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NB: Welcome to this edition of the Being a Writer podcast—a podcast that explores writers’ creativity and resilience. This series is part of The Literary Consultancy’s new programme of support for writers that focuses on cultivating and safeguarding literary creativity. With a range of special guests, we explore what it means to be a writer today.

In this episode of the Being a Writer podcast, we sit down with award-winning author Rowan Hisayo Buchanan to discuss how to write, and finish, your first novel. Rowan, author of *Harmless Like You* and *Starling Days*, talks us through the early stage of the writing process, working through various barriers, like fatigue and writer’s block, and how to push your work over the finish line.

This episode was recorded at home on our laptops whilst observing social distancing during the COVID-19 lockdown.

NB [00:00:52]: Welcome to the Being a Writer podcast, Rowan, how are you?

RH [00:00:56]: I’m alright, thank you, how are you?

NB [00:00:59]: I’m very well, thanks. Thank you for joining us today. I know it’s been quite an uncertain six months, so it’s great that we’re getting this in, because I feel like it will be really helpful for a lot of writers, who have maybe used the last six months to actually work on their projects, with all the extra time. I think we’ll just go straight into it.

When we talk about writing a novel, I think it’s important to start at the beginning, with inspiration, or roots, rather. Where do you find inspiration for your work, and what do you recommend for writers in those early stages, where an idea, or the development of one, feels like catching lightning in a bottle?

RH [00:01:34]: I teach, and I know that not all writers think the same way. I’m going to talk about my process, [so] if you’re listening and you’re like that sounds nothing like my process, you’re welcome to try it and you’re welcome to say nope, that’s not me. For me, at least, it’s often when there’s a problem, or something, I can’t quite figure out that feels sticky. For example, in my first novel, it’s about a mother who leaves her child, and it’s about how and why that happens. And it was because I knew that my own mother wasn’t always happy, and sometimes deeply unhappy, when she was raising us. And there were times, when I was a child, when I thought maybe she should leave. I’m very grateful to her that she stayed, but I was thinking what does it mean to be a mother who leaves? Who feels love for her child and yet does that? What would it take? So, that sort of started me thinking and wondering, and then a character came into my head, and I [thought] that character feels right for that question, and then there was a novel.

My second novel, *Starling Days*, I kept hearing people say you have to love yourself before anyone can love you. And I thought, it’s very hard to love yourself if you’re the only one who cares about you. It felt like a statement that existed in a world where we devalued communities entirely, and didn’t have people to take care of them. And yet, at the same time, I had people I dearly, dearly love, who had gone through mental health crises where I’ve been on the other side, and I have known that it’s really hard to love someone, and to keep telling them that they’re valuable when they don’t see that. So, I was trying to think about it, and trying to figure it out, and it ended up being a novel where there’s one character going through a crisis and another character who’s trying to care for them, and it’s about their different visions of what’s happening. And I can’t tell you the answer to either of the two questions I had, but the novels were ways of playing them out and playing with them.

NB [00:03:32]: Okay, your methods were quite experimental for you, in exploring those topics, then?

RH [00:03:38]: Yes, and I would say whatever you’re writing about, whether you’re starting with a question or a character or a setting, for me I find it incredibly helpful just to write. If you write, and you say this is a first draft, or not even a first draft, this is like a pre-first draft, where you’re writing, and you’re just figuring what matters to you, what sentences fi, what world this is, I think you can think on the page. The book eventually becomes smarter than you are. George Saunders talks about the fact that the book is the sum of all of your best thoughts for the entire time you are writing it, so your book is going to be smarter and better than you on any individual day, and that is okay, you just need to keep putting the days in.

NB [00:04:23]: That’s amazing. So, I think what you’re trying to say is if you just keep giving at the time that it needs and you keep chipping away at it, it will come together.

RH [00:04:33]: Yeah, exactly.

NB [00:04:34]: So the most important thing is to just write?

RH [00:04:38]: Yeah.

NB [00:04:40]: So, if we’re talking about inspiration and we’re exploring those topics and trying to be experimental and just get something down and get those thoughts out, I think what I’m interested in, particularly with fiction, is what role does research play in forming the foundations of your work? Because, I think with non-fiction it’s certainly a lot easier to find things that might support your manuscript, but with fiction it might be a little bit trickier. Did you do any research, and, if so, did it play a key role in forming your novel?

