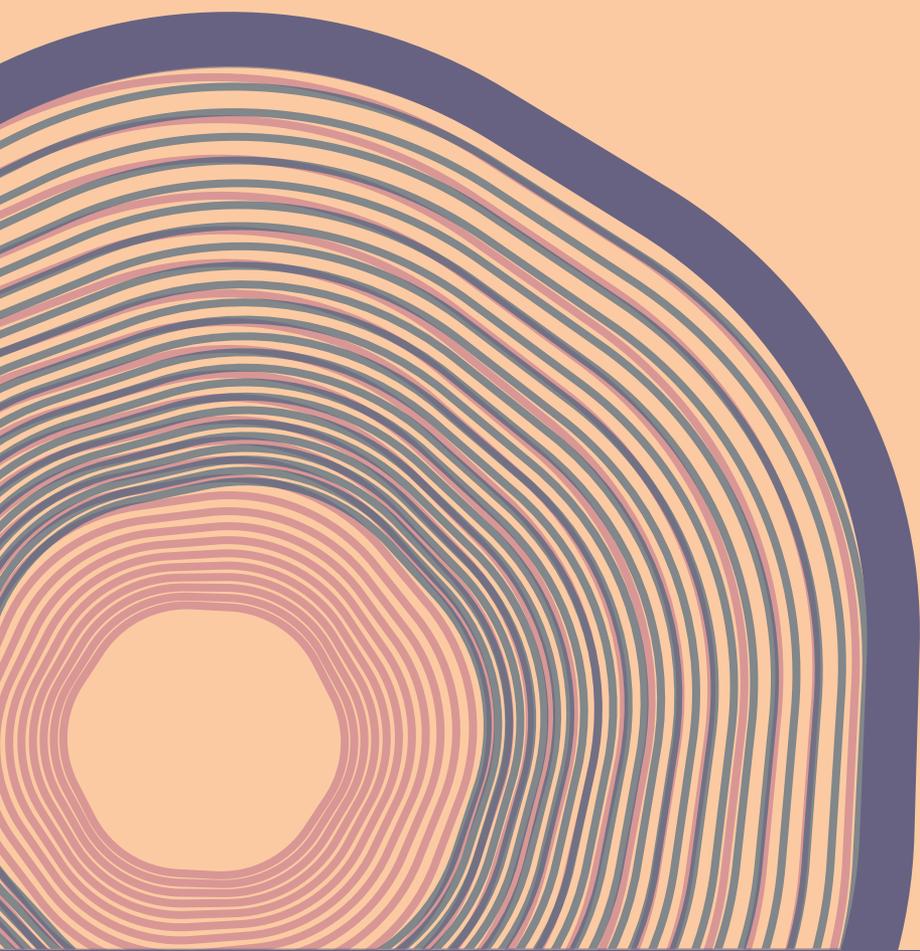


Craft Chaps

::how to write the book
while not writing the book::

By Wendy C. Ortiz



**how to write the book
while not writing
the book**

Wendy C. Ortiz

The origins of this essay are simple: every time I write something, I forget “how to write.”

Whenever this happens it’s not a surprise because I expect to not know what I’m doing a lot of the time. It is, however, disconcerting. As someone who has published books, I “should” know how to write one. I “should” be familiar with the process.

I never use “should” in my everyday language because it typically connotes a judgment. The last thing I need in my life is implied judgment, so let me try this again.

It is often expected that I know what I’m doing, and this essay will reveal that I often don’t know what I’m doing, and one may not need “to know what one is doing” in order to write the book one wants to write.

What about getting familiar, or grounded, in your own process first?

My process as I understand it looks like this: I walk around with several ideas in my head. While I am in what is known as “daily life” my brain is grappling with the ideas. Not 24/7 but then how do I know, how can I really quantify this? It does feel like, even in the background, my brain is trying to work its way around and into the ideas. “Ideas” can also be broken down, in my process, to mean “feelings,” “concepts,” or “stories”.

This process of mine can take *years*. It is not convenient. It does not satisfy the marketplace. It is pokey. It is a maze with several passages that lead out. But finally and maybe most real and most frustrating: it just is what it is.

I take notes in notebooks. I attempt several starts which I won’t call “false” starts. I will call them surveying the entry points.

