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As told to Janet Frishberg, 2372 words.

Tags: Writing, Mental health, Process.

On enjoying the time you spend not working

Writer Vanessa Chan discusses spending time purposefully, not being productive, and why joy matters.

We were talking about the things you do to relax when you're not writing, and you said television is very important for you in that realm.

People say that they love TV, but I watch *so much* TV, probably four hours a day, or more. I watch an immense amount of television. There are two genres that I chill out to, and one of them is a very good detective narrative. If you give me an unlikely crime busting, mystery-solving person or duo, I love that shit. I have some conflicts about it, because usually, detectives are connected to law enforcement and the world's realities don't reflect the clean way that crime is solved and mysteries are fixed in TV, but that's probably what I love about it, because everything is handled. There are boundaries between good and bad and everything's tied up, and I love it, which is the opposite of the way that I write. I don't tie anything up when I write. The work that I write ends quite open-endedly. So it's just foundationally different than what I write and what I believe in, but I love it. I watch that shit all the time.

Do you have a particular show that you like?

There was one that's set in Australia, *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*. She's supposed to be like a 1920s liberated woman called Miss Phryne Fisher and she solves mysteries. There were six seasons of this.

Then there's another show called *Grantchester*, which the writer Brandon Taylor also loves. I watched that show. There are so many seasons, and I watched all of it. It's about a vicar, and a country detective who work together to solve crime, and it's so stupid. I love it; it's ridiculous.

What do you love about it?

I like unlikely duos, because there's instantly built in conflict, but again, they solve crimes. They have backstories, but then every episode, some crime is solved or some mystery is handled, and it just feels very complete in a way, I think, that the world isn't. It's great. There's probably six seasons of those and I probably watched that in two weeks. I'm crazy.

People ask sometimes, "Would you ever consider writing for TV?" Never say never, but I worry that writing for TV might ruin not-great television for me. I love not-great television. I'm quite finicky about my literary tastes, it has to be well written. But TV? There is no standard.

Why do you think that's different?

Because I know less about it, maybe. You know how the most enthusiastic readers are young people on social media - that is because they're just impassioned about the story and they're not trying to emulate it in any way. They're not trying to be writers. I think, by the same token, I am just obsessed with TV, I'm obsessed with detective narratives. I'm also obsessed with period dramas about plucky English heroines. It's escapism. It's a world that I don't know. And it's solved. It's great.

So, how does this work for you? Are you controlled and regimented about it? Is it a reward, or is it throughout the day?

All the time. Over lunch, taking breaks in the middle, before bed. I also watch TV alone. Television is not social for me. I don't like being interrupted, I do not like to have it in the background. I have to focus on it, which is hilarious, because these are not the most complicated plots to follow. In fact, they are intentionally uncomplicated, but I like being immersed in the lack of complexity. I don't enjoy any company [laughs].

It's my meditation. This is how I clear my brain. I often turn my phone to do not disturb, too, if I'm really into my TV at the time.

It's a chance for you to just sit and be fully focused on this. You're not trying to do anything else or be productive.

Not at all. It's completely the opposite of productivity.

Do you have guilt around watching so much television, outside of sometimes not agreeing ideologically with the content?

I was recently in London for over two weeks and didn't really watch TV there, because I was staying in a hotel and I just had hotel channels, so nothing to watch. I definitely had more time. I'm sure that there are many more things that I could be doing, but I don't know if my brain would be as healthy, honestly. It's funny, because they don't worry about this anymore, but back when we were growing up, it was like, "Television will melt your brain. Television destroys your brain."

I think television sometimes is what keeps my brain tethered, because it gets me out of my own head, out of my own stories, and into someone else's world entirely.

When the writing and the narrative is bad, I'm like, "They could have done better with that," but I'm able to overlook that much more in a visual form than I can when it is written out, maybe because I am a writer. I'm more likely to abandon a book, but I'm willing to watch another four episodes of bad TV to see if they redeem themselves.

That's so generous. When did this start for you?

Probably it got more intense when I was still working in corporate, because it helped me turn off my brain. When I was younger, I didn't watch as much TV, but mostly because I think TV was different then. We would have one show and you'd watch it every week but it wasn't like you sat there and just endlessly watched hours of it. I like to think television is my endless scroll, the way that people think about social media. Except that I don't think it's a doom scroll, I think it's more fun than that.

In my teens, I watched a lot of spy narratives too. I loved Alias. *Covert Affairs*. All the pointlessly expensive female double agent shows that were shot on location for no reason at all. Every episode, they'd be in a different city, wearing a different bad wig, and it was great.

Did you ever have fantasies of doing that for your work when you got older?

No, I have no athleticism. But my novel has a spy at the center of it. I was writing my novel in the earliest part of 2020, and it was a bad time in New York. We were still spraying our groceries. We thought if you stepped outside, you would die. Also, my mom and my uncle died within two weeks of each other and I was stuck, I couldn't go anywhere. I felt like I had no agency, so I needed to give myself some agency, and I did it through a character. I wrote a main character, a spy, just to give myself something joyful.

