

On giving your creative work the time it needs



Writer, teacher, and publisher Jennifer Lewis discusses being present, not being precious, getting better with age, and what you can learn from helping others.

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As told to Shelby Hinte, 2601 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Education](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

Your short story collection just came out, and you also run Red Light Lit which is both an event series for the community, and a small press. I know you also teach. How do you balance time for other projects? For instance, this novel that you have planned. What's a day or a week like in your life?

I try to balance promoting other writers or helping other writers and working for myself. I get a lot of the same energy I get when I'm in the writing zone, when I'm editing someone else's work, or when I'm promoting someone else's work that I believe in, so I definitely get something back from helping other authors. It's really easy for me to promote other people. And I enjoy doing it. There really isn't any formula to it, but each day I like to spend my time either editing student papers or promoting someone else's book or reading a draft of someone's work. Then spend a couple of hours a day on my own work.

I totally agree that there is so much energy that being part of community gives. And in some ways I feel like that's where I go when I need inspiration. But I also feel like sometimes, when I'm having a creative block with my own work, it's procrastination, or just a fear of returning to my work. How do you make sure you keep coming back?

I'm probably not doing this well. I hear you on the procrastination aspect of it. And so, sometimes you're dreading going back to your own work or reading it again. But I've been trying to make deadlines for myself.

I've realized how important other people's work is for me, but I'm trying to learn how to value my work and carve out time for myself. I just spent a week in Joshua Tree where I tried not to use my phone. I really blocked out everyone else's work. And for one week I just focused on my own work. I couldn't believe how much I got done.

Honestly, if I got my phone out of the way I would get so much more done. I think that my distractions are more like Instagram and being on my phone than other people's work because their work keeps me in the zone. When I'm editing someone else's work I can really see clearly what they're doing wrong or how they're not evoking emotion. But when it's my work, I'm like, "Oh, I can't tell," But I can learn from someone else and I come back to my work. It really balances out.

How do you stay level-headed or right-sized when you're editing your own work? I hear you saying that reading other people's work you can see clearly areas for suggestion, but how do you do that for yourself? How do you stay editorial while also being kind to yourself?

I feel like in some ways that's easy for me because I do think everyone's story is important. I really do just believe in self-expression. I have a genuine enthusiasm for other people's work that I think I've always had.

I'm studying craft all the time to teach a lesson to my class. This week we're talking about the "descriptive pause," and how to add tension with no action. As I'm teaching this lesson I can see the class's head exploding like, "Oh my god. That's an amazing trick or move." And then, I'm like, "Oh, yeah, let me go back to my chapter and find the tense place and create this descriptive pause." And then it's like, "Oh, this is fun, it's working here." I feel really lucky that it's all communicating with each other.

Yeah, of course. I know that on top of all the creative work you do, you're a mom, which is a big theme in your short story collection, *The New Low*. How do you balance your writing and editing with your other adult responsibilities?

Now my kids are older, but what I will say is that most of the collection was written in my car waiting on a soccer field. I got a lot of it written in these small increments of time. Most of my graduate school classes were at night to 7:00 or 9:00. And I'd come home and write until 1:00 in the morning, when everyone was asleep. So, for a very long time, I lived with little sleep. I needed that intellectual fill to become a better mother. A lot of motherhood was trying to be present for it because I knew my writing would always be there.

The moms you write about are not your typical mom characters. They're sneaking cigarettes and taking edibles in Palm Springs and having these existential identity crises about how to be a parent and a person. What was that process of writing into some of those more nuanced spaces of parenting?

That's it exactly. Compartmentalized motherhood. I do think we were all so many other things before becoming mothers. When a man becomes a dad, he continues to be all those things. There is a tone of resentment in the stories I tried to explore a little bit. I think there's been so much balance in the world because of conversations like this. And because of stories like this. I felt like there's a whole different batch of mothers. So here are these people [asking], "What is motherhood? Is motherhood just driving kids around? Motherhood has changed a lot? And is motherhood providing care and providing love? Does motherhood means staying home with your kids?" I don't really have any of the answers. But I'm just trying to show this variety of mothers and how in some ways everyone felt like they're failing because they're not this ideal mom.

An idea that kept coming up as I was reading your collection was the split-self. The character Amme comes to mind. She's this yogi, but then she's doing all these drugs and smoking. I think that's something a lot of people could probably relate to—this idea of trying to become more than one thing. What drew you to that particular topic?

I think a lot of it that I explore is contradictions. Can you be a yoga teacher and still smoke cigarettes? It's like the image you're projecting and the reality. I think a lot of the times where there's so much fragmentation is when there's this diverse image that you're protecting in reality. But can there be this whole self? Can we hold space for these two different things? Can you be a flawed mother without being absolutely torn apart? Is there a space for you to be imperfect and be a mother and trying to be an artist and trying to make money from your art because you have to live in the city?

One of the things that I hear a lot is this sense of imposter syndrome that comes with how one spends their emotional time versus all the unpaid or low paid labor that comes with a creative practice. How have you found balance between those two things?

When I became a mother, I think I was so present with it that when I was having conversations with people, I didn't necessarily have to talk about it all the time. I feel like there's so much work with motherhood that it becomes all-consuming. When I go out in the world I don't want to talk about those things. I want to keep some identity of myself as an artist, as a writer, and as a human. I was 28 when I had my daughter, but a lot of people I hung out with in the world weren't mothers yet. In fact, some of my friends are just starting to be mothers now.