What determines your amount of time for writing the book? In my case, there is no set time. My first book, from first draft to published, took 14 years. The text of my second and third books were written about a decade before being published, which meant that the final year before publishing they were being kneaded, remade, reconstituted, for publishing.

Which brings me to the place where I am now: writing a new book, whole cloth.

First, let’s talk about book proposals. I don’t want to talk about book

proposals. My first three books were small press books and did not require a book proposal. For the many who are curious about how those books came into formation, here's the encapsulated version:

1) *Excavation*: had an agent who could not sell it; wrote a brief lyrical essay that was published online and caught the eye of the future publisher of *Excavation*;

2) *Hollywood Notebook*: was supposed to be my first book, which came out of me looking at local presses and deciding I wanted to work with the press doing radical and unusual literary projects and approaching them;

3) *Bruja*: came about after being solicited by a small press with a good reputation for “innovative fiction.”

As you can see, a book proposal was not needed for these books. All three books were also mostly finished and would only require editing.

So, why a book proposal? My third, current, and most compatible agent convinced me that it would be ideal to be paid before the book is written. Which sounds great. But still means that a good portion of the book needs to be written in advance anyway—even if you strongly stray once the book is closer to being finished. This is what I'm told, anyway, by all the folks who I am friendly with whom have run the gauntlet of writing the book proposal before the book is sold.

In 2017, my agent and I agreed I would write a book proposal, then.

And from that point on . . . internal struggle. Along with thousands if not millions of others who have been having a difficult time writing/creating since 2016.

I've been in a state of grief, which is always dynamic, since 2014. If I was trapped in the amber of grief for some of that time, 2017 to present has been about slowly prying my way out of it. Grief, as I've learned, that non-linear, engulfing, confusing, and rich time, is very similar to the state of being on the precipice of a personal project that you know will sweep you in its undertow once you begin, that will require you to be stationary in unhappy places and turn around slowly to describe to others what this place is like to visit, and to live in. More on that later.

So. How does one begin writing the book?

You are invited to the process in progress.

contemplating all my not-writing

everything I fantasize writing about and then also feel like what's the point—
until I read work that feels fresh to me, that harnesses me into a seat and I can't
take my eyes off it, and I may even feel a charge or a *competitive* feeling, or a
feeling of wanting to reply but indirectly—

so here I sit with palo santo burning in hopes I can get closer, that the thing—
feeling? object? apparition?—between me and writing will move, dissolve, or
open

relighting the palo santo that always wants to be done burning up and letting
the candle just burn, the smoke moving skyward so the little tiny flame sustains
so much doubt. if my not-writing is composed of a material, it is a porous
shapeless doubt. can I still write. can I write better. can I write as well as I've
written before. while the other voice underneath says, *just write, it's the only
way to see what you have.*

blowing again at both flames and letting the smoke rise

the smoke is another kind of message

I send the message upward

sometimes I feel like my brain is too full with other people's stories—their
stories on social media, mixed with stories I read in books. I need a break.
I need to be more alone with my words. I need to reread.

a cat finds me in the office, after some wandering and crying,
is she a metaphor for me not-writing

which tarot card would I pull if I pulled one today (not-writing)
if I tell myself it will be an outstanding day, do I unconsciously start to make
it so? little tiny stitches I make that equal a full landscape—one corner sun, one
corner blue expanse

if I write, *This will be an outstanding day—*

if I tell myself, this will be an outstanding writing session, I notice my sense of
humor.

“an outstanding writing session”

I want an *outstanding* anything. I want the outcomes of everything to be *outstanding*.

I am sitting on the couch I just napped on; I have on one layer of houseclothes, one bathrobe, and a blanket covering me. A pillow is on my lap.

I am months behind¹ on my book proposal.

I keep certain books at eye level and take down two of them. They are two books I told myself to reread when I am ready to write.

I'm not sure how this works.

I see my reflection in the big screen tv and the hood of my sweatshirt makes me look strange. My side braid falls out onto my chest, over my heart. Before I napped. I began rereading one of the two books.² When I first read it, I thought, *I have had a relationship that could be written this way*. Then I kept the book at eye-level for months, maybe a year, so I could... absorb it every time I stood to work.

The blue light of the router sputters and the cat opens one eye when I move a pillow near her heavy sleeping body.

I am trying to investigate why I have fought so hard against writing the thing I am “supposed” to be writing. And if it all really boils down to the “supposed to be writing” is the killer of writing, I will be disappointed. Or more.

