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As told to Elle Nash, 3300 words.

Tags: Writing, Education, Time management, Process, Inspiration, Identity.

On paying attention to what works best for you

Writer Kimberly King Parsons discusses how parenthood influenced her process, the value of intuition, and taking breaks without losing momentum.

I love the relationship between Kit, the main character, and her toddler in your new novel, *We Were the Universe*. There's this one part where Kit's talking about a drawer full of acorns and how she calls it Nut Space. I was like, "Oh my god. This is real." I have sticks in my house and drawers of leaves, and last week we had a bowl of dirt on the counter for a week because there was a tiny worm in it.

I definitely pull things out of my kids' mouths quite a bit. I write things down that they say, because as you know, kids are so psychedelic. The way that they view the world is so strange, and also the world is strange to them because they're trying to make sense of it. When something lodges in their brain like, "Yeah, acorns are these magical things that we collect," of course you wouldn't get rid of them. We just had this whole drawer in our bathroom that we called nut space, and that was where the nuts went.

They make the whole world so playful and vivid and different in this way I did not anticipate. I planned to have my kids, but I anticipated this slog of caretaking, and I didn't realize how many really fun, strange moments [there would be], and how they totally remake the world in this beautiful way. I was always trying to capture those feelings and write them down so that I wouldn't forget them.

The narrator is also incredibly honest about the things that are difficult. We've all been there, but it's almost like you have this social fear of admitting those things.

Sometimes you have to go through those motions because you're trying to take care of yourself, or you're trying to do some real-life thing like pay for parking online. Meanwhile there's this little voice in the back seat asking you some huge, profound question and you're trying to balance both.

The biggest takeaway for me about being a mother is that sensation of being split, and Kit starts the narrative in that place, which is like, I'm here at the playground, but in my mind I'm with this hot girl from my art class in college. There's always a part of me that's [aware], at any moment the phone could ring and I could have to stop this interview and go pick up my kids. I don't know that people necessarily realize how divided your brain has to get to function.

Did you write before you became a mom, and did it change after that process?

I got my MFA in 2010, and I had my son in 2011, but I did not develop a writing practice until I had kids. I finally had to quit dicking around and get serious with myself because I would spend the whole day reading in bed and I would write for 30 minutes. I had this sensation that there was all the time in the world, and I would get to it when I got to it, and then suddenly when I had my son, I was paying a babysitter to come watch him just for a few hours a week. I was like, "Wow, I'm paying someone to watch him while I write, so I better fucking write." That's how I cultivated my writing practice, honestly, was at the same time as I became a mother.

I had a lot of years before that of not doing it, a lot of years of pretending to write, but not really getting anything done.

Can you talk a little bit about the path towards what made you want to get an MFA?

I didn't grow up in a house with any books at all, and I didn't grow up around writers. I was a bad

student, a bad high school student, and I read *The Stranger* as a senior and was blown away by the voice. I studied English as an undergraduate, and I thought for a long time I was going to write literary criticism about Faulkner because my emphasis was on Faulkner studies.

I applied for one MFA program because I wanted to go to New York, but I had no reason to go to New York. I hadn't even been there. I didn't even know what it was like. I didn't have any money, but I was like, "I'm just going to take out loans and go, and I'll just be paying on this shit for the rest of my life, and that's okay. It's fine."

I got in to Columbia. That was the one MFA program that I applied to, largely because I wanted to study with Ben Marcus and Sam Lipsyte. I still think they're both so great and I got to work with both of them.

Sam, in particular, was just one of the best mentors I've ever had. You could turn in 20 pages every time you workshoped, and I would turn in eight pages. I just was not producing a lot back then, but I was listening and reading a lot, and meeting people and feeling the differences of where I had come from and where I had ended up.

What do you think is the biggest takeaway you learned from working with him?

Once we had this meeting during office hours, and he said, "You're actually a really funny person, and your work is really serious." Back then, it was very self-serious. I think I was concerned that being funny would mean I wouldn't be taken seriously. And so he said, "You really should just try to write in a voice that's more like you as a person, and you could try that and see how it works."

He's so funny in his work, and I loved *Venus Drive*, which is the short story collection, and some of them the circumstances are awful, but he is able to write around this core of loneliness in an exuberant, fun way. There's that playfulness with language. That was critical for me. It took me a while to figure out how to balance a conversational tone or the humor with the craft of all of that love of language and all of these syntactical tricks that you can do.

How do you know when something's funny when you put it there?