RH [00:05:13]: Yes. I know writers who just research for a year before they begin writing, and I really respect that process. But, because I’m someone who figures things out by writing, I often don’t know what information it is that I need before I’ve started, and I begin to have questions. And I also think it’s very important to say that research is not just going to the library and reading history books. It can be, if you’re writing about the Stuarts you should probably read some books about the Stuarts. For me, for example, my first novel was mostly set in New York, 1960s, 1970s, and it was a place that my mother had grown up, and an era that my mother had grown up in, so some of my research was just talking to her about the time and about the place and saying wait, you’ve told me about that family story, the time when you had knee-high vinyl boots, was that the 70s or the 60s? There was that level of conversation, and then there was some stuff that almost just sounds to fun. It takes place over many years, and so we go into new places, and I’m quite a visual thinker, so I ended up looking up fashion magazines from the time, to sort of find out what people were wearing. And some of those details made it into the book, but some of those details just helped me imagine the book better, and more clearly. I also looked at archival photos of people who weren’t fashion models, who were just people on the street that street photographers had taken. There’s a scene where the character goes to Chinatown and it’s important for her that she goes there, and she’s thinking about various things, like what it means to be, she’s Japanese, so what it means that people look like her, but what it means that she can’t understand them, and the way that she’s seen by the people around her. And so, I was looking at photos, and I found this beautiful photo of a shop selling wigs on the street, and that detail did make it into the book, but I couldn’t have told you before I’d started looking at the photos, I definitely need a detail about what this one vendor was selling. So it can just be a fun, exploratory process, and so you do that as you write. In my more recent book, which is set in contemporary [London], I guess it’s pre-Covid, so not quite contemporary, but they go to Columbia Road flower market, and I’d been there before, but I found it useful, for me as a writer, to go back several times, and I even made audio recordings of the sounds there, to really help me feel immersed in the atmosphere for that scene that was really important for the book. Going somewhere, going to a place, maybe it’s even that place at the time of day that your character goes there, if that’s available to you. Obviously, if the book is on Mars, it’s less available. It’s sort of just finding different ways in, and you’re still researching at the time that you’re fact-checking. For example, my first book, at one point they ate penne, and I showed it to someone, and I said wait, no, there was penne in New York at that time, but not in a diner. That would be like a fancy Italian restaurant thing, even though now you might find it in a diner. And so I changed it to macaroni.

NB [00:08:43]: [Paying attention] to really small details that just pop up.

RH [00:08:45]: Yeah, and a year in advance, [I thought] I must look up all the pasta availability in different locations in New York. So, I think it’s okay to start not knowing everything about your era or your setting, as long as you view research as something you can keep doing throughout your process, and it’s fun, and exploratory.

NB [00:09:07]: And I think it sounds like it’s a very insightful and enriching process for you, as well as your work, because there’s also this idea that you don’t know what’s going to make it into the book and what’s not, but it’s still really great to just immerse yourself in the world that you’re writing.

RH [00:09:22]: Yeah, exactly. And, you know, [with] my second novel, I read so many books about William Morris, and books by William Morris, and he’s a small detail in my second book, but I could go on about William Morris’s marriage forever.

NB [00:09:38]: Now you know everything about William Morris.

RH [00:09:40]: But even if it’s only small in the book, it enriches my experience of the world. When I see William Morris… [it’s like] bumping into an old acquaintance.

NB [00:09:53]: Welcome to my TED talk about William Morris. I particularly love your tip about going to the places and visiting and actually just trying to find different avenues for the details, like recording the sounds and going at the time of day that your character would go. That’s amazing. So, once you’ve got, let’s just say, you’ve nailed a portion of your research, I think the next daunting task is putting pen to paper. It’s arguably one of the hardest parts of the process, but what would you recommend for knocking that wall down, particularly for a first novel, when it seems like such a big task?

RH [00:10:32]: I feel like there are two walls that people get: there’s the wall of starting it all, and to that I say, and I touched on this earlier because it’s something that I really believe, and it’s just start bad. Tell yourself this is not perfect, and maybe this is going to be the first chapter. Maybe it’s going to be the third chapter. Or maybe it’s not going to be in the book. But you’re figuring it out. And I know that maybe some people listening will be like no but I want to finish my novel in six months, and I say good for you, I hope you succeed, but for me, at least, it helps to say okay, this is just figuring it out. And then slowly, as it becomes better, there’ll be a point where you’re like oh wait, this writing is maybe going to make it in. or maybe you’ll write an amazing first page, because that’s just been brewing in you for 10 years, and it’s perfect. This also comes across in certain writers I encounter, where they’ve had the idea for the beginning forever, and they finally sit down and they write the beginning and it’s amazing, and then they’re like, oh hell, now what? You may have rough patches at different periods, but just think of it as going on a hike. Each step isn’t that big, and you might get lost, but eventually, you’ll get there. It’s all part of the process, and the bad writing is what helps you figure out the good writing. It’s not a failure, it’s a process of elimination, so try to put less pressure on yourself.

