On learning about your own process through helping others

Author and writing professor Matt Bell discusses prioritizing your creative time, navigating the feeling of usefulness as an artist, the value of long-distance running, and the benefits of not spending an entire day writing.

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As told to Hurley Winkler, 3085 words.

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You had two new books come out last year: a novel called *Appleseed* as well as a novel revision guide called *Refuse to Be Done*. They are two very different projects, and I'm wondering how readers responded to each work as you promoted them at the same time. Did readers seem more interested in one book over the other?

Not everybody who reads *Refuse to Be Done* is doing it because they've ever read any of my fiction. A big difference in promotion that was interesting to me is that *Refuse to Be Done* has this direct applicability to the reader. The people who read it are trying to learn how to write a novel. Promoting an actual novel, that sort of urgency is less evident. Readers might ask, "Why is this the novel that I need to read right now?"

I really privilege the conversations I had around each book, which were obviously different. With *Appleseed*, we talked a lot about climate change, about some of the intellectual ideas about the book, things about manifest destiny and other topics that are interesting or fun. To be in conversation with someone who was thinking on top of that kind of work with me was enjoyable.

Events for *Refuse to Be Done* were more teacherly events. That book grew out of a lecture I'd been giving for 10 years, so it was sort of interesting to have that lecture go back out in that form. It's been interesting to watch both books find their audiences. I think both have done similarly well, though the Venn diagram of people who read both books is smaller than it might be if I'd come out with two novels in the same year.

Did you find that you enjoyed talking with audiences about one book over the other?

In some ways, the novel is the thing that means the most to me—my own words. You never know who's going to be interested in your novel. The conversations that happen around a novel aren't always the things you think as you're writing it. With *Refuse to Be Done*, I knew the questions people would ask because I've been teaching novel-writing for a long time.

If money wasn't a factor, do you feel like you would still be a writer who teaches? Or would you focus more on your own creative work?

I really like teaching. I get a lot out of teaching for my writing. I've been teaching for 15 years or so, and I often think, if all things were equal, if I didn't have to teach, I would still want to, but maybe I'd do it entirely on my own terms. The thing I would quit from academia is not teaching, but administrative meetings. I

love the teaching. And one of the things about being in a good MFA program is that every year, a new group of smart, interesting young writers moves to town and talks to me about writing. It's restorative and interesting. Even in the short time I've been teaching, I've observed that different eras of students have different concerns and different interests, and that's invigorating. There are certain things in my own writing that I would not have thought about if I hadn't been in these sorts of conversations.

Also, I was a reasonably poor undergrad student. I graduated undergrad in eight years at three schools. But I liked being on campus and I liked being part of the university life. I like that there are events and lectures and different things happening all the time. The university has given me access to lots of other people's ongoing thinking in a way that's great, especially as someone who doesn't live in New York City or Los Angeles or San Francisco. Phoenix is great on its own, but it's obviously a different cultural space.

Being a novelist doesn't always feel super useful, either, and being a teacher does—even if I'm teaching other people to be novelists, which is not useful! I totally believe that a life of making art is super useful, but it doesn't feel like it every day.

Since *Refuse to Be Done* was released, you seem to have taken on a beat as "the novel revision guy." Some folks have called you "a writer's writer." I'm wondering how you feel about a term like that.

Oh, I'm not going to argue with that. You can become an expert in something by deciding you are one, to some extent. You can publish a book on novel revision, and then people ask you questions about novel revision. That feels good. It's been great to see people find the book useful and to see people achieve things that they want to do through it. *Refuse to Be Done* has helped people I admire finish their novels, and I think that's just great. Anything I can do that makes things more achievable for other people seems fantastic.

I feel the same way about the craft books I love most. There are books that help me think about things or show me the way or clarify. And there are lots of ways to be in community with people, and one of the ways is the ways in which you're helpful or useful or adding something to your community. And it does feel like *Refuse to Be Done* achieves that in a way that's different than my own fiction does.

What you're saying about community is interesting, because you're one of the more extroverted writers I've met. I don't know if you identify as an extrovert, but you're certainly a lot more bubbly and outgoing than most writers.

[*laughs*] Sure, yeah.

