

# The Writer vs The Distraction Machine

I am a creative by nature, a poet at heart and these are very uncreative times. Words by Kathryn Lyster.

Sure, we all ‘make things’, with our iPhones, snapping pics of smoothie bowls, making a video tutorial of eyebrow hacks, we take photos of our newly organised all-linen bedrooms, but the time, space and mental freedom it takes to engage in a deep creative practice has well and truly flown the nest. We are wifi-ed to the hilt, emailed up to our eyeballs and drowning in a soup of screens.

Before Instagram was a thing, during one golden summer, I wrote 70,000 words that would become my debut novel in a few short months. Living in Wilson’s Creek, NSW without mobile phone internet or signal allowed me to float in a fizzing nebulous of ideas and inspiration. Sunrise at my fingertips, jungle in my veins, I have never been happier, I felt connected to something more than myself, like my book was talking to me and I was crystal clear and quiet enough to hear it. I swear the small empty room where I wrote glowed while I was hammering away at an old laptop hour after hour, day after day. That novel is done and dusted, available only on kindle these days, not a recommended read, but still, I cannot believe I wrote it because I can’t write a paragraph these days without checking my phone, or browsing for something I suddenly remembered, or scrolling through photos of my own cat who is nearly always sitting next to me when I sit down to write. IRL.

In this time of media overload, tech tsunamis and a laptop lifestyle that reveals more about my Scandi-Noir addiction than my literary accomplishments, some days I feel that it is impossible to be a writer in 2022. I am simply too distracted for deep thoughts, forget about the possibility of original ideas.

A lot of this comes down to self-discipline and commitment to the work, I know that. I have been alive for 38 years and identifying as an artist for at least half of them. I know that if you are giving your attention to anything that is not your art, there is no one else to blame but yourself and realistically, if you can’t ‘find the time’ to create, it’s because you are giving your time to other things that may/may not be as important as your art. These are ‘unprecedented times’, so unprecedented we never want to hear that pandemic-themed word again. But they are. And either you write about the world around you or you disappear into your imagination and create a new one. Both take time, energy and focus. Both take you rising up out of the ashes of your personal life or society-at-large to say something about something. That’s what writing is – saying something about something and in recent years – a lot of us have felt our mouths drop to the floor, but no sound is coming out.

Since the 2019 summer bushfires in Australia, it feels like the world has gone to hell. We’ve had catastrophe after calamity, on these lands and all around the world. Everywhere. Floods, fires, plagues and if being an artist involves reflecting the times we find ourselves in,

who among us is strong enough? Have I been trying to disappear from myself, the catastrophe of the world and my art? You betcha. It takes a lot of mental energy and resilience to make anything, in the face of so much awfulness. But we must all press on.

My cousin, Rosa, who is a more brilliant writer than I, wrote an essay about a picture of a raccoon stealing a jar of peanut butter and in her words, ‘pressing the fuck on’. I think about it every time I am too tired to write, too sad to think about world events or just too numb from a job in (cough) MARKETING. Press the fuck on girl.

I have spent three years blaming my full-time job for the second novel that has not yet been written. It’s the first time I have worked like this, trapped with no way out, living now in Sydney with exorbitant rent and a lockdown induced online shopping habit that just won’t quit. I bought Tommy Hilfiger like my life depended on it and I cannot explain why. When a Tinder date lasted all weekend, I was asked over breakfast, ‘What’s going on here? Are you repped by Tommy Hilfiger or something?’ Not because I look like someone who belongs to a brand, just because over three days he had seen my socks, leggings, undies, caps, t-shirts all with the red white and blue logo and it was a fair question to ask. So, I have been working harder than I’ve ever worked and spending every cent I made on shitty online purchases. Against my minimalist sustainability values. I have shopped myself to creative death, but the Machine made me do it.

In the evenings during a pandemic, I should have used all that alone time and WFH vibes to scratch away at my novel by candlelight instead of scrolling The Iconic; I wish I had created something iconic, the irony irks me. It’s a dark place to be when you like to think you are a rather deep person, but you become entirely focused on superficial things. When your time goes to shopping sales, chasing orders, sending back unwanted jumpers to the post office, tracking deliveries and couriers who don’t want to drop off your things at the top of 100 steep stone steps. All of this, is against type. I remember in my twenties, being so wrapped up in what I was writing I didn’t shower for three days, I was glued to my desk. Meeting a friend at the library, of all old-fashioned things, we hugged and a pair of balled up undies fell out of the leg of my jeans. That’s how consumed I was in the other world, the ether of creativity and the story that had captured my attention.