In terms of the second block, which is yeah, you’re perfectly happy, want to write the book but it’s just finding the time every week. I would say be realistic, if you are working three jobs and taking care of two children, then maybe, yes you can still write a book, but you should think about how much time you actually have; think okay, maybe I’m only going to have 15 minutes a week, and that really is all you have because that’s your life, and you can’t beat yourself up and compare yourself to some writer who has no responsibilities at all. And, at the end of it, if you have an amazing book, the writer Reese Kwon, who wrote an amazing book called *The Incendiaries*, that’s been amazingly successful, I think it took her nine or ten years. okay, people don’t read that book and go, that took her a long time. Be realistic, because if you set yourself up to fail then you’re going to feel worse and worse and worse about the writing process. Have a realistic idea about what you can do, that really is possible for you. Then, try to put it in your schedule, and if you sit down and there are really no ideas, there are some writers who say you can’t get up, you have to stare at the blank page. I’m slightly gentler, I try to say, you don’t have to stare at the blank page, but if you’ve scheduled half-an-hour for writing, an hour for writing, two hours for writing, whatever made sense for you, say okay, but I really have no ideas, so maybe I’ll go do some research. Maybe I’ll read around something that may give me ideas for my next session. And research could even be [saying to yourself], maybe I’ll just re-read a book I think is really great, in terms of style, and I just want to think about the style in which that writer works, and have that be inspiring, and feel that that’s success, because you have succeeded. You have committed time to it. You have focused on it. You have been thinking about the various aspects of it. And if you do that regularly, you’ll find yourself having ideas in the shower, or walking the dog, or doing your other jobs. Because you’re thinking about it, your subconscious will work on it. It’s just having that moment where you go and touch the work and you commit that time, if that’s something you’re able to do.

NB [00:14:31]: I think that’s an absolutely brilliant point. That it’s something that will, whether you realise it or not, it’s something that will start ticking along in the background, whether you’re actively working on it or not. You could be doing other things and they’ll still enrich your writing process. So would you advise, then, that maybe people shouldn’t be so, I know some writers are very strict with themselves, and, going back to your point of [having] to have this done in six months, do you think it’s better to perhaps take a softer approach just so there isn’t as much pressure on you, and perhaps the process comes a little more naturally?

RH [00:15:08]: I think it’s best to know yourself. I know that sounds harsh, but there are writers who are really successful, who wrote really good books, who work to really particular, very tight and very strict deadlines, and that really helps them. And I’ve also seen people be totally destroyed by trying to make themselves that kind of writer. I think if you’re a new writer, you’re just starting out and this is your first book, it’s worth playing around with what works for you. Commit to doing a particular style per month. Rather than saying I have to write my whole book in six months, which A. may be impossible, B. an emergency may occur, and then you’ll start feeling like oh no, what was I doing. Maybe say, I’m going to write 5,000 words this week. If that really works for you and you feel really great about doing that, you can keep committing to do that. If you’re someone who says okay, I’m going to spend half-an-hour writing every morning, and maybe sometimes writing is changing a sentence and sometimes writing is [changing] a page, but that’s the progress that you feel works for you, saying it’s not the word count that bothers me, it’s just making sure I have a rhythm and routine, which, to be honest, is more the sort of writer that I am. Sometimes I’m fast and sometimes slow. And the slow periods feed the fast periods. But I just have to touch the work. And there are writers who subscribe to that. Lynda Barry, who is an artist and a writer, has a theory that or every day you don’t look at your work, it’ll take another day to get back into doing it. She very much advocates trying to, at least, to look at your work every day. But, Jenny Zhang, who wrote a short story collection called *Sour Heart*, talks about how she binges. How she’ll have some periods of her life just writing and writing and writing and doing nothing else. And getting out all of these words. And then, other times when she’s not doing any writing at all, and she’s living and being a human and doing other things, and that she needs to switch between the two of them. So, I think it’s worth figuring out your style, because I think it’s very dangerous to say this is the one way to be a writer. I don’t think there is one way to be a writer. But there, sometimes, is one way for you to be a writer.

NB [00:17:29]: So it’s knowing yourself and your approach and managing your expectations according to that, really?

RH [00:17:26]: Yeah, and if you don’t like the one you currently have, borrow somebody else’s for a week or a month. See if it fits.

NB [00:17:43]: I think the thing I love most about writing, is how fluid it is, and, like you said there are times when it’ll flow and times when it doesn’t, but I think, throughout the whole things, you’re still learning a lot about yourself and your style of writing and what you’re putting down on paper as well.