It's hard because you're writing by yourself, and so even if something was once funny, over revisions it loses its charm. I think I just would try to duplicate that sensation of talking to my friends or being at a party. Or, there's a little bit of meanness to some of that humor, where it's like, "I'm going to be observant in this moment and say the thing that we all fucking know is happening, but no one wants to talk about it." I think it's also about writing characters from such a place of deep interiority that you don't have to worry necessarily that they sound like assholes. The other thing I learned from Sam is that it's really important that every character, whether it's true or not, believe that they are the worst person in the book, even if the readers are like, "Actually, she's not that bad. She's fine."

People always talk about how they want characters to change over the course of a novel. My favorite books feel really static, actually. I always want to make the reader change their opinion of the narrator, so that at the beginning they're like, "This person seems a little insufferable," but by the end they're like, "I totally get why she's like that. It's because of her life," or "I understand why she's over-parenting her own daughter. It's because she was under-parented herself." Those realizations really come by a slow accumulation of information about the character. So it's not just this character that really shows a great change, it's more that the reader starts to understand the character in a different way, if it's done correctly, which is of course, the hope.

Becoming a mom forced you to get your shit together with your writing routine. Have there been periods where you've really struggled with keeping yourself in the habit of it?

I go for long stretches even now without writing. The one thing I try to work on is my feelings about myself when I'm not writing, which are tricky, because when I'm writing, I feel so much better, obviously. I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. But the main thing is about changing my attitude around those periods of time where I'm inactive. Sometimes it's because I get stuck, and for me, it's much more beneficial to stop than to try to push through and look at something that I feel is fucked up every day, and to know it's fucked up. It's better for me to put it down and go and take a walk in the forest, or meet a friend, or read three books, take my writing time and use it to read.

The only way I've ever solved a problem is by stepping away from it. This book, I was two years late delivering it, and I just couldn't be rushed. I wanted to be rushed, I want to be the kind of person who can crank shit out. I'm just not that person.

I try to be gentle with myself when I recognize it's not going to happen today. I do try to touch the work every day, even if that means just reading it. Anthony Doerr says you don't want to let the paint dry on a project. If the paint dries, then it just makes it harder. I think that a lot of times I'll sit down and look at something and instantly know, "Am I going to work today or not?" And sometimes it's a no, and that's okay. I'm like, "It's going to be a while for me," but it's okay.

A couple of years ago, Sarah Manguso published that piece that was about how to have a career as advice to young writers. How she says it is, "Once you've truly begun, slow down. The difference between publishing two good books and 40 mediocre books is terribly large. Don't expend energy in writing and publishing that would be better used in your family and community."

I remember having a conversation with a dear friend and super smart editor, who said, "You need to get a book out before you have a baby." And I was like, "No, because I'm 30. I want to have a baby soon. I'm scared I'm getting too old." He was like, "Then write the book." And I was like, "No, this is going to work. It's going to be fine. I just need to do this this way."

I did have this dumb confidence for some reason that I would figure it out or that, I just always have this sensation that things are happening the way they're supposed to happen. Some of the stories in *Blacklight* I started in 2005, and I published that in 2019. That's crazy. My thesis was just a bad version of *Blacklight*, basically. I'm so glad I didn't rush that to publication. I could have tried, probably nobody would've bought it, but I could have forced it. I had this sensation of, "Just wait, just wait, just wait."

I try to do nothing for as long as possible. In my life in general, whenever there's a problem or some challenge, I'm like, "Do nothing, and then the answers will be revealed." It hasn't let me down yet. Maybe one day it will, but I don't know.

I think because it's coming from a place that's inherently confident, it's more of an expanded mindset.

Having kids, too, really does illuminate your ambitions, because suddenly you're like, "I only have time for one thing now. I have time for caretaking and I have time for my job, and then I have time for my creative endeavor. And so what is that going to be? And is it just going to be that I'm going to be fine not working, not writing, and just watching TV and making dinner at night, or do I really want to do this?" And because your time is so precious, you're like, "I really want to do it."

When everything is structured within a minute of your day, it's like budgeting your money. When you don't budget your money, it just goes, and when you don't budget your time, it just goes. There's something about having that scarcity that I think can work in a really good way for people.

You talked a little bit about taking long breaks between your writing. How did you keep the consistency of voice over the whole novel itself?

