

On sustaining a creative metabolism



Writer Mary H.K. Choi on balancing your creative work against the need for financial stability, tuning out the distractions of social media, and always striving to become a more deeply informed writer.

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As told to Arianna Stern, 2820 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Anxiety](#), [Income](#), [Money](#), [Success](#).

How do you stay focused when there are so many opportunities for distraction online and on smartphones?

Well, you know, when I sit down to write I move forward with this single-minded, monastic purpose. [laughs] That is such a lie. It's really hard. I struggle with it all the time. It's funny, I'm trying this new thing of being gentle. I lead with mandible and grit and white knuckles in terms of that propulsive force that gets me through anything. But I'm learning that that does not work with novel writing or long-form writing. It's such a big thing that you're chipping away at.

Eroding some of my focus with social media is really challenging. It gets to be so expensive. I have to stay off of social media for the most part during the day, during the time where the sun is out and I'm still able to write. Right now I can only write when the sun is out, which sucks, especially since the day is shortening.

Also, I have an addict's brain. My preferred addiction is that I have an eating disorder. It started off as bulimia and then metamorphosed into this restriction and food obsession. I can sit and just look at Instagram stories of food accounts for 13 hours. It's an actual sickness. I don't question anymore why my brain is that way or why my physiological makeup likes that so much, but the thing about addicts is that you can have that feedback loop with anything, so I have to be mindful of that.

Any time I'm really, really stuck on that recursive thing of instant gratification and instant empty adoration, I have to check myself, because it makes me super sick. It makes all the tabs in the browser of my mind open. It makes every single browser have pinwheel of death.

As somebody who has a lot of issues with anxiety and social anxiety, being on Instagram—sometimes it'll set something off in me where I'll be like, "Why don't I talk to this person anymore? Did they never really like me?" It can be almost like a form of self-harm that looks innocent from the outside.

It's true. In *Emergency Contact* I even call social media self-harm, basically. It's so seductive, because it disguises itself as self-soothing at times. It's really unfortunate, because I love social media so much, and I love being able to be in contact with my friends. I swear to god, if there were filters for only seeing my friend's babies and dogs and cats, I would be really pumped. I really do love that aspect of it, and I really do like the lowered inhibition when it comes to talking to someone I might otherwise feel so anxious about, and just paying them a compliment that in that moment feels so sincere to me, that doesn't feel like a form of social consideration where you're just quid pro quoing.

I also really love discovering new work and getting excited about things that I've never seen before, seeing artists or illustrators do something that just tickles this very specific itch within me. That is so delightful.

You know, the horrible thing about being a creative person is that there is that period in which you have to promote what you do, and so sometimes I feel like I'm a bad citizen of social media where I'm like, saying all the things that I'm doing, or "please buy this," or "please click on this." While I do read/buy/click other people's things, I have to be so judicious about it. I feel stingy on social media, which kind of sucks, but I haven't figured out a way to reconcile that in my work just yet.

I totally understand.

Yeah, like what you were saying about that long tail of thinking about something, where it's funny, because it's not an interaction. It's just you thinking something. There's something about the way social media is set up where for anxious people, it's like, you just rue everything you've said or done or ever did or ever thought. That's what I mean when I talk about an addict's brain or a creative's brain. Those are the tabs that I just want to close.

I feel like the relationship with the two is that we are wavy people, so our brains are so random and peripatetic. Then, with addicts it's like, you just try to apply a thing to those feelings, and that's where everything goes disastrously pear-shaped. I'm trying to feel more with less, I guess.

You've spoken about being someone who prioritizes financial security in your career. Do you think that prioritizing financial security is always in conflict with doing creative work, or are there advantages?

I believe in a creative metabolism working in a way where I have ingestion periods. Then, I have gestation periods. Then, I have output periods. I feel like these three things are really, really important, and they work hand-in-hand, but they have to be discreet from one another. I'm not good at multitasking, and I'm certainly not good at consuming and ejecting at the same time. I know a lot of people are. I'm not saying it's unnatural, and I really admire people who can do it. I just can't.