And it makes me wonder, thinking back to when you first started writing, if you felt like you wanted to utilize that part of your personality as someone who also helps other writers, or if you were more focused on your own writing and teaching somehow found its way into that.

I like talking about writing. I know there are writers who are like, "That's, like, the worst thing." There's sort of a false modesty thing, and we live in a culture that considers the claim that you want to be an artist or that you care about art is somehow verboten—even among other writers, which doesn't make a lot of sense to me. You're in a room full of people who are all writing, and you have to pretend that you have no ambitions and you're not trying hard? That seems a little silly to me.

I'm enthusiastic, and I do think that's part of it. If writing was miserable, I wouldn't do it. If I didn't enjoy talking about this, I would talk about something else. I write because I think it's fun. It's an entertaining thing to do. It's an interesting problem to wrap my head around. Talking about those things is useful.

Plus, it's amazing how often just talking about what you're doing is helpful to other people. Some of it's just making the way the thing is done visible. I feel like the way creative writing used to be taught was like, there was a genius in the room and you just spent time around that genius, who didn't necessarily ever teach you anything directly or talk about how they did things. And that seems a little ridiculous to me. It seems like it

can be more direct. It doesn't diminish my process to share my process. In fact, talking about writing has made me a stronger writer.

Is there anything you find challenging about being open about your process with students and other writers?

There are two things that are hard to teach. The first is the stuff that you do most naturally, because you don't have to think about it. So then you go to teach that part of the process, and it's often very challenging to put it into language. The second is the stuff that's hard for you, that you can't talk about because you don't know how to do it yet.

There are things that I realize I teach poorly just because they're hard for me. For example, I don't think I'm the most natural dialogue-writer. I work hard at dialogue, but it doesn't come naturally to me. And when I first started teaching creative writing, I'd think, "Well, it's probably time for a dialogue lesson." But then I'd show good dialogue and ask my students, "Why is this Denis Johnson dialogue good?" I couldn't even explain it.

You said earlier that being a novelist doesn't always feel useful, but being a teacher does. How do you manage that feeling in terms of your approach to your own creative work?

When I'm writing long-form fiction, the book is mostly bad the entire time I'm working on it. The big satisfaction comes very, very late for me, but there's daily pleasure in surprising myself and playing with language and writing a sentence, trying to get seen and making a thing that is well-constructed, indulging in my weirdness. A huge part of the daily process for me is creating a space in which to think my own thoughts. That's incredibly gratifying.

A lot of the satisfaction from teaching is watching people take these sorts of leaps in their work, and it's fun to be around that. It's fun to be around their enthusiasm, to feel the kinship of a bunch of other people who are trying to do the same difficult thing. When I teach novel-writing, I teach it in a generative fashion. Students usually start from scratch and write forward together. The idea is that they go through the stages at the same time. They hit similar problems. For example, first chapters have similar issues when they're in a generative phase, and I have enough experience to lead students through those stages. But it also is good to be reminded, "This is what everybody's first draft looks like." Teaching keeps me from getting discouraged in my own work.

Speaking of students, I recently heard you speak on a panel with the writer Allegra Hyde.

Oh, she's so good.

She's *so* good! She's had marvelous success over the past couple of years, and she happens to be a former student of yours. I'm wondering how it feels to watch a former student achieve in that way.

It's always exciting to see students go on to succeed. The best students, of course, just keep getting better after grad school. I think it is reasonably hard to guess who those students will be, though I'm not surprised that Allegra turned out to be one of those people—she was publishing extraordinarily well as a grad student, and it was sort of obvious that she was on the path. I do think there is a sort of Venn diagram of ambition and drive and raw talent, and you just have to make that whole thing come together.

The early career's an exciting place. They're really more interesting at the beginning than they are in the middle! The middle is actually the hardest part. Most people who want to publish a book can eventually, as long as they have a certain baseline of talents and work at a certain level. I really do believe that. I think a lot of people have the talent to write a book, but I think fewer people have the long-term persistence to publish, like, five books, which is half marketplace stuff and half—well, they're hard. You finish a book and you're like, "Am I going to do this again?" I've had some of those checks in my own career, which has gone as well as I'd wanted it to, where I'm just not sure if I have it in me to do it again, because it is so much.