The way that I write is with consecution, which is something that I learned from Garielle Lutz, who first came to Columbia and gave a talk called "The Sentence is a Lonely Place." It illuminated something that I had already noticed, which was that my very favorite writers were all doing this thing where each sentence became a seed for the next sentence. You're always actually looking backwards to inform your process moving forwards. So because it's sentence-based and it's granular, and you're really literally only looking at the sentence before, the voice is consistent. So I'm never having to think about story or events or ideas or what happens next. All I'm doing is taking what's profitable from the last sentence and putting it into the sentence that follows.

This was also something I further learned with Gordon Lish, who I studied with for several summers in New York after my MFA. All of those writers, like Christine Schutt and Amy Hempel, their work is so different, but they're all using the same method. When I sit down to work, it's like a game almost, because all you're doing is pulling a little string along. You're just looking from what you've got and moving forward. And because there's so much friction between every sentence, it all is cohesive.

Sometimes voices come to you and they feel really short. You're like, "I could probably get 10 pages out of this voice and that's it." But I felt like I could listen to [Kit] for a lot longer.

Have you had to have stops and starts sometimes where you have worked through a voice and want it to be a longer project but then you've realized that it's not working?

I feel that every project really tells you what it wants to be, really clearly. It's much more like you start something, and even if you have an idea like, "Maybe this is a chapter or this is the beginning of something," it will tell you really quickly. With every new sentence, it's narrowing down and narrowing down, even when you want to be opening it up and opening it up.

I think certain voices are just resistant. But I do think every project tells you structurally what it wants to be, too. The novels that I love are much more experimental than *We Were the Universe* turned out to be. The project tells you what it wants to be, if you're just paying attention, you know?

I was doing that for a while where I've worked through a couple voices on one particular project and it kept not working, and then I finally hit a voice, and I was like, "Oh, that's the one."

There's the one. The thing that people don't talk about, because it's hard to talk about, is how much intuition goes into writing. It's one of those things where when you tell students, "Just listen. Pay attention to what you've just written, and look at the desire in that sentence, and use that sentence to write the next sentence, and just keep doing that over and over again." Also, it's okay to have the same preoccupations and obsessions and desires.

When I look at a writer like Faulkner, who was writing literally the same families over and over again, he couldn't shake them. It's not a detriment. It's really positive to find someone who figures out what their shit is and then just keeps doing it. Do it into the ground.

I think that's maybe even better than this idea of having to reinvent the wheel every time, or having to sound so different from one thing to the next. I don't believe that there are coincidences, I'd be trying

to figure out something with this dialogue in my novel, and I'd be stuck. Then I'd I go outside and hear two women talking to each other, and hear one of them say something that's so strange. When you're open to the possibility that the world is informing the work, all of these really cool things start to happen.

I do think it gets easier as you get older, because you're just like, "I'm not in as much of a rush." I remember turning 30 and being like, "This is really bad that you haven't published anything." I remember feeling like, "Okay, you better hurry up." *Blacklight* came out right before I turned 40, and I was like, "Whatever, it's fine. Okay."

I remember feeling so rushed to publish when I first started out. I was like, "If I don't publish, I'm going to die. If I don't finish the book, I will be dead." Or, "I'm going to die and I'm not going to have published it before I die." This year I had realized that I actually just don't feel rushed anymore. I don't feel that intensity anymore. I was a little bit scared. I was like, "Am I going to keep working on stuff?"

Actually, that's power. Not having that sense of being rushed is a form of power, because it's like, "No, let me tell you about my timeline. This is on my time," instead of it being like, "Well, if I'm writing my vampire book, I better hurry the fuck up because it's vampire season." You can't follow trends. There's such a big gulf between when you finish something and when you sell it and when you publish it. If you're just true to that kernel of voice, whatever it is that's your north star, as long as you just continue to move in that direction, it will find the right people and it will find the right time, and it will come out on its own timeline.

That sensation of having to rush to publish is a young person's game. I think longevity is really appealing. You see a lot of people who come out hot when they're 25, and then they just burn up and you never see them again. I love Karen Russell. She has been publishing steadily since she was 25, and she's a magic genius of a person. I am like, it's amazing how she just came out of the gate like that, which is incredible. But not everybody's like that. Some people really take a lot longer.

Kimberly King Parsons Recommends:

Walking in the Forest First Thing in the Morning

Pat Kim's Spinning Tops

Wilderton Bittersweet Appertivo on Ice (Non-Alcoholic but Burns Like the Real Thing)

This Acrylic Tray Lets You Write on Your Laptop While Riding Your Peloton

I Want to Lick These Photos by Texas Artist Mark Lovejoy

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