The cat next to me awakens and her eyes looking toward the sunlit windows become the most gorgeous things in the room. The other cat snores as though disputing my observation.

I must return to these books to see if they do carry guideposts or maps or some kind of looking device to help me with my book.

with every sip of water I wonder if it is helping me “come to”

“coming to”: an action of awakening

in that evocative post-nap state, my frequency feels clear, unblemished, but slowly with the arrival of thoughts and practicalities the frequency becomes spottier, crashes into sparkly static

today the writing is laughing at my past, my shit, how I cover my shit, how I walk from disaster to disaster

writing each “chapter” of the book as an urgent matter

the fury I felt, fueling me

writing exactly from the place of feeling deep injustice
the times I wanted blood, recognizing it in me now, and when it is absent
to not be removed from that feeling, to be in that place, utterly

when I believed so strongly in what I was doing I thought I had to burn down buildings to make my point

sitting in a craft talk with Samiya Bashir,³ I write down a list of my obsessions (which have been narrowed over the years, and which I will not judge one way or another right now)

I make a list of what “I am not allowed to write about”—what I have drawn circles of fire around to protect, and I will not even replicate that list, anywhere (it is, thankfully, brief)

we breathe, we listen, we note tickles, giggles, pangs

we feel

going through my notes I notice: the day when I was preparing for a meeting with my agent about the book (not being written), I had written down a small list

- 1) not good enough feelings
- 2) distrustful of the marketplace
- 3) angry and sad about the overall truths of the publishing industry

4) my own shit, like trying to keep my (health, relationship) life intact

5) fatigue

6) aging

that day (month, year) I sputtered out. I remembered being in Terry Wolverton's writing space,⁴ how it took some arranging to get there, but the nights I made it there...practices that got me to write. Against my own compulsion to not write.

My god, what does it take, I write in my notebook.

on good days I enjoy sharing with people (some peers, some students) that last year, I traded draft book proposals with an extremely talented writer and since then, she has sold her book.⁵

I return to the draft of my manuscript.

So: how is writing a book like coping with grief?

Maybe it's like grief in that some of the things that have helped with grief I've also found help me with the writing of the book (and the proposal).

When I'm in grief I've taught myself to forcefully find something new in the everyday things I look at. That might mean that when I walk in Griffith Park, which I've done for over 15 years so that its landscapes are a second home to me, I make myself see what I don't typically see. I bend my neck and look up at the lattice of tree leaves to note how they are different than the last time I looked up. I get up close to the flora I often don't notice or usually move swiftly past. There are always ant trails every few feet and I notice how we cross paths. The imprint of shoes and dog paws in the dust are ever-changing. When getting up close to leaves, I make myself touch them and notice their veins.

When I'm writing the book I forcefully find something new in the everyday things I look at. Recently this has also meant looking beyond where I usually look: making myself read books that might be outside of where I typically look. For a while, I lost myself in fiction purposely as a way to mitigate grief and take me out of my own head that is often preoccupied with nonfiction.

Some will say they are the same when approached this way: it's just writing. There's truth to this, just as there's truth, always, in fiction. And still I approach fiction and nonfiction differently in my head, maybe because each feel driven by different impulses.

I listen to other writers. One sunny morning I walked around the deep bowl of Kenneth Hahn Recreation Area listening to Ingrid Rojas Contreras talking with Brad Listi about her writing uniform and her writing practices with a dictionary or a tarot card deck.⁶ Because I loved her novel so much, I trust her and mark this practice as something to try and also to share with others.

I keep a notebook dedicated to the book I'm trying to write, so all the notes that arrive first as thoughts, memories, plucked phrases to consider, etc. will be in one place. Yes, I handwrite.

I address the list of my concerns that I had written in preparation for a meeting with my agent.⁷

1) not good enough feelings

Oh, those. What to do with those? Flesh them out, write them on little pieces of paper and then burn them in a metal bowl? Or take the little pieces of paper and arrange them around my seated body and write one sentence in opposition to each feeling? Whichever, but these too have to be extracted at least until there is only a bearable amount left inside.

2) distrustful of the marketplace

Yes, we all live under capitalism. There are machines in place that promote and undercut artists of all varieties. Have you found your fellow artists and creators and weirdos? I find that having my explicit network of writers, artists, people who make me question myself, etc. have helped me feel more grounded in what is a marketplace totally worthy of my distrust.

