



EP 15 - 5 Insights From A Growing Writer



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When I mention I'm a writer, I get either odd stares or curious questions. I've mentioned bits & pieces about my writing process and projects in various episodes of the show. I'll often cite them as examples to illustrate concepts. But on today's episode I'm going to focus on the insights I've gained thus far in my writing career.

First, it's important to give a brief background, so my insights have the proper context:

- I've been writing seriously for fourteen years
- At various times before and during I've also been an artist, graphic designer, created some abstract comic books, designed board games, and co-founded a game publishing studio, Masquerade Games. But writing has persisted as my most important creative outlet.
- Writing started as a hobby, and while it's grown to a small side business, it has never been a significant source of income for me.
- I'm a self-published writer, with four novels, one novella, and one novelette out in the world. All are available at chriskreuter.com
- I write primarily science-fiction. Most of my work is at the middle-grade level (approximately kids 8-13)

- For the past two years, I've been working on my fifth novel. With this latest novel, I've gained the confidence to aspire to get agent representation. My goal is becoming a traditionally published writer.
- I view myself as a serious writer, always looking to improve both craft and the audience for my words.
- Writing has become a core element of who I am as a person. I plan on writing until the day I die, regardless of the outcome of what's produced.

With that background, I'd like to share some of my insights:

1. The act of writing is a roller coaster
2. I write every book multiple times
3. I write what I know & care about
4. Writing is my best thought
5. Anyone can be a writer

1. The act of writing is a roller coaster

- Roller coasters can be fun, but they can also be scary and dangerous.
 - Many times I'll find myself thinking about my current project, in anticipation of the writing itself. Kind of like standing in line for a coaster.
 - Many times I'll write like a coaster ride: In short, compressed windows.
 - So, the minutes and hours spent in line, well that's life. It's the stuff which informs the writing, the messages and emotions that I want to express in my words. Writing is how I express those thoughts and feelings.
 - This analogy works on two levels: For the writing process itself, and then as a comparison to the path a writing project takes
1. For the writing process itself:
 - Like a coaster it has ups and downs.
 - There are slow, difficult climbs, exhilarating downhill where you feel like you could write 10,000 words a day, and brain-shattering shakes and rattles.

- On any given writing day you can experience all these feelings. You never know what will happen when you ride.
 - But it's a lot more fun to ride than to sit on a bench and wonder what it feels like.
2. Across the entire writing project, a roller coaster ride makes a nice analogy:
- Boarding the coaster, buckling in, the anticipation = Outlining the plot and characters, setting expectations on what the book will look like
 - The initial climb = Starting to get words on the page. Often a slow process, but one where I'm building up energy and ideas.
 - the initial plunge = Hitting my stride, the words flowing fast. I can better see the track ahead and I rush towards it with exhilaration.
 - The twists & turns = Unexpected developments in plot and character reveal themselves. Every project has these sudden twists and exciting developments
 - Coasting to the end = Wrapping up, having enjoyed the ride, and anticipating sharing my story with the world.
 - And of course, planning what coaster I'm going to ride next.

2. I write every story multiple times

- Some writers can just start writing and come up with a story on the fly. That's not me.
- Perhaps it's my engineer brain, but I start with strong outlines and initial bios for critical characters.
- That being said, on every project I've discovered deeper layers and interactions between characters through the act of writing.
- As these bios get fleshed out, I'll alter them, especially as the relationships between characters become clearer.
- The reality of writing a book so many times often seems daunting to people, but I enjoy this element of writing.
 - I feel my years as a board game designer prepared me well for this reality. Some games we designed went through dozens upon dozens of prototypes. Often tons of work would get thrown out the window after only a few playtests.

Frustrating at times, but through those experiences you learn to streamline processes, waste less time, and find shortcuts that allow you to iterate faster.

- It also makes you far more open to diverse opinions, while training you to trust your own discernment to know what's worth keeping and what really does have to change.
- Everything I write, regardless of format & length, tends to take 4 or 5 drafts, from start to finish:
 - My first draft follows my initial outline closely. I focus on key plot points, who's doing what and why. This draft is usually the fastest, since I don't get too hung up on crafting perfect sentences. Much like a band crafting a new song, it's very much an exercising on finding the notes that best fit the tone and heart of a song.
 - For the second draft, I have a much stronger sense of what the story is really about. I'm clearer on what works, what doesn't. Few people, if anyone, will read a single page of the first draft. I usually start this draft soon after finishing the first, after a careful review of my outline and character bios, detailing the changes I plan on making on the second pass.
 - After two drafts, I start getting my story into the hands of beta readers, writing coaches, and trusted friends. They will often point out flaws in plot, character arcs, and overall message of the book. This feedback is often detailed, and offers up many areas that need changing to bring the book to a widely readable level. My third draft focuses primarily on this list. I also place a heavier focus on the crafting of sentences, paragraphs, and chapters.
 - For books like the Rainy River Bees trilogy, where I knew I would be self-publishing, it's after this draft where I started conversations with my illustrator, Jack Parra. This allowed him enough time to complete all the various artwork, but it was also early enough where his sketches and ideas influenced the work itself.
 - At this point I'm usually very happy with the manuscript, but I'll usually get another round of feedback. If I hit the mark, my fourth draft that will be focused mostly on grammar, small edits, and tweaks. But it can also result in some more heavy lifting on certain areas of the book.

