city. I was doing this crazy thing with a person I had eloped with after three months of dating. We hadn't even told anyone we were married at that point. So it was a section of my life that feels almost fictional in retrospect, because it was all so crazy. Delving into all of that from the vantage point of being older really has been fascinating.

It's also refreshing to hear someone talking about failing and coming out the other side of that experience. There is this idea that if you open a business that fails, it must mean you go bankrupt and your life is basically destroyed. In the end, it wasn't actually the end of the world.

Yeah, and that is just bullshit. Your life is never over until you die and until then... who knows? You keep on going. I look back now and I actually think that the best thing that happened to us was that the place failed. If we had spent our entire lives in a little town in Northern Washington it probably wouldn't have been as interesting of a life than what happened to us *after* we failed, you know? I'm glad that we did it. It was an experience that I'm very grateful for. Ultimately, I'm also really glad that we failed.

Going back to that idea of failure as a universal experience. I think most people feel like they're failing all the time. And people do say, "Oh, you have to fail all the time." But sometimes you just fail. Sometimes that's what your life is and that's also beautiful. You're still alive, you're still going through every moment of the day in this insanely beautiful world.

Perhaps it's really only a failure if you don't learn anything from it.

I think that there's truth to that. You can definitely fail and learn nothing. Often the reason you keep failing comes from a refusal to learn anything. It happens when you keep doing the same thing over and over and not gaining any kind of perspective from the experience.

Now that *Little Wonder* is out in the world, do you have a sense of what this means for what you do next?

You know, it's lifted a lot of fear out of my life. That's probably the biggest impact this project has had on me. No matter how it affects other people, I'm so touched that people are reading it and enjoying it. But I think that even if no one cared at all, just getting it out there and knowing that I could do it is affecting my life in a good way. Whether I write more micro-fiction or return to work on my novel, I'm not sure. I'm open to seeing what happens, but mostly I'm trying to focus on the pleasure of seeing this idea I had come to fruition. It's done. It's a book. I can look at it and say, "I did that. It's mine."

Kat Gardiner recommends:

Train yourself to see the beauty in the mundane moments of everyday life.

Remember that failure is the only option most of the time, and embrace that universal human experience with gusto.

Tell those you love that you love them often.

Give a damn.

Vote, vote, vote. With your money, your voice, and your ballot. Every time.

Name

Kat Gardiner


Vocation


Writer


Fact



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