RH [00:17:59]: Yeah, and I think any attempt to make it more industrial can interrupt that flow. I also think that it’s not that profitable to be a writer. If you’re like, I hate writing and I hate sitting down every day and I hate all these goals that I’ve set for myself, I would say, okay, why are you doing it? And if you think well, because I’ve always loved writing, then try to think about the conditions in which you’ve loved it, and maybe it’ll take you a very, very long time to write that book, and you’ll be doing other things that bring you money and profit more effectively. Because, if you’re sitting down every day, yes there will be moments when you don’t feel like it, and you push through and you’re pleased. And that’s great. I think there’s a difference between pushing through something to get to a good place and knowing that works for you, and just having decided that you have a goal and that you have to be published by age, I knew someone who really felt she had to be published by age 27, or she was a complete and utter failure. I think that is soul destroying, because it then puts you in a position where you begin to hate the writing process and it begins to be something where it’s always telling you oh no, you’re not good enough and you’re not fast enough. There are so many other jobs in this world where they will tell you you’re not good enough and not fast enough, so try to find the things that made you excited about writing.

NB [00:19:35]: I think that’s a brilliant point. Attention and knowing why you do what you do, and just bearing that in mind throughout, is a great way to just keep yourself afloat during what can be a very daunting process while you’re doing it. So, the process of writing, I think we spoke briefly about this before, it isn’t always linear, and it doesn’t always follow a formula with a beginning, middle and end. Do you remember what you started with, with your first novel?

RH [00:20:06]: Yes. So, and I guess in some ways this is an example of how writing can come out of crises, I had a pre-first novel, that I was writing because I was grad school and I was excited to have the time to write. And I plotted it all out, and I knew that there were certain secrets and they’d be revealed and everything else. And I just didn’t care about it. I loved writing, and I loved books, and I loved sentences, so I wanted to write a novel. But [with] this particular novel I always felt like I was colouring somebody else’s pictures by numbers. I think it probably helped, to begin to think what a novel structure looked like, but it wasn’t a book that I loved. Around that time, my mother had a health scare, in which she forgot where she was, what year it was, it wasn’t clear if she knew who her family members were. She was apparently very happy, but she was completely confused. She had been given some food and she kept asking who had given her the food and she’d be told it and she then wouldn’t remember. And I was terrified. I wasn’t in the same country as her, so I was just receiving reports of this from my brother and my father, feeling completely helpless, knowing that I shouldn’t bother them because they were trying to help her, and feeling completely lost. As I mentioned earlier, my mother hadn’t always been happy in my childhood, and so, suddenly, although I’d always known there was possibility, like it’s a possibility for a person to leave, and I was very grateful that she hadn’t left, suddenly I felt like she might be gone, and I just didn’t know who I was without her in my life. She was a very big part of me. And I didn’t write at all that day I wrote nothing. I cancelled everything I was supposed to do, and sat in a chair feeling very worried.

After that, after it turned out that it was something called transient global amnesia, which she recovered from entirely, I began to think about what was really important to me. what relationships were important to me. and though I am neither the son in the book, whose mother leaves, and nor is my mother the main character who leaves, although both the imaginary person and my mum grew up in New York in the same period, and it was grounded in my love for this person, they became separate people. But it came from this moment of thinking who are you without this person in your life? I think, for me, it is when something feels really urgent that a novel can come out of it. I think, a short story, it can just be playing, oh I’m curious what happens if I put this next to this, and that’s exciting in its own way. But for me to make it through a novel, to make it through 79,000 words, or whatever that book was, you need to really care about the material.

NB [00:23:44]: So it’s not necessarily just a formula, it’s just whatever feels urgent to you at the time, and inspires you to put pen to paper to begin with?

RH [00:23:55]: For me, it’s the not knowing, and the desperation, in some ways, to figure out what it means to be alive, what it means to be a person, what it means to have a particular relationship that brings me back to the page, because the page is where I figure those things out. And then, I think, afterwards you structure it and you think, the first chapter, a bit slow, if I cut these sections and move them somewhere else, will that be better? Or do we need this other information? It becomes more of an exercise in joinery, almost. I think it comes from urgency and then craft is applied to make it something readable.

NB [00:24:48]: and just bouncing of that question, do you remember the very first thing that you wrote?

RH [00:24:53]: In my life, as a human?

NB [00:24:57]: I think with your first novel?

RH [00:24:59]: Okay. I had this scene that is no longer in the book, where that character went to buy a pair of shoes and they didn’t come in her size. It was about a desire to be beautiful in a particular way, or to access a certain aesthetic world. That character is an artist, and she starts it as a teenager, almost trying to make herself into something before realising she doesn’t want to do that, for various reasons, and realising that she’s more into colours and textures and light than she is in transforming herself. But, in the beginning, she’s trying to transform herself into what she sees as beautiful. So there was this moment in the book, and it got cut because in some ways the book isn’t a book about clothes. It’s a book about transformation. And I felt that that was sort of slowing down what was important, for that character to have this whole shoe shopping scene. But it was how I began to figure out who she was, and so I don’t mind that I wrote it.

