

Episode One

Welcome to Bold, a writing podcast focused on helping you write big, and BOLD, and beautifully. I'm your host, Kate Ristau. I'm a folklorist and an author and a world creator.

You know, I used to think that to be a writer, you had to suffer. That's what we know, right? That's what we learned in all those movies and all those books about writers. Writing is suffering. It's pain. It's sitting at a mahogany desk and pounding your head against a typewriter. It's drinking. It's smoking. It's cutting your wrists until they bleed and pouring out the blood and dipping your pen into the dark red ink and scraping the words into your paper thin skin.

Are we kidding? That sounds terrible. Who would want to do that? Who would want to dedicate their lives to suffering, being miserable, being sad?

I knew there had to be a better way.

But it took me a long long time to find it.

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I remember a creative writing class I took with internationally renowned, world famous author David Foster Wallace. Wallace was a beacon of Post-modernism. Everything he said was wicked smart. He could talk about tacos, and you'd be like -- that dude, he's got things figured out.

So, when it came time to review my stories in our undergraduate workshops, I always remember a keen and utterly inevitable sense of existential dread.

I didn't stand a chance.

Don't get my wrong -- my writing wasn't terrible. By that point, it was mildly tolerable, intriguing, and often -- even funny.

But it wasn't mind-blowing or mind-bending.

It didn't make you think deep thoughts.

But it did have a few things going for it. It was straightforward. Lots of plot. Good dialogue. And, like I said, it was kind of funny.

When I read my first story to the class, they really, truly, actually laughed. Snickered and sniffed in all the right places.

Wallace's brow just furrowed, slowly, deeply.

When I read my next story, they piped up that it was unexpected. Light. Interesting.

Wallace sat me down in his office.

"Your work is good. Really. You've got a good voice. But could you, you know, try to write something a bit more serious? Try to write something that isn't just written for this class? Try to write something more worthwhile?"

Now, even as I'm saying what he said, well, I'm not quite saying it right. Because he said things all profound-like, and I say things like I ran into them in a Pizza Hut in Iowa.

But imagine that sounded SUPER PROFUNDIS.

"Sure," I said right back. Totally. I can make a story that means something. That has something to say. Yeah, all right. I'll do it."

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I should have known I wasn't on the right track when the my main characters met for the first time at a Starbucks and talked about their cats.

The class laughed. I laughed. And David Foster Wallace kind of shrugged and circled a few things. It must have been so frustrating trying to get post-teens to think big thoughts when he was trying to write the next next great american novel. And seriously, friends, my thoughts were about as deep as a slice of Pizza.

But that doesn't mean they were bad.

It took me a year, and a lot of Chuck Palahniuk novels to figure that out.

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Here's what I want to share with you:

You don't have to write like anyone else. You don't have to create amazing, breathtaking, showstopping, adjective-inducing work. You can just write YOUR story. The one you're meant to write. The one that sits down in your bones, or crawls through your mind, or leaks out of your fingers. The one you can't stop thinking about. The one you can't shut off.

That's the one you should write.

Because that's the one we will want to read. That's the one that will matter.

If I had sat down to write the next next next next great american novel, I'd still be at it forty years later. I ain't got that in me. I don't. I don't want it in me.

I write small stories. Fast stories. Stories with lots of dialogue. Stories with action. Stories that anyone can read. That they want to read. I write stuff for kids. And stuff for people who want to be kids. Or stuff for people who remember being kids.

I don't write important with a capital I stuff. I write stuff that is important to me.

And that's important too.

Because I think if you write that thing that has been crawling through you -- the one that punches you in the gut, or pokes you in the shoulder and says hey. Hey. Hey.

If you write that one -- you'll write something bold and new. Your story will have a shine to it that it wouldn't have if you sat down to write some IMPORTANT.

Important is garbage. It's not my wish for you. My wish for you is the stories you've wanted to tell, the poetry you've longed to write. My wish is the words that fall from your tongue and onto the page. The ones that feel right in your mouth.

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So, where do you go from here? Back to your writing desk -- or back to the kitchen table. Do the thing you want to do right now. If that's writing -- awesome! Do that! But if it's reading, sit down with a book. Give yourself time. Think about the story you want to tell.

Not the one you think you're supposed to.

Somebody else will write that one. We want to hear the one only you can tell.

That's all for now. Now, you're free. So go write big, and bold, and beautifully.

Episode Two: Shownotes

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I've been thinking a lot about joy lately. About how we make in our lives, and what holds us back from it.

We all know the soaring, floating feeling in those moments of utter ecstasy, but I'm not talking about elation.

I'm talking about those quiet moments of joy, the feeling of contentment that occasionally runs through us, those times when everything just feels perfectly okay.

I don't want that all the time—I know better than that now. Spending your life searching for constant contentment will leave you aching. People will fail you. Over time, you will become bitter. You will expect too much if you think everything will fall cookie-cutter into constant contentment. It won't. Seriously. Even if it's an actual cookie cutter. You will make the gingerbread man, and occasionally, his head will get stuck. His arms will be too long. You'll burn his head.

