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February 7, 2022 -

As told to Michelle Lyn King, 2641 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Success, Failure.

On taking yourself seriously

Writer Kyle Lucia Wu discusses remembering why you do what you do, the value of community, and trusting your intuition. I'd like to begin by talking about how [your debut novel] Win Me Something began, both as a project and in publication.

I always wanted to write a character that shared some circumstances of my life. I always wanted to write about a bi-racial Asian-American character, and I always wanted to write about growing up in a blended family, because these weren't experiences I saw very often on the page. I never really wanted to write non-fiction, so it took me some time to land upon the fictional cipher for these things that I wanted to write about.

I still count [previous work] as work that went toward the novel, so that's why it's hard to pinpoint when, exactly, [the book] started, but I do feel that it started, in earnest, in graduate school. I was writing short stories at the time, and I started with [the character] Willa, putting her in different situations that would resonate and engage with the circumstances of her life. I was writing different short stories about her and really conceiving of it as more of a linked story collection, where it would be the same character, but different parts of their life. As time went on, there were certain parts that just felt more important to me, felt more interesting. Eventually, those swelled into the shape that the book is now, where there's a present-day, and then some past parts coming in.

In terms of publication—oh how do I begin? It took me two rounds [of submitting] to sign with an agent, and then two rounds of submitting to publishers to have the book published. I finished a draft that I felt happy with and submitted it to agents. I did get several agents who said, "If you want to resubmit to us, after you make a few changes..." Some agents left the door open, so it wasn't entirely dispiriting, but that's still not exactly the response you dream of. Now I feel like the book definitely wasn't ready at that time. I do think the experience of having had [publication] not be such a seamless process has contributed to me feeling a little bit more chill—for lack of a better word—about the process in general, because it's easy for me to look back and be like, "Oh, I'm so happy that the book didn't sell that first draft that I sent out to an agent because it just wasn't ready yet." Even though I couldn't see that at the time, I see so clearly now that the book just wasn't ready yet.

It's given me a greater sense of trust in what happens, and a greater sense of just being okay with the way things turn out. As a younger writer, it's really difficult to not want to zoom to the finish line.

In that moment when you're receiving rejections—even encouraging rejections—it can be so hard, especially if you've been working on a project for years and years, and feel like you've done everything with it. Did you do anything specific during the time between submissions to help breakthrough that period and get the novel to a new place?

I definitely did take steps away from it, but I don't think that was really intentional. It was more that I couldn't think of what else to do. I think that it was very wounding to hear that it wasn't ready and to have your optimism for an opportunity be dashed. There was definitely some hand-wringing and stepping away, only because I didn't feel like I could return to it. But, then, eventually, I just felt ready to go back.

One of the things that really brought me back to the book is more external, in that I won the Fellowship at the Asian American Writers' Workshop. I was feeling really low in my writing life, but when I was given this opportunity, it gave me a big vote of confidence to return to the book. I feel like I just needed

support. I needed some vote of confidence or support from some external force. That's what allowed me to go back in and revise it. [The fellowship came with a residency], and when I went on that residency, I just totally deleted and rewrote the whole book. That shows you the value of community and support. Having the support of a community was especially meaningful because the rejections had made me feel so isolated.

What was that process like for you, deleting and rewriting the book? Was it terrifying? Did it feel like returning to square one, even if it was really a necessary step in a longer process?

When I started writing a novel, I was like, "Yeah, I think this will take me, like, two years." If I'd known that my novel would take me seven years, I don't know that I would've started it. You have to stay in the dark, a little bit, to get yourself to that finish line because writing a novel is just such a long process.

When I was writing that first draft, I had inklings about things that could be changed, but any change feels like such a big undertaking. One of the reasons I was really able to delete and rewrite was just this great privilege I had of being at a writing residency. I got there and I had three-and-a-half weeks ahead of me, with nothing to do but write. I was like, "Okay, there's so much time that I have. I can waste a few days just taking risks." It's not like I deleted my novel, never to be found again. It was more like, "I can take a few days and try from the start." Once I let myself take that risk, I actually found that it came out really easily, which is maybe a lesson, even when you're not in a residency.

I think that, deep down, as the writer, you do know when something needs to be changed [in your work], but sometimes you don't want to do the work. So much of writing is learning to tap into your own intuition about the story. I think that I knew some things about the book, but I was scared to try and put them into motion. I think sometimes it's a matter of doing something that might feel scary, but you know deep down might be better. It's about listening to your intuition.

I think there's some feedback one gets and it's clear right away that it's the wrong feedback. Then I think there's another type of feedback that comes from people who you really trust. You know that they're a good reader for a work, that they understand the project you're trying to do, but they give you a note that feels off. I find it can be hard to know whether or not to take that sort of feedback. I think it can be easy to have an intuition and more difficult to find the confidence it takes to follow that intuition. How did you learn to trust your intuition?

I definitely wasn't able to follow my intuition very well toward the beginning of this journey. When I was in graduate school, I welcomed every single opinion someone gave me because I was just so thrilled to have engagement with my work. I followed all of these suggestions and none of them ended up being right. I don't regret doing that, because it showed me that you can't follow someone else's advice for the story that's coming deep from you.