NB [00:26:30]: It’s really interesting that you say it didn’t make it to the final cut of the book, because I think a lot of writers struggle to part with those sections that, although they did serve a function during the process, they perhaps don’t have as much of a significant role in the story as they initially thought. What would you recommend for those feelings of, just, maybe you don’t want to cut [it] out but maybe it’s necessary, [and] it has to happen sometimes, and just keeping an open mind with regards to knowing that not everything you wrote is going to make it into the book?

RH [00:27:04]: I think tell yourself you’re going to write more books. That if something is not actually integral to the story but you really love that description, or there’s an idea that doesn’t really work with the other ideas in this book, but you think it’s a fundamentally good idea, or an interesting idea, put it aside. Make a special folder for it, or a special drawer of your desk, depending how digital or physical you are. And say oh, you can go back to it for inspiration. There was a short story, not a novel, that I wrote when I was 17, and I made it absolutely as good as I could as a 17-year-old, and it was probably my favourite story I wrote when I was that age. I might’ve been slightly older, 18 or 19, I cannot be sure. But, many years later I stumbled upon it, and I ended up rewriting it, and I kept some of the essential meat of the story, but I also realised things that were inessential, and that weren’t necessary. I changed the setting, and I changed the flavour, and it’s in an anthology now. And, you know, my young self would have been very pleased, and might’ve been impatient, like why can’t I make this the story it needs to be? But I wasn’t quite ready to do that with that story. And I think if you have something that you’re trying to cram into a book and it’s not quite working in that book, but you also can’t see how it’s going to work outside of that book, just remember you don’t have to lose it. You can keep it, and then maybe, in a few years, in a few months or even in a few weeks, you’ll be able to transform it, and make something different with it, because you’ll have the difference you’ll need. I think [that] there is no trash.

NB [00:29:17]: Only holding pens.

RH [00:29:20]: Yeah.

NB [00:29:21]: That’s a great tip to have and to let things just marinate and mature the way they need to, and to have that distance from them. You might actually end up appreciating it a lot more years down the line.

RH [00:29:38]: And equally, maybe you will never think about it again. And that’s fine. You’re giving yourself the option to go back to it or not. That’s okay too. But it’s not a hard a hard and fast decision of this moment.

NB [00:29:52]: But it’s important to mention that, at a time, that piece of writing did mean something to you, and that in itself makes it valuable. Like you said, there’s no such thing as trash, where writing is concerned.

So, moving on to our next question, which looks a bit more at structure when we’re writing: in terms of foundational writing blocks like character, setting, plot etc… where do you tend to begin, and why?

RH [00:30:18]: We’ve talked about having a problem, but I think that’s a very abstract thing hovers over me as I write. But I tend to begin with a character and an image, so it’ll almost be a movie still, but I won’t have any of the rest of the movie, I’ll just have this person looking at something, or in a particular place. And as I write I’ll figure out why they’re in that place, where they were before they were in that place, and where they’re going next. So, with my second book it was a woman standing on George Washington Bridge, with bleached hair and arms covered in flower tattoos, and I didn’t know why she was there exactly, but I had a sense that she wasn’t the happiest person in that moment. I didn’t know why she had those tattoos, the meaning behind them, and I was just writing and figuring it out, and I think story begins to emerge from there, for me, rather than it being screenplay bullet points, which I find, sometimes, very helpful, post-fact, once I’ve written everything, and I go ah, it’s a bit lumpy. Then, trying to think about all the traditional story structures, and how you would fit them or reshape it when there’s a problem, I think is helpful for me. But I find if I start with those, it becomes very stiff.

NB [00:31:46]: Okay, so it’s just keeping an open mind and not limiting yourself to one particular aspect of the story. Do you recommend just writing whatever flows at the time, whatever you feel could come out, just letting that happen?

RH [00:32:03]: Yes, I feel that I keep basically saying the same, and I apologise for being repetitive, and, you know, we were just saying there is no compost, but maybe I think everything is compost. You put it out, and you see what grows. I think that that’s, for me that’s how I start. And I do tend to start with character, because I think in terms of people, and how they think about the world, and their particular approaches. I’ll find other characters, and their contrasting desires or beliefs will create tension, or plot. If you’re listening to this and you’re like, I don’t start with a character, I start with the botanical landscape, please come on this podcast! I want to hear how to start with the botanical landscape. It’s not to say you have to start with character, but for me it is the most natural way.

NB [00:32:58]: So just go with what comes naturally to you? I feel like we’ve spoken a fair bit about kickstarting the process, and how to see ourselves through the beginning of writing, but from our Being a Writer surveys, we’ve actually learned that many writers find it difficult to finish their novel. It’s really easy to let the feeling of fatigue or writer’s block take over, [so] what do you recommend writers do when that happens, and has it ever happened to you?