I'm always going to be really pragmatic about finances because my parents are immigrants, and specifically they're Korean immigrants of a certain age who literally lived through famine, the Japanese occupation, my mother having a large family and going hungry—these things very, very much inform the way they brought me up. It's getting to be this almost stereotypical thing of, "Oh, isn't it weird how Asian people blah, blah, blah?" You know, this is truthful to my childhood, and so with that in mind, I'm always going to be so scared of being homeless, especially living in New York where you're like, "Oh, only tremendously privileged people get to live here."

With that in mind, I did make decisions where for one year I would just work, and I would allow myself to take smaller magazine articles that I could do without eating up a lot of bandwidth. It wasn't until I had a really, really solid nest egg by dint of a job at VICE, where I was the culture correspondent for the HBO nightly show. These hardcore salaries combined is what allows me to write full-time as a very, very new author. I just don't know how secure I would feel to take those risks if I didn't know for a fact that my rent was paid for at least a year.

That makes perfect sense.

Yeah, and the other thing, too, is the role of guilt and shame in creative pursuits. It's really, really easy to get caught up in this notion that your creativity will calcify and become irrevocably stymied if you spend time doing not-creative work in order to feather the nest or whatever truly pedestrian-sounding thing, to just go to a fucking corporate job and get money, you know what I mean?

It probably feels really different, living off your own money as compared to an advance.

I just can't imagine what it would feel like, being like, "This is the price tag that I put on your head, and this is what you have to do," and to do that before a thing even exists. I can't imagine how hard that would be. If any author is in the position where that is their truth, and they can still write excellent work, I admire that so much, because I do not know that I could do it.

Did you work in advertising for a little bit?

I have not worked in advertising. However, I have definitely written copy for freelance work for different clients. I am a completely unconscionable sellword. I will write pretty much what the fuck ever if I am in that sort of money-amassing phase. I have absolutely no shame in terms of what I will do for money.

The really great thing about writing is it's kind of like type O-negative. It's the universal donor. You can mold it to be fairly malleable to any job. The only job that I was too horrified to do was, I think, some literal deluxe apartment building somewhere, like some neighborhood-obliterating thing. They were like, "Hey, we want to make content. Can you cook up a magazine for us?"

I remember it being a lot of money, and I was just like, "You know what? I can't feel that gross for that sustained period of time." Also, like, fuck New York in the face.

Now that you've published your first book, is the way that you earn your living any different?

Yeah, it's really different. I cannot imagine a more rarefied position to be paid money for the work you feel most curious about. You know, I'm so scared all the time. I'm constantly bargaining with the universe that it not take away this thing, and if it does, I have to find some serenity and surrender. I'm writing my second book, and it's so hard.

Despite it being really hard, and despite it being inconceivable that I be paid money for it, I don't want to turn around and do like, 20 other things just for the money, or just for people hearing of me. There is, again, that whole built-in shame thing, where you're like, "Oh no, I'm not doing the work that people want from me," or "Oh no, I'm not doing the thing that people think is funniest or most creative or flashiest."

I get really envious of a lot of people who are doing excellent work in the spaces in which I have also worked, but books just take a long time. I need to have that grace to just let it take however long it takes. It just makes me too crazy and too fearful to put my book down for too long and focus on other things. I just don't want to jinx it. I'm like borderline fucking superstitious about it. I'm like, "Please, don't let them take it away."

It's a bit like being in love. It's so overwhelming, and you feel so lucky, but it's shot through with that fear of losing it. You know, it's so corny but it's exactly where I'm at with it. I don't even want to stare at it too hard for fear that it would change or just go away.

How do you avoid the urge to judge your writing as you're writing, or do you?

I do most of my writing in the winter, so I take a sabbatical for the month of February and I get out of New York, because it's too cold there. Again, this is a huge luxury, and I am so, so lucky that I am in a position to have that privilege. It's something that, at least for the last few years, has been very, very vital to me.