But, as a writer, there has to be a road to occasional joy. I've made so many mistakes myself, and continually walked that road of unfulfilled expectations.

Honestly, I expect a lot of people, but I also expect a lot of myself. And that can make your gingerbread crack and crumble, and get way too spicy.

And yes, I'm sticking with this metaphor, because it's about cookies, and I'm always here for a cookie metaphor.

But seriously, social media makes this all the worse for us. Case in point—Last week. Last week was the Portland book festival, but it could've been any day of any week.

On Friday night, there's the Lit crawl, a slew of readings by authors and poets and all my favorite people. But I wasn't ready for it.

I was still making copies for the book fair, and prepping slides for my middle grade panel. I had to stay home.

In my mind, I also prepared all my excuses. In fact, I just gave you a few of them. But what if I just didn't feel like it? But if I needed a night at home? What if I just needed to eat dinner and do the dishes and read books with my kid?

Facebook invites to events and shows us what we missed. People who might not stop by our house to invite us to a reading – who might not even know where we live – will click our name on an invite list.

And there is joy in that. There's so much possibility in being able to stretch out, to reach out, and ask...unencumbered with awkward.

But there's a balancing too.

You have to stay focused on what matters to you, and what you need. Sometimes, you need a night out. And sometimes – you don't need anything from anyone besides pizza.

And I don't think it's just me – but guilt gets in the way of contentment. Then, later, when I see all those pictures, that feeling of being left out creeps in.

You know the feeling too. You missed an opportunity – for friendship, for fun, or even for a different future.

Or worse yet, you were never even invited.

Is there an easy solution? No.

Sometimes, well, it just sucks. People are stupid and your gingerbread is stupid and baking is stupid and you don't even care about the metaphor anymore.

But I think the best thing you can do is acknowledge that feeling – realize what it is. Consider the weight of your own expectations, the disappointment of others, or that feeling of being left out.

Then, think about what you need. You are not a robot; you're not an automaton, and your friends or future friends can't read your mind.

So, you make a plan. You think of what you want and you start dreaming that into the world.

Start today with the dreaming. Throw open your doors and have the absurd audacity to consider what you need, what you want. Write that down.

Make it big and bold and beautiful.

Then get to work on what you really need.

Episode Three: Shownotes

You know, the last few episodes, we talked about joy, and telling your own story.

Those two ideas are inextricably linked. When we start to tell our own story, we feel a particular type of joy – sometimes.

Sometimes, the words fly from our fingers and onto the page. We create, we inhabit, we explore.

Sometimes.

But it doesn't always feel like joy.

Sometimes, it's hard. Really hard. Sometimes, it's not about joy. Sometimes, it's about working through the muck and the garbage. Sometimes the light is hard to see, and the path is unclear.

But we know, deep down, that we have to get that story out – that idea – that little piece of the universe. We have to bring it to life.

But if you know me, you know I struggle with birth metaphors, because my own son's birth wasn't easy. He was two months early and there was so much blood. But writing a book is so close to having a child that I can't stop myself.

You spend so much time planning, thinking, giving. There's months in the making of it and enjoyment in the possibility. But there's so much weight in *need* and *want*. There's so much expectation. So many things can go wrong.

When I was pregnant, One of my friends told me – “don't worry, your body will know what to do.”

Yes. Yes it will. But that kind of statement, well, it kind of pisses me off.

Because yes, I trust my body, but fear is born out of the unknown and born out of our past experiences.

So my past experience tells me that writing a book is going to be hard. With that past experience, I stare into the open maw of the unknown.

And I eat lots of cookies

I'm so happy you're standing here with me now, staring into the abyss of a new beginning – the shining light sparkling with dark edges.

Now, imagine your character standing here with us, but instead of a dark abyss with sparks of light, she sees threads. And one thread represents what she wants -- what she needs, more than anything in this world.

She reaches out, and she grabs that thread. It's loose and gentle, but she wraps it tight around her wrist, and walks into her story. Every action she takes, every word she says, every bird she sees our cup of tea she pours is influenced by that thread. It is a part of who she is, and who she will become.

Babies come out of the womb surrounded by threads of possibility. Your main character does not see all of these threads anymore. She's in the middle of her story now. Along the way, throughout her life, she's grabbed onto the ones she needs. And she's not ready to let it go now.

So what pulls your character forward? What drives their need? Is it a desire for love? Friendship? Loyalty? Trauma? Revenge? Hope? Does she want peace? Or does she want to watch the world burn?

The character who wants to belong – she might do something stupid – incredibly stupid -- because her friends are doing it too.

Or she might do something big and awesome and beyond her understanding because her thread is wrapped up in her love for her child.

She might push beyond what anyone can dream because she is grounded in her experience with her son. In making his world better.

Think about the threads of your character. What motivates them? What pulls them forward?