When did you know that you really wanted to commit yourself to being a writer and to doing the work?

I always knew I wanted to write. I just loved reading. I love the craft of storytelling. And then, you have to go through this like, "Am I good at this?" kind of questioning. But I really did commit to writing every day. I think I did The Artist's Way writing pages for like five years in a row. I would write those three pages before I did anything else. A lot of that, for me was just organizing my thoughts. But I committed to it. Some of the stories in my collection I started 18 years ago. So, I've committed to writing for probably more than 20 years. Writing has always been a love of mine.

What was the moment where writing those stories shifted and they became a book? What was that shift like?

A lot of it was just studying collections and asking "What is a short story collection?" It's usually just what we can get away with. I think when I read Olive Kitteridge, and saw it had the recurring characters, I was hooked on that. The thing about a short story is you may love it, but at the end the characters are done. The 14 stories in my collection are standalone, but the characters come back and you get to see them again. I had a lot of fun and they arc like a novel in some ways.

What is your process like when you're writing a story?

I'm not an outline writer at all. I'm definitely more of a "seat of your pants" writer. I like finding out the story from within the story. For many of the stories in my collection I was like, "I want to do a craft move, I want to do a monologue." So, I practiced a monologue. For some others I wanted to write an omniscient narrator or I wanted to play around with point of view changes. I probably have my own process, but I'm definitely, not someone who has an outline and says, "This is where it's going to start. This is where it's going to end."

What is your revision process like?

I mean, there's a lot of play. I love dialogue, so much of it is asking when something becomes dialogue and when dialogue becomes summary. A lot of it for me will start with dialogue, going back and forth, and then coming back to the scene and then realizing 90% of that dialogue I did was unnecessary and not needed, and then scaling back the dialogue, and putting in more of the scene. How I revise is different for each story depending on what I'm trying to do with it.

A major theme that I saw in the book was around the relationship between youth and beauty and becoming. I think about this a lot with art where there's all these "best under 35" or whatever lists. What do you think that obsession with youth and productivity and blooming as early as possible is?

I think I'm just picking up on something like this cultural pressure. I've overheard conversations with people saying, "If I'm not published by 30 I'll kill myself." There is this pressure to make a great piece of art while you're still young and attractive enough for the book cover or whatever it is. I do feel there's a cultural pressure. I think in general people believe we lose our intelligence or our work decreases with age. I don't think any of those things are true. Those are false beliefs that have been pumped into our heads, maybe for women more so than others. There's this fear of irrelevance—that we're losing something. I guess in my mind, I feel quite the opposite. I feel I've become more empowered. I've become more whole. I've become more connected to myself and my work. I've carved out that time for myself. That's been a really great thing about getting older.

If you were getting a lot of that messaging, did you ever feel the pressure to publish by a certain age or finish something by a certain age? And what was your relationship with that messaging?

I do trust in divine timing of things. Even with the stories. I'm really happy they came out so much later, that I have this distance from them, and I can approach them differently. I don't know. I'm not in a huge rush. But with that said, talking about the novel, I also feel like, "Okay, I need to put a little bit of fire under my butt to keep myself accountable, keep myself on these deadlines." Because the novel is good and I want it to be out in the world. And it's fun having people engage in your work.

How do you get to that place of having a bit of pressure to stay accountable, but not so much it makes you crazy?

I've had a meditation practice for around five years. I've been doing that 20 minutes, twice a day situation. I think that helps me a lot. I am a big believer of not being precious with my words, of just writing a lot, because I know I'm going to write more. I try not to be attached to the result. Of course, I want it to be good. But I also know that there'll be another book after this book, and I'm constantly improving.

What are some of the ways that meditation has shown up for you in your writing?

I can give the example. I was in Joshua Tree working on my novel, and red-tailed hawk flew into the glass window, there were no stickers on the window, and it flew into the window where I was sitting typing. It just sounded like a brick, and it fell on the earth. I was looking for some metaphor of how this character felt and I was like, "Oh, we felt like a red-tailed hawk blindly hitting a glass window."

I guess I allow the story to come to me more. I try to be a vessel for the story. In a way, I never felt that writing was something I was doing. It's something I'm witnessing. If you're quiet, sounds are going to appear. You can use the sounds that you're hearing to put them into your work. A lot of it is just being present.

Jennifer Lewis Recommends:

I recommend **more live music and less screen time**. This April, I saw [Tomo Nakayama](#) at The Hotel Utah in San Francisco, [Lola Kirke](#) and [Pearl Charles](#) at Pappy & Harriet's, and [This Lonesome Paradise](#) and [Timber Timbre](#) at Giant Rock Meeting Room in Joshua Tree.

Reading poetry. Just one poem a day can inspire you to express a truth in a creative way. I recommend [Unearth \[The Flowers\]](#) by [Thea Matthews](#) and looking forward to reading [Vanishing Point](#) by [Kimberly Reyes](#).

Attend Open Mics. It's inspiring to see people's material in various states of development.

Support local artists. Buy one less drink and support a different artist each [Bandcamp Friday](#). Or buy a small painting from a local artist instead of a large-framed print from a corporate chain.

When in San Francisco, eat at [Puerto Alegre](#). It's a family-owned restaurant in the Mission district that has been open for 50-years. I've been going to it for over 20 years and it's still my favorite place.

Name

Jennifer Lewis

Vocation

writer, teacher, publisher

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