- This is the situation I'm in with my latest book, *The Boy & Bus 13*: My third edit resulted in changing the story structure in some major ways. I loved the changes, but I missed the mark with some of the characters and formatting along the way. So my fourth draft is a heavier edit than I usually do at this point. But the book is way better for it!
- At this point, I'll give a work a solid once-over before self-publishing, or pitching to literary agents. This last pass is almost entirely for spelling, grammar, and formatting tweaks

3. I write what I know & care about

- My writing got a lot better when I made a simple realization: I needed to write the stories that I would want to read.
- Writing from personal experiences, knowledge, and areas of expertise makes for deeper, more believable stories.
- For me, writing from what I know helps me focus more energy into the characters than on technical details or making their environment believable. I'm confident in those things, but readers need characters with depth and feelings too.
- That's not to say I don't reach: I'm always happy to do research or ask questions of experts in the context of a writing project. For example in *The Boy & Bus 13*, I did a lot of research on Artificial Intelligence.
 - Side note: I highly recommend the phenomenal book [Life 3.0 by Max Tegmark](#).
- For example: *The Rainy River Bees* trilogy was very much an exercise in writing the book 9 year old me would have absolutely devoured.
 - Sure, hockey meets science fiction might be a niche thing, but I'm not writing for the masses. I'm writing for me.
 - The books became my love letter to the game of hockey, and all the science fiction worlds I've enjoyed over the years.
 - My knowledge of those worlds is what made the books resonate with hockey fans and sci-fi loving readers.

4. Writing is my best thought

- This is actually a quote from my good friend and amazing author, Carlos Hernandez.
- He said it in passing during a conversation but it instantly stuck with me and has become a core belief of the importance of writing.
- What this idea means to me is that writing allows me to craft, as intricately or as sparsely as I need, the messages I want the world to hear.
- Words are as deep and lasting a way as humanity has invented to cast our thoughts, ideas, dreams, etc... Into the future.
 - Another side note: There's an incredible chapter in Ryan North's book How To Invent Everything that goes into incredible levels of detail on all the methods you could use to ensure those words last as far into the future as possible. For example, casting them as a tablet made of a specific metal alloy and dropping multiple copies into the deepest parts of the ocean.
- Different art forms do this in various ways, and I enjoy aspects of all of them. But writing is the most intimate.
- I love how the ability to write evolves along with each of us. The more I write, the better I write, and therefore the better I think.
- I can go back at my old writings, even the goofy things I wrote in elementary school, and see younger versions of myself. I can see a worldview, perspective.
- Sure some of the writing technique makes me cringe at first - but it's still a part of my journey and I appreciate having those words exist. Like little time machines to see my past selves.
- I tell people this often, but I'm not writing for any kind of fame or fortune.
 - If people fall in love with my work and want to elevate it, that's wonderful. But it's not my end goal.
 - Having my best thoughts out there in the world, in a way that my children and their descendants can access. That's deeply meaningful to me, knowing they'll have access to such important parts of who I was. So much so, that if that's the only thing that happened as a result of creating them, it would be totally worth it.
- I believe that if you treat people the right way, over a long enough time-scale, good things end up coming to you. And part of treating people right is to create art that's

honest, personal, and meaningful.

- To be fair, it would be great for my art to make enough money to enable me to make more art. But it's never been the purpose of creating it.

5. Anyone can be a writer

- There's no special code or path to becoming a writer.
- You don't need a degree in the arts or be the most eloquent person in the room: You just have to be someone with something to say.
- Then you work on your craft. You put in the work, you'll continue to improve.
- To write well you need to read well: When I pushed myself to read more, and broaden the number of writers read, I became a better writer.
- Like all artists, writers evolve over time. If you're just starting out, embrace this!
- It's okay if you think your writing is total garbage when you start out.
- One of the best pieces of advice I ever got was that the act of editing is writing!
 - It's not about the first draft being pristine out of the gate - it's about crafting a story as best as you can.
- Seek mentors, writing groups, don't be afraid to ask for honest feedback or help.
 - But tell them you want help, not a pat on the back!

Episode 10 Quote:

From Paul Graham:

You can't replace reading with other sources of information like videos, because you need to read in order to write well, and you need to write in order to think well.