RH [00:33:31]: Yes. I recommend two things: one is, I think it’s on YouTube, the writer Stacey D’Erasmo talking about writer’s block. She says it’s not writer’s block, it’s that, up until you have writer’s block, your conscious brain has known how to write this book, or how to write this idea. And then, the moment you have writer’s block is the moment you no longer know how to write this book, because you’ve never written this book before. You’ve never written a book like this before, and that can happen to you at any stage in your career, no matter how many books you’ve written. At that time, [Stacey] believes that you have to begin to trust your unconscious and allow it to continue working on the problem, and allow yourself to believe that you will find a way through. I find that a very reassuring, and useful, thing to think about. For those of us, and I include myself in this, who are like, yes, but I sometimes wish my unconscious brain was faster. Also, what if it’s just not concentrating on that? What if it’s just thinking about my lunch? I had a professor when I was younger called Sam Lipsyte, who would say, ‘Skip to the fun parts.’ That if you are writing a bit of your book that you find boring, and you don’t want to have to write it, skip to the next bit that you’re excited about. Skip to the bit that you want to write. He believes that the energy from that comes through, and that sometimes you don’t need to write, metaphorically, every step the character takes down the stairs. Sometimes it turns out that you can just [write], ‘Character walk[s] down the stairs,’ if you have these two really exciting things that happened at the door and on the landing, on the other sides. Often writers get stuck because they feel like they need to write things that they don’t find particularly interesting, but that they think just have to happen. If it’s that you’re bored with your project, skip to a bit of your project that you’re excited about or that you want to write. So I think that that can be useful. I have another friend who is a writer who believes you have to have your novel and your mistress—that’s not to say step outside your marriage—but it’s that you have to have your main project and another project that you’re working on on the side, that has everything that your main project doesn’t have. I often find, if I’m writing something in the present tense, or if I’m writing something in the past tense, I’m like ah, God I’m so bored of this tense, I wish I was writing something else in this other tense. Or if you were writing about teenagers and you love writing about teenagers and that’s why you’re writing a novel about teenagers but there’s a moment when you’re like oh but I really want to be able to talk about what it’s like to be in your 40s, then to have this side project, that you have no deadlines on, that you’re just doing for fun—and who knows maybe that’ll turn into a published novel. I know someone whose mistress novel got published and her main novel didn’t. that can happen. It’s to give yourself both permission to run away from your project, but you’re not running away to do something you’ll regret later. For me, I could very easily spend a lot of time anxiety scrolling on social media, but I will not feel good that I did that. I’d much rather say okay this project isn’t working, maybe I’ll play with a short story idea, or an essay idea I had. Or maybe I’ll do some art. Then, that’ll give me the energy to come back to my writing. And when you look back at that time, maybe it will have taken you twice as long to finish your novel, but maybe in that time you will have written two novels. Rather than feel dispirited, [it’s] to find the places where you do have energy, and put the energy there [into] making things you’re excited about. And maybe it’s just [that] your brain needed a break from that particular project, but the things you learn in your mistress project, you can then apply and will inspire you in your main project. Those are three pieces of advice I have found quite useful.

NB [00:37:57]: Allowing yourself to be creative through whichever avenue possible, really.

RH [00:38:02]: I tend to get writer’s block when I have time, and when I have energy. But when I have lots of other work on, or things going on in my personal life that are difficult, or there are lots of other pressures, then I can find myself being unable to do a lot of writing, so maybe I’ll, on a good day, have written three or four times as much as I’d write on one of those days. Or maybe I’ll sit down, and I [won’t] have any words, so I’ll do some reading instead. and it’s just because my brain is exhausted, and yelling at my brain for being exhausted is not going to help me.

NB [00:38:39]: No, of course not. Just acknowledging that you might need a break or that you might need to step away from it for a while is really important for writers to know.

RH [00:38:47]: Yes, and that’s also part of how you develop your work: figuring out what you need as a body and a brain, to have the circumstance sin which you can be excited and happy to write. And rather than viewing that as a failure, just taking it into account in your plan. Because I think too often what it is, is people [think their] first plan didn’t work. And rather than feeling able to adjust their plan, and taking into account new information, they go oh that didn’t work. And then, later, they say, yeah when I was 20, I tried to write a novel but life got in the way and then I didn’t and I feel a bit bad about that. [Instead], you can say when I was 20 I started writing this novel that I was really excited about, and now I’m going to finish it. Or now I’m not going to write that novel because that was a novel I wanted to write when I was 20, and now I’m 30 but I am going to take this one character or this one idea and I’m going to tell it in a different way. You have worked this whole time to become the person who can write this new book.

NB [00:39:45]: So, it’s just re-framing the way you look at the process, as well?

