

On committing to your creative work



Author Lucy Ives discusses the economics of writing, stories about stories, finding infinity, and the sadness and fear that comes from completing a project.

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As told to Maddie Crum, 2354 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Day jobs](#), [Money](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

Some of the plots in your newest collection, *Cosmogony*, involve fractured working lives. What is your own experience with juggling writing with making a living? Or, what advice would you give to someone who's trying to juggle writing with making a living?

It's hard. And I think for one's own sanity, it's good to recognize that it's hard, and not feel annoyed at oneself if it's a struggle. I think that can be really hard, how annoyed we can feel about how hard it is. I think the advice that I received, and which I followed and found useful, was to just keep doing it, by which I mean writing, and do it all the time, like when you have time, because it accumulates.

I freelance and teach. I don't make enough to live from writing. And yeah, I guess I would just say, it takes a lot of practice. I think people don't talk about that, that writing itself—not just like, "Oh, it's hard." But that it isn't natural. It's like playing the piano or something like that. You have to stay with it to be able to do it well, or be happy with what you're doing. I don't have great advice about it, because I think, to me, at least, it remains a struggle, but I think you also get more accepting of the fact that it is a bit of a struggle all the time.

Several of the stories here are metafictional. The narrators talk about narrating, and the satirical characters discuss satire. When did you first become interested in metafiction, or stories about stories?

I always liked that idea that a character can sort of turn around and say, "Actually, I know what's happening here, and I know that there's a reader here, and that I'm not alone." I would have to think for a while to figure out when I first came up across the idea of metafiction. I would guess that it was probably in children's literature somewhere. But like many people, there was some point when I came upon the sort of big, dead writers who have metafictional things in their work.

And I guess the big people for me are Nabokov and Flaubert, although Flaubert, he's a more subtle metafictional artist, and he's more interested in extractic things, but I've always liked that. I like doubling. I like it when there's another work of art inside the piece of writing, and when there's some kind of writing on that work of art and in that writing. There might be a scene in which there are people talking, and those people might talk about another book, and then inside of that book, there might be a reference to a landscape, and in the landscape, there's a little goat, and the little goat is singing a song. And then a gnome comes along and shows the goat an urn, and on the urn there's... I could go on forever, but I just, I like that. I like that distance, because I find that sometimes I feel sort of imprisoned in life, and it's great to be able to find that distance somewhere, that sort of infinity.

I was going to ask which metafictional stories you like best, but you've gone over that a bit. I'm curious just for my own interest, which Flaubert novels or works are metafictional to you, or which interest you in that way?

Well, I would say *Madame Bovary* is just, it's perfect. You just learn so much about the world that is in the novel and also about the author's rage about the culture of his time, and what you're allowed to talk about and what you're not allowed to talk about.

And I would also say the book of three stories that includes "A Simple Heart" is an under-read gem. It's truly, I think, one of the greatest works in fiction. And recently, I've been spending a lot of time with Robert Glück, who's an American, a living American writer, and his work. I don't mean in-person spending time with him, but spending time with his work, and his novel *Margery Kempe* was recently released by New York Review Books, and he has some of that kind of descriptive magic in that book. And that was a book that he wrote by interviewing, I don't know how many, like 40 of his friends or something, about their bodies, and he partially uses that to create just these incredible acts of description, and you kind of can't believe you're reading it, because it's so beyond vivid. So, there's a lot of infinity in that book, too, just to give another example of what I mean.

Do you feel that Realism is a limited form for describing the world as it is today? Or maybe just for you personally? It sounds like you feel hemmed in by it.

Well, I think that there's part of me that feels like she was sold a bill of goods a long time ago, and is still resentful about that. And I guess, I somehow absorbed some kind of, I don't know, idea about mimesis or imitation, whereby there's the book, and the book is a mirror of the world, that just contains a picture of the world in it.

But as I spent more time with literature, I come to find out that books are tied to all sorts of other forms of media, and the ways in which language engages in acts of depiction are very complicated, and have to do with all these different forms of technology that we use to provide ourselves "shadow images," as Plato would say. So, I think that there's part of me that is—it's like a grieving part of me that is like, "Wow, I wish Realism were just as simple as that." As saying, "There's a cat," and describing what the cat does. But it doesn't seem to work like that.

When you're talking about this remark about Realism, you're referring to something that one of the characters in the story "Scary Sightings" says, that Realism is a secular form, a secular mode for depicting reality. And I think there's something also about that idea of it being secular that's important, because humans also haven't really done without god or deities for most of their history. And so, the confidence of Realism is also something that I find very suspicious, although I don't totally understand why, but that confidence that I can really show you something that's there, and that you will recognize.

Some of your stories, and I'm thinking of one in particular, "Recognition of This World is Not the Invention of It," consider systems and theories versus lived experience. I'm interested in that subject, and the idea of showing both theory and practice in fiction.

