

On seeing failure as necessary



Writer, editor, and teacher Aaron Burch discusses how he's learned to embrace his craft as a hobby and evolve from the little failures that lead to success.

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As told to Shelby Hinte, 2415 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Failure](#), [First attempts](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#).

You're a teacher and you've opened and run a couple of successful literary magazines, but you're also regularly publishing your own work. Can we hear a little bit about how you balance doing all those things?

It's a handful of things. One is I've been doing it for so long that it's just so embedded in my life. I don't know how to not. I don't know how to come home and just watch TV. I feel like I come home, and I work on something literary, and then that makes me seem really productive. I'll knock out a bunch of submissions and then people will sort of acknowledge the journal's going strong. And then some part of my brain is just like, "yeah, but I haven't written anything in two weeks."

I don't have a ton of other hobbies, so my hobby is doing it for the love of the thing. It's not really a career because I'm not getting paid for reading or running journals or writing, but it all kind of seems career. It's different enough from my day job that it seems like this separate hobby.

I started *Hobart* when I was 23. At that point I was figuring out what it meant to be a human, so working on *Hobart*, working on a journal, was just there from the get-go of what it meant to be a person.

I'm really curious about the career versus hobby element. Do you feel like that impacts the pressure you feel to produce?

I'm in this kind of weird position where I'm not a professor, I'm a lecturer, so I'm not tenure track. And for a long time, to some degree, I felt like that was hanging over my head. It's like at this age, with this much experience, I should probably be tenure track or whatever. And at some point in the last few years I just brushed that off. I don't feel like I always need to get bigger or have more. You're allowed to be happy at the level you're at. I really like the classes I teach and there's lots of aspects to being a professor and tenure track that I would love too.

But a part of being a lecturer is I get paid less. But part of getting paid less is I don't have to do committee work. I don't have to go to meetings and my job is not really tied to my creative output.

Writing for me has really been able to stay as this thing that I just love doing. A lot of writers think of this word hobby as kind of demeaning. It's like, "it's not my hobby, I'm a writer." A hobby is a thing you do for fun. And I write for fun. I embrace thinking of it as a hobby.

I love HAD. There's sort of this careerist or writerly despair that gets projected online around the act of writing and HAD feels like it's a reminder that it's okay to be silly and have fun and writing doesn't always have to be so serious. Was that intentional?

It was a little intentional in that that is always my belief about writing, but it was also accidental. That mentality of writing goes back to the beginnings of *Hobart*. What I always wanted to do from the beginning of starting *Hobart* was publish stories with writing as good as possible, but that also allows writers to have fun. My background wasn't really as an English major or writer. Some part of it was wanting to publish stories that my skateboarding friends who aren't big readers would enjoy. As a 23-year-old kind of broey writer dude, having my skater friends love a story that I published felt like more of a goal than getting a story in *Best American Short Stories*.

The genesis of *HAD* was when I was still doing *Hobart*, I started doing these pop-up submission windows. I just tweeted something like, "Look, I'm two drinks in. I'm going to pour a third. I want to read as many submissions and reply as fast as I can. I might make a decision after two sentences. If you're game for that, submit to me right now, and I'm going to reply to as many as I can, as fast as I can."

I got a decent chunk and read through them, and thought it was fun. And then I would just do that every now and then. A side effect of that was writers having to wonder what is going to grab my attention under these specific circumstances.

I don't think it was purposeful, but it became the site of weirder stuff than I would typically publish on *Hobart* just by nature.

How has being an editor shaped the way that you write and/or revise your own work?

It's hard to answer that a little bit because the two are so intertwined. I started *Hobart* and I started writing kind of at the same time. I really started *Hobart* because I wanted to build a website and I didn't really have any other kind of website in mind to build. So it became a lit journal, and I wasn't much of a writer yet, but I built a website and put my name on it under an about page and then a comma and then editor. And people were like, "Oh, this guy's an editor." And I was like, "Sure."

I feel like being an editor became a little bit of a roadblock to being a writer, because a big aspect of being a writer is writing a shitty first draft, and then you clean it up, and then you figure out what it's about. Some part of my editor brain would just block me because I knew all the kinds of stories that I would reject. Often a first draft is full of cliches. Instead of pushing past it, I would think, *I would reject this*, and then I would stop writing. I would hold myself against that high bar of the kind of story that I would fall in love with, and I would be like, "I'm not as good of a writer as the thing that I just accepted yesterday, so I guess maybe I should just be an editor because I can publish better writers than I can be myself."

How do you stay in a healthy place of being excited by other people's work and not maybe feeling insecure or comparing yourself to others?

Some of it is just getting older and maturing and figuring out what I can do that I think others can't. When I was younger, I could only see what other people could do and I couldn't.

I go through the world as this Labrador retriever who's had an obnoxiously happy upbringing and is generally pretty smiley about things. When I was younger, I thought I would be a more interesting person if I was more fucked up. How do you write interestingly about a really happy childhood? My parents loved me and supported me. It makes me a well-adjusted human, but it doesn't make for the greatest personal essay.