RH [00:39:50]: Yes. There are some people who do really well with negative reinforcement, but I think that most people do better, not with a blanket, telling themselves they’re great every day, because that starts to feel fake, but with true positive reinforcement, actually looking at the things that were going well, and acknowledging them in yourself and then figuring out how to replicate them and then praising yourself for the things you’re actually happy with. Which is different from hiding behind a poster of rainbows, which is, I think, what a lot of cynical writers, myself included at times, can feel like that is. But it’s not, it’s genuinely having a careful, analytical eye on your life and going oh, I was pleased with that piece of work I did at that time. These were the circumstances which could create that work. To what extent could I bring those circumstances back?

NB [00:40:41]: That actually leads really nicely onto our next question, which is what helps keep you going?

RH [00:40:46]: Well, number one, my partner tells me I am a horrible person when I am not writing. I just become very annoying. So I think there is maybe some part of me which has it as a need, and I don’t think I am unique in that. [If you have] a creative endeavour, then actually you do have a need to do it. To let it out in some way; being like it’s so great that I’ve written all this, being like oh this is how I survive as a human being, this writing is how I make the rest of my life possible. There is that. There is that aspect. But I think otherwise, it’s just trying to have internally-based rather than externally-based goals, and by that I mean it’s absolutely wonderful when someone wants to publish your novel, or give you a prize, or publish your short story, or post a photo of your work on Instagram. That’s an amazing feeling. Tell the writers who are alive whose work you love that you love it—it will make them so happy. But, if you have those things as goals, that can begin to be not very helpful, because you can’t really force those things to happen. But what you can do instead, [is say] this year, before Christmas, I want to write a short story I’m really happy with and submit it to five magazines. Whether you get it accepted or not is up to fate and chance and whoever else is submitting and everything else. But you will have done that. Or, to say I’m working on this novel, and I want to spend this month thinking about dialogue because I’m not so confident about dialogue. So in everything I read this month I’m going to read carefully and see how they put together dialogue and I’m going to try to apply that to my novel, and at the end of that month, you have had a success. It’s not a success that maybe anyone other than you can see, but you’ve achieved it, and I think that is hugely powerful in keeping you going.

NB [00:43:09]: Of course. So, going back to what you just said [about] praising yourself, I think just motivating yourself as well, [and] recognise that you’ve achieved something and that you’ve reached a target and achieved a goal, and that itself is worth celebrating. Whether the whole book is complete or not, I think celebrating the small things along the way certainly makes the process just that little bit easier.

RH [00:43:36]: Yes, I think that’s hugely helpful. And I think the other thing I would say that is hugely helpful, is to have friends, and I [don’t mean being] friends with famous writers. They can be completely unheard of. Or they can be potters who just love to read. Have people in your life who are excited and invested in your process, who you can talk about it with. You don’t have to, you know some people find it takes away the energy of there book to say what’s in it but just to think, I’m going to finish chapter five and I’m going to send it to my best friend. If you don’t have those people in your life, maybe try to find a writing group. Or find someone who maybe wasn’t your best friend, but you knew that your friend’s girlfriend’s friend was also trying to be a writer, and maybe [ask them to get] coffee sometime. If that is a good connection, maybe you can start trading chapters, and that can be very boosting, to have that community. One of my dearest writer friends, literally she just bought my book, and she read it and she liked it and she’s also a novelist, and she emailed me and said, ‘Hey do you want to have coffee in Homerton?’ And she one of the people I go to first if I’m having a writing crisis. So, you know, finding those people who support you is also really, really helpful.

NB [00:45:13]: Is there any particular hurdle you remember during your writing journey, at all, that kind of just stands out to you or really taught you something about yourself as a writer?

RH [00:45:25]: When I was in grad school, I was writing a lot of short stories about sad women who lived in the American suburbs. Now, I know for listeners, my accents a bit confusing. I grew up in the UK but my mother’s American, and from New York, as we talked about. And I am part British, part Chinese, part Japanese, and those things have sometimes been huge in my life, and sometimes been small. But I have certainly never been an aryan woman living in Connecticut, and, you know, I met a woman who lived in Connecticut, and I say Connecticut, it did sneak into my first novel, but to have that as the big focus of my writing, I think, subconsciously, and I hadn’t thought about this in a controlled way, but I [thought] well, books are about people in the American suburbs. And when I say people, there were many sad women, but also a lot of sad American men. And I don’t know [how I thought] that this, on some subconscious level, was what literature was about. And I do like some of those stories and some of those ideas. It’s not that I think those were terrible. But I had a friend on that programme who said, ‘It’s great, but why these people? Why are you writing about these people? And what is it that you feel more qualified than other people to write about? What is your special expertise? What are the things you know about?’ and I found that deeply helpful, because it’s different from saying only write what you know. It’s not saying that you can’t write about only American men in the suburbs, if that’s what you want to write and want to do and want to commit to researching and thinking about. [But] that helped me write a book about what it’s like to be Japanese and living in New York during a really famous period of history, which there were a lot of movies and books about, but there was no one story that resembles my mother’s stories. And it allowed me to write stories about mixed-race people, but it also, and I think that is important to talk about the identity parts, but it also made me realise that I wanted write about artists and people who are obsessed with colour. There are certain ideas about what is a writer, that I sort of sometimes think get communicated by not particularly good movies, [about] someone in the American suburbs or possible in a New York apartment, bashing away at a typewriter and smoking out the window. Great, but to say oh wait, what are the things I know about? What are the things I already feel I have something particular to say about, rather than conforming to a very unconsciously received idea about what a good book is? That’s not to say if you have an idea about what a good book is and it’s a particular structure and style, or you want to be Joycean and you say I want to write my Joycean novel. That’ great. That’s a deliberate choice. But it’s just really thinking about actually what interests you, actually what you want to write about, separate from some boring ideas, as shared by sad men on typewriters smoking, about what a good book might be.