Then it turned out to be the main engine of the whole novel, because the novel was about three sad children living through a war. There's a time and place for that, and it's very important that we are able to write sad stories. I just needed a bit more joy in that particular moment, so I wrote their mother and gave her a job, and she was a spy.

She heralded back to my love of spies, detectives, mysteries, and double agent stuff.

That makes so much sense. When you're watching, are you often feeling strong emotions? Do you cry? Do you laugh, or what's the state of your emotional world?

It actually depends. In some cases, I am fairly emotionally engaged. If I've been watching it for a while, I'm fairly emotional. I do get a little teary or laugh, because I'm very focused on it. Again, I don't have anyone there. I turn off all the lights and don't do anything else, so I'm almost in a movie theater. I don't even sit up, I lie down and I watch my show.

You have a whole ritual around it.

It's very ritualized.

It's interesting—I've heard a lot of people say the same thing—about how they feel like they could get more done if they didn't do whatever the thing is that they do to relax. But I've started to think, maybe not, because maybe our brains just need a certain amount of downtime each day.

Yes. I believe in hard work. I'm one of those people that tries to write every day or every other day. But also, I don't think we need to keep doing more, I think we just do what we can do. I think my brain, it's

done after a certain amount of words. Or back when I was in corporate, after a certain amount of emails. TV, essentially, it's a very intense hobby. I don't know, some people have beehives, or whatever engrossing thing that they do. Running? Not for me.

You do strength training though, right?

I do, but that is not a passion. That is purely for health reasons and I resent it all the time. It's not meditative. I do like the way that I feel stronger and all that, but it's not a passion, no.

I totally had a projection on you that you really enjoyed it, from Instagram.

I'm proud that I'm pretty fit now, but no. I don't like the outdoors, I don't like direct sunlight, and I really don't love exercise, but I will do it.

I do really like clothes, I love clothes, which is unlikely for a person who's...I'm a big person, I'm heavy. I love fashion.

What do you love about it?

It scratches the same interest as writing a sentence. Putting together a particularly becoming outfit just feels like fulfilling an equation the same way that writing a perfect, complex sentence does. When I put together textures or colors that may not work together. The body that I have doesn't always look traditionally great in everything, and it requires more work to think things up. It's like art to me, I enjoy it. Both writing and fashion would've felt inaccessible to a younger me who scribbled in the dark and was a fat kid.

Do you enjoy the process of shopping as well?

Only online, because I hate shopping in stores. It's very overwhelming. My brain is very linear, I like categories, I like lists, and I like filters. Also, a lot of fashion for bigger women is not available in the store, so we've all been trained to look for stuff online.

I enjoy style. I'm never going to be someone who's a stylist, to do it for influence, or anything like that, but I do like it when I put a nice outfit together, and take a little photo of myself.

I have noticed that you pay attention to how you dress, it seems like you're paying attention to the composition of the entire outfit, the look and color and how it all works together.

I think there's a pride associated with being a rumpled writer. There's an idea that the vanity of style and fashion is not something an intellectual bothers themselves with, which I think is nonsense. I think that's a very uniquely white masculine thing. They're like, "Ernest Hemingway was a rumpled alcoholic and look how well he did." Good for Ernest Hemingway, but it's not for me. I like clothes.

Totally. I also am very aesthetically-oriented with clothes, with jewelry. When I was in high school, I was obsessed with makeup. And there is such a strong thing within the literary world, that sees that as antithetical to-

Being intellectual.

Exactly. Going back to the television thing, I feel like a lot of people that I know have a lot more internal conflict about their ritualized, just-for-me trash or not-somehow-feeding-their-art thing. Why do you think you're free of that, or as free as you are?

I do not believe in feeling guilty about things that bring joy. As long as they're not illegal, or destructive to someone else, I don't see the need to feel guilty.

That's beautiful.

I have guilt about other things! I worry whether I'm spending enough time with my family or taking care of my friends. There are bigger things to be guilty about. I think that people think time is finite and you have to fill it with so many productive things, but I'm a great believer in joy. I just like to fill my time with things that I enjoy. I spent many years where my time was not my own and it was filled with stuff I didn't always enjoy. I would advocate for things where I did not care for the outcome, being a communications person at work. Now that my time belongs to me, I just want to fill it up with things I enjoy.

It's really quite a compelling idea.

Life is too short to just be productive all the time.

Vanessa Chan recommends:

Mangosteen. This is a Southeast Asian fruit and one of the truly best gifts for one's tastebuds.

The novels *Cinema Love* by Jiaming Tang and *The Ministry of Time* by Kaliane Bradley. Both are publishing the first week of May and both are exceptional in different ways. *Cinema Love* is about gay men in rural

China and the women who marry them, and *The Ministry of Time* is about a 21st century millennial and a 19th century polar explorer who fall in love because the British government has bureaucratized time travel.

Water. Hydration is important. Often when I start feeling really lethargic and exhausted, and think I'm dying, I realize I'm just dehydrated.

Damansara. I am currently in Malaysia so I'm getting my fill of Malaysian food, but if you need to scratch this craving (or try something new) while you are in San Francisco, Damansara is the restaurant for you, started by chef Tracy Goh.

Celine Dion. Everyone should have a Celine Dion power ballad on their musical rotation.

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