It interests me to hear you say that, because I notice that you tweet a lot about long-distance running. I saw a

tweet of yours a few months ago that was like, "Heading to the airport, just ran 20 miles," and I was like, "What?!" I would just never, ever do that. You're clearly someone who is really accustomed to endurance, and I'm curious how you became that way both on and off the page.

I'm hard to discourage, so maybe that's part of it. I don't know that I feel overwhelmingly confident, but I do believe that effort over time adds up. Every novel is just a certain amount of effort expressed over a certain amount of time. I didn't become a runner until my mid-thirties, but it does feel fairly similar in mindset to writing books.

I think the writing is the part you can control, and running is the same way. There's a book on ultra-running called *Relentless Forward Progress*, and that's all you have to do: continue to move forward at pace for a long time, and you can run any race. I think there's something similar in the writing light. It's not about who writes a book fast. It's not about who publishes first. You just continue forward in your practice over time. That seems to me to be the real goal in my own work.

What is your writing schedule like during the teaching semester? Are you the kind who packs in more writing time during the summer and winter breaks, or do you try to keep a fairly steady pace throughout the year?

It depends. Ideally, I write from breakfast to lunch, five days a week. Even during the semester, I do that a lot. I've been lucky to teach in the afternoons and evenings and do a lot of my other work there. And so I do, more often than not, have that time, though that doesn't mean it doesn't always get lost to catching up or something else.

When I'm drafting, I think I can only productively draft two or three hours a day anyway. That's the farthest I can see to the book. My brain gets sort of sloppy after that. I've had some experience at residencies and stuff where I can write really long days, but that requires all of the rest of life to be cleared out of the way. In the summer, I might do a little more, but not a lot. I just read more and things like that.

At the end of a draft, and certainly in deep revision, I work really long hours. That's the phase where I need to be able to see the whole book. In late-stage revision, I can work eight to 12 hours spread over different parts during the day, but only for a couple of weeks. That's the phase where I'm most like a writer in a movie. I look a little haggard. I'm not fun to talk to. I'm drinking and eating too much. I don't want to do that all the time.

Mostly it's a couple hours a day, and then I do everything else. That way, I don't spend the rest of my day going, "I wish I was writing." I don't resent being in the classroom. I don't resent being with my students or doing errands around the house or doing other things. I don't need all day to write, but I do need my time. And when I'm not getting that time, I feel pretty frustrated. But it doesn't have to be eight hours a day. And I don't even think that would be useful most of the time.

Aside from that privileging of creative time, what advice do you have for artists who help fellow artists? How can they keep their own projects afloat while helping others with their work?

I think you have to be sure that you're doing what you want to do, and you have to be willing to say no. One of my own guides for that is imagining when it comes time to do the thing that I'm being asked to do and asking myself, "Will I resent doing this? Would I rather be writing? Would I rather be doing something else?" I think I'm a little wiser about knowing which opportunities are okay to let somebody else do. It's easy to fill your life with service to other people, and I do a fair bit of that, but I try to do it in a way that helps me finish what I want to do.

That's always an ongoing balance, and I get it wrong, of course, all the time.

Matt Bell Recommends:

Privileging writing time. As often as possible, I try to do my own creative work before I move onto the work I do for other people.

Running. Running is a big part of my creative practice. I do a lot of thinking when I'm out in nature on the trail.

Simplifying scheduling. I meet with students a lot and love and prize that work, but I actually hate the "when are we going to meet" kind of correspondence. A couple years ago, I started making these Google Sheets sign-ups for the whole semester. I say, "Here are my office-hour slots and thesis-hour slots," and I just let students take them. It weirdly eliminates a lot of email that's irritating, and it also means that I know how much of that kind of work I'll have every week, and that makes it more manageable.

Hanging out with non-writers. It's nice to spend time with fellow creative writers, but some of my friends that are in adjacent but different fields are actually the people that I have the most productive conversations with. People who are doing similar work but not the same kind of work are actually the ones who help me learn the most about process or coming into new ideas.

A buffer zone. Transitions out of the creative space or out of even my teaching work help me get present. My wife has a normal eight-to-five job, and at five o'clock, if I'm working all day, I'll set a hard stop and do the dishes and make dinner. Being in the world in that physical way transitions me out of my brain. I find that it's not a burden to make dinner. It's a chance to be in the world again with other people.

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