NB [00:49:00]: So it’s not necessarily write what you know, but, I guess, write the thing that you feel somewhat passionate about, or that feels different to you, or that you could put your own spin on?

RH [00:49:13]: Some people say a version of that is write what only you know. I find that a bit strict, because I think some other people might have access to some of this information.

NB [00:49:26]: Thank you, Rowan. These are really brilliant points you’re making. But I think something that I’d like to round-off with, and we touched on it briefly before when we spoke about having friends and building a network, is are there any resources you’d recommend for writers who are working on their first ever major project? Or something they should surround themselves with to keep themselves going?

Rh [00:49:51]: Yes. So, I would say, there are, in terms of education or courses or classes, there are so many available now, and that fit very different lifestyles. Maybe for some people, they want to do an MA, and they have time and space to do it [and] it’s incredibly helpful. But there are also evening classes you can take, and online evening classes you can take, that may provide you with a feeling of, like once a week I sit down and I talk about books, and that’s really helpful. And maybe you’ll start emailing one other person on that course. And a lot of those aren’t too expensive or too back-breaking, in terms of what you would need to take part in them. I would say that’s helpful. I would also say that writers, it’s sort of in the name—they like to write. And as much as I think MAs are incredibly valuable, there is no piece of information that’s being passed on, secretly allowed in MAs that’s not available in a craft book somewhere. And you take those out of the library completely for free, or you can buy them from your local, independent bookshop, or order them to your local, independent bookshop for not too much money. And just have this other voice in your head, because writers can’t keep a secret. They’ll write it down and want to tell you about it. If you feel completely alone and the idea of making a writing friend just feels like too much, there is, at the very least, that. You can just read someone’s thoughts about it, and maybe that will inspire you and help you. It’s not too hard to find the good ones online. I quite like the Tin House craft books, because they’re broken down into essays, rather than being one grand vision. There’s also a book called the Sandra Scofield *Scene Book*, that talks about how you put together a scene, that I think is really good and I often recommend to people. So, there’s that, [and] obviously TLC is great, and they have, as anyone listening to this already knows, loads of interesting scholarships and outreach programmes, and maybe you can find something that fits you, if you’re [not] too intimidated.

NB [00:52:15]: Just shoot us an email.

RH [00:52:19]: Exactly. I think there are lots and lots of ways to do it, and there is not, in fact, one correct way.

NB [00:52:27]: No. It’s just figuring out what works for you and what you think would be most beneficial. Last certainly no least, do you have any words of encouragement for writers, who are maybe on their journey or just starting out?

RH [00:52:43]: Mostly I just want to say congratulations. I know that’s boring. You might feel like, well I haven’t done anything. I’ve been doing a lot of online teaching during the pandemic, and my students, a lot of them aren’t people who’ve been writing for ages, they are people who love stories and who love writing, but who have been doing other things, and who have been able to take this time, and if you haven’t, maybe that time will come later, but they’ve been able to take this current time to commit to their creativity, to commit to exploring the stories they want to write. And that is a incredible first step. There are so many people who might have interesting books but who are too scared to start writing. There’s any easy way of feeling like, well if I never write it, I’ll never have to know if it was good. And so, just sitting down and being like no, I’m going to write it, and maybe it’ll be good. Maybe it won’t, but then maybe I’ll write something else. That is an act of bravery, a small, private bravery.

NB [00:53:50]: I love that. Rowan, thank you so much for joining us on this podcast. It’s been absolutely wonderful having you. There are so many gems within this episode that I have found extremely helpful, and I’m sure our listeners will find helpful too. So, thank you for giving us your time, and for sharing so much with us today.

RH [00:54:07]: Thank you so much for having me on this podcast. I will have to listen to the other episodes, which, on my days of panic, could have something to reassure me.

NB [00:54:21]: Thank you so much, Rowan, take care.