3) angry and sad about the overall truths of the publishing industry

Again, this is where I look to the people I know, the relationships created despite the industry that would naturally erode connections between writers. I have friendships that allow me to backchannel questions, rage, snark, etc. so I'm not just extracting that which might poison me and shooting it out all over the social media landscape (except for the times when I do, after I've thought through some basic questions about what my intentions are).

4) my own shit, like trying to keep my (health, relationship) life intact

5) fatigue

6) aging

Returning to the subject of grief: besides being a writer of memoir and nonfiction and essays, I'm also a therapist. One of the things I most regret about how I dealt with/didn't deal with my grief was not going to therapy

immediately after my father died.⁸ I say this only as encouragement to anyone who is suffering but is not considering therapy. It's like I "forgot."

Though this may not be absolutely true for every single person, it's reasonable to imagine that a good number of people's creative work could benefit from attending to their health, their relationships, their immediate real life. I personally have been finding that for me this means 10-20 minutes of meditation a day, near-daily stretching, breathwork, walking outdoors, and dedicated time spent in solitude are what make it possible for me to just live more easily in this world. Sometimes I resent that it takes all this extra time and energy to just feel "normal." And then I remember that this is where I'm at now, this is as temporary as any number of things I have experienced, and to just keep doing it if I want to maintain the current sense of relative ease.

in the space I have found, carved, created I write one sentence. then another. then another.

I return to the draft of my manuscript.

I return to the draft of my manuscript.

I return to the draft of my manuscript.

FOOTNOTES

¹ In truth, though, there was no hard deadline, and I may have made a mistake about this—would I have worked “better” with a deadline, which my agent offered, and certainly I can offer myself? Is it too late to make a deadline?

² *Ampersand Revisited* by Simeon Barry

³ Samiya Bashir lecture at Idyllwild Arts Writers Week, July 2019

⁴ Author Terry Wolverton runs Writers at Work, an ongoing workshop space in Los Angeles, since 1997. Many thanks to Terry and the Writers at Work community for their Meditate/Create Workshop, which is currently on hiatus.

⁵ thanks to Carina del Valle Schorske for sharing her book proposal with me, and for her continued truth about how, even when a book is sold, there is still the writing to be done.

⁶ OTHERPPL Podcast Episode 562

⁷ There was not a particular reason for me to meet in person with my agent, other than I genuinely enjoy getting a drink and talking with her in the backyard of my favorite bar. But it was important for me to get the list out of my body before it poisoned me.

⁸ Grief is a subtext to everything I've written since March 30th, 2014.

⁹ Sort of like how I “forgot” how to write a book.

OTHER RESOURCES & IDEAS

- When I find myself stuck I like to revisit Patricia Lockwood's 2018 lecture at Tin House's Winter Workshop "How Do We Write Now"
- If you use an e-reader and frequently look up words with its dictionary, it usually saves a list of those words. Look at the list. Write sentences with or without context using each of the words you looked up.
- Ask one person in your life to gently, lovingly check in with you on a weekly or monthly basis about the state of the book you're writing.

PROMPT

Take a routine that you're used to doing several times a week—this could be walking or driving to work, or grocery shopping, or making a meal. Take notes on what you notice, what you don't normally see when you're usually rote, going through the motions. You're noting the in-between things, the stuff you don't typically notice. If you don't usually look up, look up and note what's there. If you do this a few times with a routine, switch to hearing. Smelling. Using your fingers touch what you don't normally touch and give it a name, a feeling, in your notes.

After you have done this with several of your routines, alter one routine slightly. Notice the difference and give the smallest observations new names.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wendy C. Ortiz was born and raised in Los Angeles. She is the author of *Excavation: A Memoir* (Future Tense Books, 2014), *Hollywood Notebook* (Write Large Press, 2015), and the dreamoir *Bruja* (CCM, 2016). In 2016 *Bustle* named her one of “9 Women Writers Who Are Breaking New Nonfiction Territory.” Her work has been featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Rumpus*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and the National Book Critics Circle Small Press Spotlight blog. Her writing has appeared in such venues as *The New York Times*, *Joyland*, *StoryQuarterly*, and a year-long series appeared at *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*. Her “Urban Liminal” series of texts appear alongside signature graphic representations of the projects of Lorcan O’Herlihy Architects in the book *Amplified Urbanism* (2017). Wendy is a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles.

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