

On how to cultivate focus



Author Lillian Li on setting aside specific time for writing, the pros and cons of day jobs, fending off self-indulgence, and remembering that you never lose the ability to make art that matters to you.

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As told to Ambrose Mary Gallagher, 2356 words.

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How do you feed your creative self when you're not writing?

I remember a few years ago I was hanging out with a friend, and he was very excited to take me to this bar. When I asked him why, he said, "Well, it's got really great people watching, which I know you'll love." I had never really considered that before, because it wasn't something that I was actively thinking about as nourishing my creative side, but I think it absolutely does. That's something I have to remind myself of, because it's so easy for me, when there's a moment when I'm not doing anything, to pull out my phone and go on Twitter or Instagram. In those moments, I'm trying to keep my phone in my pocket, and trying to look out and see what weird stuff people are doing, because people are doing weird stuff all the time! Right in front of you! I think that observing how people move through the world is really helpful in trying to write about people.

What's the one writing habit that you always have to fight against?

There's still this thing that I'm learning how to do, which is just putting my butt in a chair. I've taken on this new practice where I take a walk with a notepad and set that time aside for writing. Two hours a day, let's say, earmarked for something having to do with writing. That's something that I don't do, and it makes it feel so much easier to go for a day, or sometimes weeks, without writing anything, and without even thinking about writing, and even thinking much more about how I'm *not* writing and getting distracted by that.

Can you say more about how thinking about *not* writing can be distracting?

I think that there's a common perception that being hard on yourself is a kind of toughness, to criticize yourself and say, "I didn't write today, I'm such a lazy person." I've definitely made that personal mistake of feeling like I've accomplished something by berating myself for not writing, and that has distracted me from the actual fact that I am no closer to getting writing done.

My favorite variety of that is googling everything else I could be doing with my life.

There's the idea that it's like exercise; if it's not pleasurable, then it must be good for you.

Do you have a day job?

I've never had a full-time job. I've always stacked part-time jobs together. For the last couple of years, I have been a part-time bookseller at Literati Bookstore in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and I've also been a part-time lecturer at the Sweetland Center for Writing at the University of Michigan. Together, those come out to a full-time hourly

load.

How do you balance those jobs with your writing?

Even though I didn't purposely try to stack part-time jobs rather than go after one full-time job, I did realize that it was one way that I could have my creative writing life and then also make a living for myself. There's this real beauty to part-time work because it kind of automatically means that I am not fully invested in the place. Of course I'm invested when I'm there, but there's always going to be this sense of scale. Basically, I'm never wrapped up in one thing.

Even though you might think that you spend more time juggling two jobs, at least in my case—because bookselling is a little more physical on my feet, and teaching is a little more mental and cerebral, reading and grading papers—I'm able to feel like I'm not really exhausted in one avenue. That leaves a lot more energy for writing, and also makes it so the thing that I'm ultimately most passionate about will always come back to writing, because that does feel like a full-time job. Even if I'm not necessarily writing, that's always something I'm thinking about first and foremost, and if I had a full-time job, that might infringe on my thinking time.

If you were able to meet all your needs through a writing income, do you think you would still work those part-time jobs?

Right now, speaking from a place where I am not able to live fully on a writing salary [laughs], it's a very safe space to talk about this high-minded stuff. A lot of authors talk about the feeling of writing the second book versus writing the first book, and they say with the first book you're not thinking about marketability, you're not thinking about how you're going to sell this to your publisher, to your reader, and then the second time around you have all these voices in your head, mimicking what you think people might be saying. One of the ways that that voice can get into your head, for me, is if writing becomes also a way in which I make my living. Of course, very few writers get to do that anyways, so it's not like that's going to be a danger anytime soon. But even with that framework, I think it's great to have a different kind of job, if only so that I'm out meeting people and being outside in the world. If I was a full-time writer, I think I'd be a much more isolated person.

How do you deal with online distractions, like social media or email?

I heard that to get into focus, it takes about 15 minutes for you to access that space, and then less than a second to get out of it. Once I got that ratio into my mind—this idea that it takes a really long time to cultivate the kind of focus that's necessary to dig deep into a creative work, and you can send it all tumbling within a second of just clicking to see an email—I think that has helped me resist that urge, because it is so easy to click away. Right now, my mechanism for getting through that knee-jerk reaction that I've accidentally trained into myself is to realize how long it takes to cultivate that focus, and how easy it is to upend it.

How do you handle the business side of writing?

I've heard that in newspapers, there's some kind of metaphysical wall that's between the advertising side and the editorial side. They don't talk to each other. I want to erect that kind of wall within my own life, you know? In that economically supporting myself does not infringe on how I am creatively sustaining myself.

