

On creating something out of nothing



Writer Kate Folk discusses the importance of staying curious, respecting a story's will, and living in the future.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2354 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Time management, Failure, Success, Inspiration.

How do you start a project?

It depends on the project. I'm working on a novel now, which started by taking a weird interest in something and circling around it. I think in the early stages, I like to do a lot of really rough draft brainstorming, trying to generate a lot of words, even though I know they're not going to be part of the final draft. I find first drafts challenging and, actually, I prefer the revision stage, because it seems so daunting to create something out of nothing.

My strategy for that is to pour as much content on the page as I can, so that then I have something to work with and transform from there. I've been realizing the way I get my ideas is through the writing itself. If I can just start writing anything, then I usually will find my way to something good, eventually, if I keep going, even if it starts in some really mundane place. I can usually arrive at something that's more interesting than what I started with.

When you say that you have a weird interest in something, are you doing a lot of research whenever you start a project? I was curious about research in general, just because you write so much on technology and biology.

Not really, I probably should do more. For the stories in *Out There*, I didn't do much research into the AI stuff, because I felt like if I started to learn more about it, it would open up this whole side of the story where I would really have to get the technical details right. I like to stay in a somewhat ignorant place about it, which I think also worked with the characters for the two blot stories in the book.

Because in [the story] "Out There," it's told by a woman who is outside of the tech world and is noticing this technology's impacts secondhand and then in "Big Sur," it's another woman in a similar position and then a blot himself who also has no idea what's going on, so luckily that seemed to work. I try to do some research along the way, but just enough to feel like I can write it and then go back later and do more research to flesh it out or make certain parts feel more fully realized as I need to. But often, I feel like research can be a way of procrastinating on the actual drafting process, so I prefer to try to write it as well as I can and know that I'll fill in some of those blanks later.

How do you edit your stories? What happens for you after your first draft?

Well, I'm mostly thinking of the novel now because it's been a while since I wrote those short stories. But for the novel, I wrote a first draft, like I was saying, that was a brain dump. I was trying to write 1,000 words a day and generating a ton of material. And then once I felt like I had done enough of that, I went back and wrote a

draft from beginning to end that had more of an actual story arc and figured things out along the way. Once I had a solid draft that I could actually call a draft, then I put it aside for a few months. Last summer, I workshopped that draft with my writing group, who are some writers that I was in the [Wallace] Stegner program with.

I workshopped that first full draft with them and got some feedback and then I set it aside for three months and deliberately didn't look at it or think about it at all and then came back to it a month ago. I think it's really crucial for me to get some distance from my writing so that I can then come back to it with fresh eyes and read it as if someone else wrote it and be able to see, from there, the work that's needed.

I really love the way George Saunders talks about revision in *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, his book about these Russian short stories, which is also a great craft book. He talks about revision as a sentence-by-sentence process. It's like you're steering a ship a tiny bit at a time. With each sentence, you're gradually changing the overall work, proceeding incrementally, sentence by sentence. I think that's been really helpful, because in the past when students have asked me how to revise, it seems like an impossible question to answer and I guess it's really personal to each writer, too. But I do like the idea of taking it one sentence at a time and letting the work guide me through the revision.

A lot of your work is futuristic and technologically focused. Is this just a result of living in the Bay Area or is it something you're particularly interested in exploring?

I think it's both. I've never worked in tech, I guess I had a copywriting job one time at a startup of sorts, but I feel like I've been living amidst the tech industry and seeing how it's changed the city, even in the time I've lived here. There is a lot of that vibe in the air here, like we're the first people who get the new startup scams. There are the self-driving cars now, the fully self-driving ones with no one in the car. Sometimes I see them on the road and they don't seem to drive that well.

It's such an uncanny sensation to see a car without anyone in it. It reminds me of the blots, actually. I feel this tenderness toward them, but also fear and also...when I'm driving, I feel competitive with them for some reason. I'm like, "Oh, I'm a better driver than you. You're just this stupid self-driving car that's gathering data," so I feel like I can dominate them or something. But I think I also am, like everyone these days, pretty tethered to my phone and social media and I can feel how it's warped my brain, but I feel like there's no way around it at this point. I've given up the idea of moderating that in my life, it's like *whatever, it's how it is now*.

I'm definitely interested in that, too, the ways that technology has changed our relationships and how there are so many friends I have who I maybe don't even see in-person very much or who live in other parts of the country or the world and, in a way, it's great to be able to keep in touch with people through social media, but I also feel like I'll have text relationships with people that are distinct from my in-person relationship with them. I'll be texting with them all the time and then I see them in-person and it's a little awkward, like we're both two separate versions of ourselves.