At some point, I figured out there is something there to interrogate and wrestle with and think through. One of my goals as a writer has been to explore how to be earnest without coming across as sentimental.

I've read a lot of your shorter work, and you know I teach your attachments essay pretty regularly, so I was excited to read your first novel, *Year of the Buffalo*. What was the experience like writing longer form?

There's lots of real joys and pleasures in writing something so longform. It's the day-to-day work of it and not

having to immediately come up with an ending. One of the struggles of writing is figuring out how to bring it to completion in a satisfying way. If you're mired in a novel and on page 112, you don't have to. You're like, "I don't know how this will end, but that's months or years away. I don't have to deal with that yet. I just have to deal with writing this scene well, and then figuring how to get from this scene to the next scene." You're kind of postponing that challenge of ending it. It's also really appealing to get buried in something and obsess over it a little. I think probably one of the common traits among writers is that we're obsessive about things. A novel lends itself to that because you get to live in this thing and keep thinking about it for months or years.

I guess the flip side is there's a real pleasure in finishing something, even completely extracted from the publishing aspect of writing. When you're in the middle of a novel, you don't ever get to feel like that unless you take breaks and work on shorter stuff. In terms of publishing, there's more immediate gratification with shorter pieces than a novel.

How do you sustain a project that potentially takes years?

I mean, at times, it's hard. Writing groups have been really, really sustaining and encouraging for me. I have a handful of writer friends who I trade work with, and sometimes I'll trade work that I'm in the middle of. There's pros and cons of sharing work too soon. But sometimes a couple of your writer friends can be like, "Oh, this is really great. I'm curious what will happen next?" And then you have to write what happens next.

As much as I love external validation, writing is getting to spend a little bit of time with things that I'm interested in. A big reason why the second half of *Buffalo* is a road trip novel is because I love road trips. So when I am sitting at the desk and maybe don't have any ability to go on a road trip in any foreseeable future, my characters can. There's a joy in getting to create the world of the novel that you want to live in a little bit.

How long did you work on *Buffalo* for?

Oh my God, I don't even know. I don't know how a normal person writes a novel or I don't know how a normal novel gets written. In grad school, I wrote a novel for my thesis, and it didn't totally work, but it taught me that I could write a novel. That was one of the benefits of grad school. I met with my thesis advisor between my second and third year, and I was like, "I'm pretty close to having a story collection of stuff that I've been writing for MFA workshops for two years. I could spend a year writing a couple new stories and just making this as tight as possible, or I have an idea for a novel, and I could try to write a novel." I expected her to say "do whatever you want," but she goes, "write the novel." So I did, and I think that was one of my best writing experiences.

I sent it around to some friends and to some other people. Most people were like, "there's aspects that are fun, but it doesn't really work." So then I scrapped it, probably spent some time writing stories and short shorts, and then started a new novel. I scavenged and rewrote and repurposed a bunch of material from the thesis. I spent, I don't know, three years writing this novel, maybe a year trying to get an agent.

Every agent turned it down. And then a couple years passed, and then Dan Hoyt, who started Buffalo Books, reached out to me. He was like, "I'm going to start a new press. I thought of you. I like your writing. I know at some point, you were working on a novel manuscript, whatever happened to that?" I was like, "I don't know, I threw it away, but you can read it if you want because nobody else is." And then he really liked it. We spent another year working on revisions. In a way, I wrote it in three years, but then in another way, it's like 10 years from start to publication.

How is failure important to your vision of success or to your writing practice?

Failure has often taught me that I can do something. Maybe it didn't work, but I could do it. The first year I applied for MFAs, I got uniformly rejected everywhere. And then I spent the next year just writing and thinking about writing and trying to become a better writer. I was like, "well, I guess if I got turned down by everyone, maybe I need to spend more time on my writing." I'd been spending a lot of time editing too. And I was like, "instead of just publishing stories that I love on *Hobart*, how do I write stories that I would want to publish? If they were written by someone else, what would make me want to accept them? How do I write a story that I as

the editor would accept?" That year, I figured out my voice in a way that I hadn't before. So similarly, that first novel not selling taught me that I could write a novel. In order to fail at something, you have to have done it or have tried to. I tried and I did it and I completed it.

I didn't realize that you started writing at the same time you started *Hobart*. What's it been like leaving and focusing on other things?

Weirdly, it felt less monumental than I thought it might. I did it for so long, and because it's so intertwined with myself as a writer, stepping away from it seemed like losing part of myself. There's a lot of things in our lives that when we give them up or when we move past them, we wonder who we are without that thing. In lots of ways, it's been positive. It's made me think of myself a lot more as a writer than just an editor.

Aaron Burch recommends:

Hot Rod

Dogwalker by Arther Bradford

Making art

A new tattoo

A good walk, run or bike ride

Name

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Vocation

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