One of the most interesting talks I had was with somebody who had some experience as a project manager, and he would say, "Have you ever tried to project manage your writing?" So that you have a certain quota that you meet every day, and you'll be finished with your novel by month six. That's the goal, and you have monthly check-ins and weekly check-ins on that. There's a part of me that was very in love with that idea, the control of it and the neatness of it.

But I found that the creative practice is very uncontrollable. There are certain days where I could write for hours, and it feels amazing, and then the next day or the next three days I will find that I have no energy to do more than even a paragraph a day. It isn't like every day I can deliver this amount of product, and so it just doesn't fit into a business framework in that way, because I'm just very unreliable as a writer.

Well, you're reliable enough as a writer to publish a novel. So, after you finish that first draft, how do you go about editing? I read that Zadie Smith—this is absurd—said something like she goes over every sentence until it's perfect, so that by the time she writes the last sentence, the book is finished.

I remember reading that, too, and that's definitely not how I do it. I had this professor, Eileen Pollack, and she has this term that she uses called "zero draft," where the first draft that you write isn't even your first draft. I sporadically come back to that idea, because there's something really freeing about it, which is that the first kind of complete write-over is more exploratory than anything. It's about discovery, it doesn't have to be linear, it doesn't have to make sense. You can totally decide that you don't like Character A after 50 pages, and then you don't have to go back and write out Character A, you can just go on and pretend that Character A never existed. You can write all these parallel universes, essentially, in one draft.

I love editing probably more than I love writing. Writing does feel in many ways like I'm making mud or making clay, material that I then, in the editing process, can shape and make into whatever I want it to be. But, until I make that mud or whatever, there's nothing else I can make. After finishing a rough draft, I go back and start rewriting oftentimes within the draft, which is kind of a bad habit because it means that I'll take more shortcuts. With the first novel, I started to do something that I think I'll do forever because I love it so much, which is reading out loud. I probably read my novel out loud like six to 10 times.

How does reading out loud change the way you think about it?

You can find the ways you're being indulgent when you read it out loud. One, it doesn't make sense, and two, it just doesn't feel good. You kind of trip over the words, and there are obvious signs. I think some writer said that if you're bored reading your work, then a reader is 100% going to be bored. Reading out loud is one way to distance me from the work, and to also keep me from skimming and reading faster when I'm getting a little bored with it, so I can tap into when I'm honestly not interesting even to myself.

It's almost like it's harder to lie to yourself when you're putting it out into sound waves. So, when you're in that editing process, how do you decide when it's done?

I think another writer said that once you're just moving a word around in a sentence, and each draft is just moving that word again and again—which I've done, I've moved the same word from the beginning to the end of a sentence on each subsequent draft I revised—I kind of just got to the point where I had to let it go. There's always going to be that feeling that you didn't finish, because the thing is, you're writing the novel that you're aspiring to write, and it always feels like you didn't hit the mark. It's part of the unique Sisyphean challenge that is writing. And so I think that it's really the best that you can write, at this moment. Also, whenever a deadline starts to loom up—those deadlines, while arbitrary, can be helpful.

Writing is pretty classically solo, but you've talked about your editor being helpful in getting things done. What's most helpful about working with editors or other collaborators?

It's a good question, and it's one I've been thinking about a lot these last couple days, because I just came out of my writing retreat, Kundiman. One of the things that you do on this retreat that's so lovely is you have salons where everyone reads 250 words. Something you're working on, or maybe a past thing. It's a group of maybe 35 people reading 250 words of something. In order to have those 250 words to read out loud, it sharpened my ability to edit myself, my ability to figure out what I have to say, figure out what actually makes sense and is honest, versus something that's just kind of flabby and indulgent.

It's something that I'm trying to figure out how to work into my life now that I'm out of the MFA program. It was something that I kind of took for granted. I felt so sick of workshops, like if I never had to have 12 people read my work again in order to critique it, that would be an amazing thing. It wasn't necessarily the random feedback I was getting from those workshops, but just the fact that I knew that I would have to enter with my story or with my piece into an arena of people who were going to be pretty intensive, and people who had a good

bullshit detector, who knew what was honest. You know, people who could just feel it.

What is something you wish someone told you when you began to make art?

I think that what might be helpful to hear right now from somebody that I trust—and also something that I hope is true—is that you never lose it, by which I mean that you never lose the ability to make art that matters to you. That's been a place of doubt that I've been in for a while, without even being truly aware of it, and that I'm hoping to sort of ease myself out of in the next couple of months. It's the fear that I've lost that ability, that it's in some ways even like a physical object that one could lose and not like a core part of who you are as a person, that core part that made it so you could make the art that you were already making. That would be a really great thing to hear from people right now.

Lillian Li Recommends:

Graphic Novel: *Sabrina* by Nick Drnaso

Essay: "Joy" by Zadie Smith

TV Show: *Happy Endings*

Book: *Blood, Bones, and Butter* by Gabrielle Hamilton

Writing Retreat: *Kundiman*

Name

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Vocation

Writer

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