I think one of the things that I was trying to do there, or it interested me to do there, was to have a character who is doing everything wrong. And to summarize quickly for someone who hasn't read the story, essentially, this person is trying to quantify how well she can perceive the world in comparison to the other people around her. And she has this imaginary formula, a mathematical formula. She's trying to quantify what she can see, and what she can know. And I think that we often use these very peculiar kinds of mechanisms to orient ourselves in the physical and social world, and so this is just an example of one kind of peculiar mechanism that a person could have. But part of what the story's trying to do with that very theoretical way of kind of getting around living, is to show you where that theory comes from, and then also to show, I think in an optimistic way, that a character can move beyond that.

And there is a moment, a very extreme moment of praxis in that story, too, which is contemplating driving her car into an oncoming car, not to give too much away there, but that character is in a lot of pain, and so is looking for a way out of it. The theory is something that's being used to make that pain survivable. And it's part of the job of the story to show how one can move beyond using a construct like that, keeping uncomfortable, upsetting,

painful things at a distance, and to have a different kind of relationship to them.

You write not only stories, but also novels and poetry and nonfiction, as you've mentioned. Do you typically set out with a medium in mind? In other words, do you know what you're writing is a story or a poem from the outset?

Right now, I'm very prose-obsessed, and that is the form that I'm interested in right now, primarily. So I write a lot, and there are things that I write that are not for public consumption. That might be poetry, or I take a lot of notes, too. But I often will have a big picture idea for something that I want to do, like with this story collection, I, and another editor said, "Hey, do you have a story? I want to try to publish a story by you." And I did not have a story. And I was really afraid of writing stories, because I thought I was very bad at it. I had written one short story in my life.

So I had a couple of misses. And then somehow, I managed to write a story that worked and that the editor liked, which was really amazing to me. It seemed like a miracle. And after that, I had this idea of, "Okay, I'm going to write a book of short stories, because I have to get over this fear of short stories." And so that was really where the book kind of came from. And I think that fear of the short story was also related to other kinds of fears about living that are in the book, too.

Do you find that short stories are generally more plotted than something like a novel? Is that part of your fear of them?

Yeah, and there's a different kind of plotting, in my opinion, that's associated with the short story, and you don't have very much space, so you have to know how you're going to get in and how you're going to get out of the story. It can be this kind of hermetic form, or a form that can't just spin out; it really has to close.

What does the process of revision look like for you?

I revise the book, and then a few other people read it, and then there is a master document listing all of the things that have to be revised. And then those are broken out, and the book is printed out in various ways. I don't know if you've ever used that function on the printer, where you can do four pages to a sheet or six pages to a sheet. I'll often read things I write in very small font, to get an overview of them. And then I'll print them out in really big font, and look at them that way.

I think when you zoom out that way from a novel, it's much easier to read it, and it's much less painful to read your own writing, when it's very small like that. So I find that very effective for either cutting the text down or reorganizing the text. And then if I make the font really big, it's super painful to read it, because I have to confront my own idiotic ideas.

How do you know when a piece is finished?

Usually I'm overcome with sadness and fear, actually. And when I have that feeling where the bottom drops out of things, I know that it's done.

Lucy Ives Recommends:

Three books on love. In the past year or so I've been thinking a lot about love in its various manifestations—from the good, to the obsessive, to the agonizing, to the transcendent, and back again—and want to recommend three very different books about it, bell hooks's meditation *All About Love*, Robert Glück's novel *Margery Kempe*, and Taeko Kono's short story collection, *Toddler Hunting*. The last of these is not for the faint of heart.

A staircase. If you are in Murray Hill in Manhattan and have a spare moment, I recommend a visit to Dover Street Market and an unusual staircase inside. Madeline Gins, a poet, philosopher, and architect whose writings I have edited, designed the "swallow's nest"-like "Biotopological Scale-Juggling Escalator" in collaboration with Rei Kawakubo. Gins was interested in creating structures that would help people evade mortality; she and her partner, the painter Arakawa, famously declared, "We have decided not to die." Their work seems particularly refreshing

and prescient now.

Some animals. Three years ago, I moved to a rural area and at this time learned about a large mammal I had never heard of before, the fisher, sometimes referred to as the "fisher cat," although it is not a feline. A quick thumbnail: it possesses a toylike head with round ears, a snout stuffed haphazardly full of hook-like teeth, a pointlessly long and supple body, anodyne peg-like limbs nevertheless festooned with claws. Sounds cute, right?

Since this time, I've become more curious about my own ignorance regarding the diversity of sentient, intelligent, mobile entities out there, both present and historical. It's a bit presumptuous to "recommend" animals, but perhaps I can just mention two. This spring, I have been teaching a workshop on memory and one of my students mentioned the prehistoric titanoboa. It's very large. A very small animal I see on a daily basis and which I've come to feel affection for is the pseudoscorpion, not least of all because it eats booklice.

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Vocation

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