I think I'm interested in all of that because it feels so present in my life at all times. It's hard to write about the current moment without writing about technology. I think that a lot of people don't want to write stories that have characters texting or emailing, there's resistance to that, which I understand, so a lot of people choose to set stories in the past, even if it's in the early 2000s or the '90s to get around that. I guess I'm more interested in writing about contemporary existence, even if it's challenging.

The first and last stories in your collection, "Out There" and "Big Sur," both take place within the same world: the world of blots. I've heard the writing advice that if you find yourself writing a story in the same world as another story, that's a sign that you need to write a novel. Why did you choose to keep them as two separate stories rather than making something larger out of them, and why did you decide to keep both instead of just one?

That's interesting advice. I did consider making a linked collection or a story cycle or whatever, or even writing some kind of novel about the blots. At that point, I was interested in a different idea for a novel and I also didn't really want to be only the blots, my whole-

The blot girl.

Yeah, the blot girl. The two stories happened because I wrote "Out There" and I workshopped that in the Stegner program and one of my professors in the Stegner encouraged me to do a revision of it that was more...He just thought that there was more potential to the idea and I did, too. He thought that we could meet the blots more on their own terms on the page, because in "Out There," we only really see the blots through the narrator's memory of meeting one at a dinner party, so it's filtered through her memory and her description of it, but I really liked "Out There" the way it was, so I just wrote a second story. It was easier to get into this story because I already had that skeleton created for "Out There" of some of the basics of the world and how the blots worked and even the dinner party where they're being beta tested.

I ended up with "Big Sur," which I think was a fuller realization of that concept. And then once I had written that, it felt like enough. I didn't know how to expand it. It felt like it was the length that it was supposed to be. In the past, I've tried to take a short story and expand it into a novel and it hasn't really worked, because for me, it seems like the length or the form of a story is determined from when I start it. Stories become the length that they are supposed to be and it's hard to fit them into a different length against their will. I guess I could have probably written a novel if I had found a way to expand that world and the scope of it, but I thought it was time to move on at that point.

"Big Sur" is pretty long, too. It's not novella length, I'm sure, but it feels like it. It feels very full and rich for a short story, so that makes a lot of sense to me.

It was too long to place in any journals or anything. I think it's 43 pages.

What path led you to where you are today and what's the most surprising thing you've realized along your creative path?

Well, I guess I always wanted to be a writer. I always wrote stories. And then getting to where I am now, I had a lot of self-doubt along the way. I didn't feel like I could fully commit to trying to write fiction for a long time. I guess once I got an MFA, then that felt like I was making a commitment to it, but in undergrad, I took some writing classes, but I didn't feel like it was a practical career because it seemed so hard to make it as a writer. It's still such an uncertain path. I think any creative field, it requires such an investment in, or a belief, in what I'm doing, because there's always so much rejection and fluctuation and intermittent success and then a lot of nothing or disappointment and all of that.

I guess that's what I realized through this whole process of finally publishing a book, because it was a long road for that to happen. When I was younger, I thought that once I had published a book, that was it: I had made it and everything would be fine and I would never feel that self-doubt again. But what I've discovered is I always feel kind of the same no matter what happens. I think something valuable I've learned is that, really, the important thing is the writing itself and that feeling of being curious and invested in what I'm working on. That is really what brings me back to writing. Even the success and good things can feel a little hollow and strange, and it's really the work itself and feeling like I have time and space to write and be creative, that's what I'm always searching for, and it's the most important thing to me.

As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success and how do you define failure?

I want to say there is no failure, but I know that's probably not true. What would I think was a failure? I guess I would feel like I had failed if I had completely tried to play it safe or tried to cater to what I thought people wanted or something, if I felt like I had betrayed my own creative vision. And then if I really wasn't proud of the result of it, that would feel like failure.

Like I said, I do think the most important thing is that daily work and feeling creatively inspired, even if it's something that no one will ever see, because I have this anxiety about time passing and about squandering my life or whatever. Writing, or lack of writing, can heighten that anxiety—the constant guilt that I'm not writing enough. But when I am writing regularly and it's feeling good, then at least I've done something worthwhile for

the day and I feel more comfortable in my existence. Feeling engaged in that way is what feels like success for me.

Kate Folk Recommends:

aged gouda

listening to Kraftwerk while on a plane

pretzels and kombucha eaten together as a snack

Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie*

a good pair of tweezers

Name

Kate Folk

Vocation

writer

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