What I do in this period is I write a book, and so a lot of my actual first drafting happens in a very, very concentrated period. Then, for the entire rest of the year, I just fix it.

The really nice part of it is that, when you're first drafting, you don't judge it. It's really just gibberish, but the major plot points are there. I usually plot it with notecards and things like that before I sit down to do the work. Then, the work just comes, because I don't allow it to not come. I just work on it every single fucking day until a draft is done. Then, I put it down for a while and do other things, like magazine articles, and then I take it back up.

I go through it again. Then, I go through it again twice, and then I give it to someone else to read. Blessedly, the last two times I did that, my publishers, Simon & Schuster, were like, "Okay. Based on this, we shall extend another offer of a book deal to you."

Then, I just work on that draft. By then, I have a lot of guidance. After the next two drafts, then friends who don't usually read YA who are pretty quick readers will read it. The thing that I know wouldn't work for me is people reading parts of books. That would just fuck me up too much.

You've said that writing a novel was a longtime goal of yours. How does the urge to write change once you've accomplished a lifelong goal?

I really want to become a better writer. I feel like I am finally afforded the space, the respite, and the reprieve to invest time and resources around becoming a better writer. I never studied how to write in college. I never really took English courses beyond the truly rudimentary prerequisites that you need to get a bachelor of science. I am missing a lot. My parents don't speak English, so I don't have anything that was given to me in terms of literature in a language that is available for both of us. I speak really rudimentary Korean, and I read it, and I write it, but it's not anything that captures nuance.

I feel really self-conscious about it a lot of the time, but I think I just need to read more. Writing at this pace allows me to have more luxurious and more expansive ingestion periods, and be really unafraid to admit what I don't know. I really had a chip on my shoulder for not having written a book despite wanting to write a book my entire life. Now that I finally have that I'm like, "Okay, well these are authors who are far more lettered than me. I haven't read a lot. What should I read? How do I learn how to describe things the way you do?"

That sounds very sustainable to me.

This is such a luxury, and it's such a privilege. There are also decisions that I'm making in my life that direct me to that, like my decision not to have children.

I really want to qualify that by saying that I know people have [written books and had children], and do well, but I just can't imagine that I'd be able to. You know, everyone can @ me on that, and we can have a conversation about it, because I don't know what it feels like to sit in your head, but I only know what it feels like to sit in mine. I cannot imagine having to write books and also be a mom at the same time. I say that while acknowledging that I can't imagine a betrayal more cutting than any woman who's in the position of wanting kids and not being able to have them. It's not to say I'm not sad about it.

Most days I don't think about that as being zero-sum either. I'm not like, "I don't have kids, so I can work. The work better be worth it. If a book-baby isn't as fulfilling and gratifying as a baby-baby then, oh no, I've done it all wrong." I don't think about it in such stark terms. But you know, you do make certain practical decisions based on the type of work you want to pursue. That's just a reality like any other.

In an email after our interview, Mary H.K. Choi fleshed out her thoughts on motherhood.

I wanted to add that I also don't want to be a mom. I'd never wanted kids my entire life, but then as I got older that faith got a bit wobbly and I wasn't sure. Now I'm sure-ish again because it doesn't seem feasible for me financially, but also because being a mom looks hard. It's a Herculean effort that I see my friends crushing at, but I can't imagine part of my brain and heart becoming sentient and ambulatory like that. It's astonishing and something that makes me sad that I won't get to know about, but it's not solely the practical aspect of it that dissuades me. Even if I have lots of questions around parenting seeming like a default lifestyle for most adults.

Mary H.K. Choi Recommends:

Magnesium.

12-step meetings.

Ryuichi Sakamoto's score for Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence.

The wedding story ("Til Death do us Part") in the Argentine anthology Wild Tales, (Relatos Salvajes), as a general vibe.

Murder books by women (Karin Slaughter, Patricia Highsmith, Gillian Flynn, Megan Abbott) and if it's around the holidays cozy murder books by Canadian women (Louise Penny).

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Vocation

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