This speaks to the archetype of the artist so lit up with their work, that the living world fades, reality becomes less real in the face of the art that is emerging. Painters in paint-splattered clothes, writers with pencils sticking out of ratty buns. One of my favourite books, *High Tide in Tuscon* by Barbara Kingsolver is a memoir to end all writerly memoirs. Living in the high desert, she talks about the writing life in the best way. She describes being a women writer of note in the 90s in her all-black ensem-

ble, she wasn’t concerned with fashion. In my mind, it’s because she was creating something that would become fashionable: *The Poisonwood Bible*. A literary tome. This makes me want to cry. Also, it makes me wonder if Barbara would have been able to write like that in 2022, would the bible be poison if she’d had a smart phone? In the face of all this hypothesis, this remains true: I bought enough Sandro blazers to fill a walk-in, imagining myself wearing them to book launches, but if I added up the hours I spent browsing online stores, consumed with consuming, I would have my novel by now. Ready to print.

This addiction is against all of my values and yet I cannot stop. Even though I know there is a global marketing monster behind all of this, designed to make a relatively free and intelligent person into a slave like this ... But still – I SHOULD BE STRONGER. So bingeing on fashion, sometimes fast – sorry to everyone and the earth and all the women who made this shitty t-shirt I bought on sale, I feel deeply ashamed. In an attempt to stop the cycle, I handwrote a quote from *My Favourite Murder*, my favourite podcast, pinned to my wall that goes like this: “Do not let the patriarchy sell you trash made from the bones of a dying earth”. It didn’t work. I just bought some velvet cushions, to soothe my feelings and also to make me forget that I haven’t written anything creative in months.

This brings me to my next bingeing addiction – podcasts. Being a writer requires a relative level of daydreaming, silence, swimming in the inky space between words and thoughts and imagination. It requires that you sit alone in silence for hours on end. Unlike other types of art creation, writing is not about movement of the body, it is not a performance, writers rarely write in shared studio spaces like visual artists, there is nothing collaborative about the process while they are writing. Even the medium is sparse – it is small letters on a blank page, no colour, no pizzazz, the meaning, the brilliance is non-visual, it is about making tiny letters dance. And if you are dancing yourself, it just doesn’t work, not in the traditional sense anyway. Inspiration can come from anywhere, but so many writers talk about how it comes when they are on long walks or other solitary pursuits. Murakami wrote a whole book about how running is the most important anchor to his life as a writer and we’re talking long hard slog runs, marathon kind of runs. So what happens if you fill the quiet space where words live with noise? I listen to podcasts at least six hours a day. When I’m driving, doing laundry, out on a walk, at the beach – all of this previous ‘daydreaming’ time is now filled with words, other people’s stories, voices imprinting on my brain. I don’t hear the waves with my morning coffee, I am listening to a story and I am convinced this impedes my ability to hear my own story.

In 2017 after a savage breakup, I began to experience panic attacks on the regular and podcasts were a very quick fix. They numbed my overactive mind and spiral-

ling thoughts, seemed to level me out, grabbing the reigns from the existential crisis I’ve been having since I was seven (yes, diagnosed by a child psychiatrist) so really, over-thinking is in my DNA. Podcasts made the white noise disappear, but the white noise was what I wrote about. So what now? I’ll tell you – without silence, gaps in time, space for my mind to expand and fill out, all of the creative work that happens before the actual writing (a.k.a the other side of the creative process) dried up. I can no longer write for eight hours a day. I also no longer have panic attacks, but is the trade-off worth it?

This assessment of my bingeing demons is not complete without the biggest of them all – streaming entertainment until my eyes bleed. Netflix, Stan, AppleTV, Binge, BritBox (there are too many), have stolen years of art-making. They are the primary reason I am a writer with one novel under her belt, not thirteen. Or even three. I recently found three half-finished novels that I had kind of forgotten I’d written. They’re like failed relationships, shoved in a drawer, filled with dreams and promise and a distinct smell.

Living alone, working in marketing in the beauty industry during the days and then turning on the blue-haze glow of Netflix until I drift off is me not living my best life. I know this. But it’s like eating too much sugar, it’s so easy, it’s just there, and I can binge nine episodes of a subtitled Scandi Noir until I’m numb – numb to feelings, to creative stirrings, longings, losses, numb to the solostalgia we all feel as the natural world we love and value burns to the ground. As the earth that literally supports our every breath is up in smoke on every continent, Netflix is pumping out shows to make it all go away quietly, it is fading reality. It allows us to think nothing, feel nothing, lose our discernment about what we are watching, as long as we are consuming something that makes us feel nothing. (I’m conscious many of these shows are someone’s creative dreams and I would die if anyone wanted to make something I wrote into a Netflix show, so maybe I’m just jealous I haven’t been asked yet). But still. It’s a very bad thing for a writer to feel nothing. To fall into silence. To be distracted into apathy.