I actually find it really useful when people that you trust give you notes that you might not agree with. It's useful to articulate why you disagree with someone, even if it's just for yourself. I've definitely gotten notes from people that I trust—well-intentioned and well-thought-out notes—that would probably be wonderful in another version of my book. But not my version of my book. It's enlightening if you can actually articulate why you disagree with a note, and explain why that's not something you want to do, based on everything else in your book. I did that several times during editing processes. It never felt antagonistic. It just made me think deeply like, "Why is this something that I'm having this visceral reaction to?" Trying to work through it and articulate it is really useful. Once you do that, you've opened up a new layer of information about yourself and your story, and why you want to do things a certain way. You just have to try and understand why you're having that pushback, and learn to trust that small nagging feeling, which is tough. It takes practice.

You're the Managing Director at Kundiman, and you teach creative writing. You're also an editor at Joyland, where you've edited writers for many years. I'd like to hear about what part of your writing life those different roles fulfill.

I think that it was important for me to care about something other than my own writing. Being so tied up in one project can feel like all your emotions are tied to it. So then, when something goes wrong or you have a setback, it's easy to feel like your whole world is falling. I wanted to feel tied to something in writing outside of myself. I think it helps to remember why you care about writing, outside of your own project that you've been working on for so many years. At Kundiman, it's endlessly inspiring to be around other writers who have their own voice, their own style, their own work. I've been really inspired by the writers there. I'm grateful that my day job involves helping uplift other writers, but that I don't really write [at my job]. In a way, it's perfect. That's better for me. I wouldn't want to be writing for my day job, because I do find that a little creatively draining. I get to do something that I care about, where I get to feel like I'm helping nurture other writers. I think it's important to care about something outside of yourself.

Is it important for you to have things in your life that really have nothing to do with writing or publishing?

I think so, yes. I do like to have distance from writing. That can even be when I'm really in a writing phase. When I'm deep in an editing phase, sometimes I can only watch TV. I can't read at all. Sometimes you just need to be able to move your brain away. I really believe in giving your brain a break, in whatever way it is, and I think it's important for writers to be paying attention to the world, to be paying attention to what's outside of the small world of writing. It's important for us to be looking around.

It's important for us to know what affects the world, and to have something outside of writing to anchor you to the world. It's always important to surround yourself with as many different experiences or viewpoints as possible. My writing felt narrower in scope when I only cared about writing or when I thought I only cared about writing. Opening yourself up to the world actually just makes you a more well-rounded writer or artist, able to respond to different things that are happening.

When I look back on the times where my writing felt too narrow, I think I was maybe a little too focused on writing.

Yeah, you can sit at your desk and be trying so hard to force a breakthrough or a sentence. Sometimes when you walk away and do something else, ideas just come to you because [the work] is still floating around in your head. You have to have trust that you'll still be working on the story. It's not going to leave you the second you leave your computer. You have to have some gentleness and grace with yourself.

You mentioned going to a residency, and you talked about what a gift that time was. What does finding time to write look like for you when you don't have that space? Is it just a matter of waking up a couple hours earlier or not going out on the weekend? And, if so, how do you find that discipline?

This has changed at different periods of my life. It's important to know when writing works best for you. I like to write in the morning, but I also don't like to wake up that early. That's the main crux of my struggle. But if I can manage to carve out a few hours before work, that's best for me.

I like to write in the morning, when I'm fresh, and I also really prefer to have long stretches of time, when possible. My best tip is to pay attention to when writing feels best for you, and to really set yourself up to take advantage of those pockets of time. If I'm able to [write for] two hours before work, then I always try and set up my workspace the night before, so that it's ready to go. It's looking neat, my computer's there. My notebook's there with whatever notes I need. Sometimes I like to give myself mini-assignments on a Post-It. Something like "Pick up the scene from blah-blah-blah" That means, as soon as I sit down, I should know what I'm doing. Writing time is precious, so you don't want to waste your time cleaning off your desk in the morning.

You also just have to take your own writing time seriously. For me, writing has meant having to decline a lot of things that I'd rather do. I do want to find a balance there. I feel like, when I was a younger writer, I would decline everything because I had to stay in and write. That was a little extreme. I could've not been so serious.

It's a balance, but I do think that you need to sometimes make sacrifices in order to get things done. Stay in when you need to stay in, block off your time, do whatever it is to get you to that state of concentration, because you really have to take yourself seriously. No one's going to force you into doing this. It's a solitary pursuit. You don't often have someone watching over you and giving you these markers. You really have to take yourself seriously and do it yourself.

Kyle Lucia Wu Recommends:

Feeling Asian Podcast, "a podcast where two Asians talk about their feelings," is my favorite thing to listen to on long walks, laughing to myself. Also, following Youngmi Mayer on any platform you can.

Filipinx: Heritage Recipes from the Diaspora by Angela Dimiyuga and Ligaya Mishan. So many good recipes, and it's changed how I cook adobo.

Asian American Girl Club for cute merchandise and warm book clubs

Fiona and Jane by Jean Chen Ho, a captivating linked story collecting about a long friendship, following two Taiwanese American girls in LA from childhood to adulthood in a way that feels intimate and familiar but also surprising and subversive.

Last year I resolved to stop buying new clothes and only buy thrift or vintage when I wanted something. It felt really nice to cleanse myself of fast fashion or the want of Instagram ads and also allowed me to only buy things that I really wanted, rather than what the algorithm tries to get me to want. I recommend putting yourself on a shopping ban for a bit or having a clothing swap with friends!

Name

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Vocation


writer


Fact

Sylvia Rosokoff

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