This is the age of cancel culture, but really – what we are cancelling is ourselves. Our creativity, our vitality. And even the sanctity of our homes. All of this technology, platforms and mechanisms designed to grab our attention exist in the palm of our hands and come right into our homes. And writers write at home mostly – or in cafes or bookshops. So even in a bookshop I am not safe from consuming instead of creating. But mainly, the fight for time is more important than ever because our focus has been commodified and our homes are now portals to all kinds of consumerism.

Just like nature and our bodies, we need to be speaking more about how the private sphere where we live and where some of us create, because of technology like phones and laptops and mainly because of the internet – we have lost control of our private realm. You don’t have to step outside, it all comes right in through the front door. My bed can be a shopping centre via The Iconic, an autopsy scene via a true crime podcast, a ‘meat market’ via Hinge, and a way to spy on all the people I do and don’t know on any given evening. Writing takes energy, concentration, focus – and after a long day of life, adulting, work, being a human in 2022 – we want to be distracted and hummed softly into oblivion by any means possible. Quickest and cheapest please.

Can I palm off my weak will in the face of the Distraction Machine to my muse? Can it be Her fault and not mine? Maybe it’s not me that got tired and lazy, maybe it’s her. She is the Tommy-wearing, true crime bingeing flake, blank-faced with the glow of another Norwegian forest seething with dead women or more glaciers and snowstorms than have ever existed on earth. This muse is crap, and badly dressed and not inspiring me at all.

In *Big Magic*, Elizabeth Gilbert told us how in ancient Greece a muse really was an external force, a spirit, and the great artists of that time just had really shit-hot muses. So, I could blame my inability to write on my rubbish muse, but I know it’s not true because until 2019, she was lit. She poured bush honey on my head and we were in a flow so golden, I could cry just thinking about it. It’s not her fault at all, and it’s not really the fault of Apple or Meta or the streaming services I mentioned either. I have to take responsibility for throwing my writing aside and settling into an apathy that hurt like hell, even while I felt nothing at all.

Writing is about imagining ourselves in another’s shoes, about imagining other worlds and new futures and if we stop doing this, then we are accepting the status quo, or allowing those in power to write the future for us, by consuming the mass-entertainment we are missing the nuances and niche perspectives we could offer or explore. We have to rise up above it and keep creating.

Drawing lines in the sand is important – as humans, as artists. We have to try and fix what is breaking us. What happened yesterday doesn’t have to happen today. Which is why I am in bed suddenly writing. Feeling the juices rise. Time for this distracted writer to grow up, eat some peanut butter for brain power, find a pad of paper and any old pen and PUSH ON.

If you ever read the novel that is buzzing around my head like an octopus on mescal, it will mean that my commitment to my art won out over the machine designed to make me dumb. It will mean that I rescued myself, my life and my creative process from the gutter. It will mean that I stopped distraction-bingeing and started living and writing again. Like my life depended on it.

# Love For One Night

A review. Words by Nat Woods.

Sitting tucked snug under my knee blanket, waiting patiently for the show to start, it suddenly seemed like the 130-year-old Eltham Hotel was always destined to be a theatre stage. The large window at the front and centre of the building allows a clear view into the bar and the upstairs balcony could’ve been pulled straight from hundreds of theatre set designs. With no stage curtain to hide last minute adjustments to set, costumes, or props, the action of the pub and the play seamlessly merge into one – patrons I’d seen drinking at the bar now reveal themselves as the actors themselves and at some point, the true bar staff disappear and are replaced with the show’s solo bartender. And while the hum of the local pub goes drifts across the open air from the beer garden, the play’s live “pub band” kicks off the musical score and the show begins.

Under the Northern Rivers’ starry sky, NORPA’s *Love for One Night* unravels delightfully and raucously – a series of love stories that make you cry with laughter and tear up with sentimentality. Part drama, part musical, part ... acrobatic french kissing ... I don’t know that I’ve ever seen anything like it. With references to the floods, lovers being lost to local cults and the stories behind the theatrical upstairs rooms of the Eltham, the show feels like something we can all own and be proud of as a community. What a beautiful thing to have after everything we’ve been through. I hope it’s back for another season very soon.

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