Take that thread and weave it into your writing. Let your character grow, learn, and react, with that thread woven into the core of them.

Build their story. Create their world. Make it big and bold and beautiful.

Episode Four: Shownotes

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I've been thinking a lot about you lately. You, who are struggling to write, and you, who are pounding out words in the middle of the night. I know all of you.

Except I don't. I don't know what drives you forward or pulls you apart. I just see the other side, and I only hear what you tell me.

You've been loud lately; snipping and snapping at your husband, your wife, your cat.

But you've been quiet too. Staring off into the distance, thoughts drawn out, words and worlds falling apart.

What can I tell you that you don't already know? What advice could break through the roar and what hands could hold you tight enough when mine can't?

I don't know what to do, how to find the places where you begin and end, so I'll tell you a little of my own truth right now.

I've started getting up early again, as I try to balance the constant unreality of everything that must be done and all the urgency of nothing.

In the morning, the house is quiet, except for the snoring dog.

I pick her up, all 60 pounds of her, and carry her to my office; she wouldn't come if I called. She wants the warm bed and the snuggles, but I want the sound of her snoring just like I want the noise of the coffee shop, and the taste of espresso on my lips.

And since we're here together, and we've come this far, I'll tell you the truth of it.

I think it's okay to be selfish right now.

I think it's okay to eat that second cookie or that bag of chips or make your sleepy dog snuggle you in your office when she wants to be in bed because we are living in a time that not all of us will live through.

We are surviving.

It's not selfishness to do what you need to do. In times like this, it's just living.

And when your brain is on high-alert, well, for some of us, that means high word counts and hyper-productivity and getting all the things done while Mari-Kondo-ing our house and baking sourdough bread.

For others, that means wondering where the rest of the chips went, or why there's no more Easter Candy. Who jelly beans anyway?

You are not a machine. Forgive yourself, then do what you need to do, then forgive yourself again.

I'm not talking to you about selfishness, because that's dumb. I'm talking to you about forgiveness.

There's a squirrel outside my window that's ripping apart the cherry blossoms. Pink petals raining down. Who knows why we do the things we do. Sometimes it's because of our past, sometimes it's because of our present sometimes it's because of our future.

Do we need a flippin reason? Tear the bag of chips apart. Rip your way into a beautiful World.

You are magic. You can destroy and create.

So do it. Or don't. It's your time, only yours. You are big, and bright, and beautiful.

Until next time

Bigger: Episode Five Show Notes

I've been thinking a lot about you. Since the lockdown began-the Great Pause-an incredible silence settled all around me, then it rose into a guttural scream.

We have dreams of justice.

We believe that things will be brighter than they seem.

But, for now, they're just so broken, and it's not my voice you need to hear.

So I've been sharing others.

But even as the world has been changing, I've felt so small. How could I do anything that mattered? How could we change all this terrible?

I lost my metaphors months ago. Now, I think in themes and feelings. I think bigger. I have to.

Because I have to believe this is going to change.

That people will do better- be better.

Not racist. Not awful.

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The first black author I read was Toni Morrison.

I'd read the words of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, but never sat down with a book. A whole entire book.

I can see it now, growing up white and poor in rural America. I read *Beloved* and that was what my school gave me: blackness wrapped up in violence. Beauty torn apart. Racism seeping and slicing and bleeding. The only overcoming came through the other side of death: ghosts, gods and magic. I wanted to believe in something bigger, but I

kept wondering, and I still wonder, why couldn't we be bigger? Why couldn't we be better than the people in the stories we were reading?

That's still my wish. And I feel the pull of it when I read big SciFi Fantasy like NK Jemisin. I see a world where black people are literally reforming continents. I see that possibility.

I wish I had those books when I was younger.

I think about my son, now, reading Spider-Man by Jason Reynolds and seeing black people as superheroes. Reading shelves that are full of the possibility and complexity of black lives. That's the world I want to believe in.

So, how can we create it?

The first step, the easiest step, is buying books by black authors. Reading them. Sharing them with our kids. Sharing them with each other.

The second step, for me, is supporting young black writers. I'm a firm believer in creating systems and promoting organizations to help us push for diversity, equity, and inclusion. That means supporting those who support others, like writers in the Schools and I, Too Arts Collective, which runs out of the brownstone where Langston Hughes once lived.

We need to support our published writers and build networks of opportunity for developing writers.

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There are so many things you can do, but one more that matters the most: raise your voice. Say enough is enough. Stop killing our kids and policing bodies in the streets. Allow their stories to be told by allowing them to live, outside of a culture of violence and police brutality. You can make a change, from your desk or from the streets. I'm here for you, and I hope for you. You're big and bright and beautiful.

Plans: Episode Six Show Notes

Plans

I've bought three planners this year. They have all promised to keep me more organized. Help me meet my goals. Stay on track. Complete big projects. But it wasn't just Covid that threw my off the rails.

My life is incredibly busy. I'm sure yours is the same.

Since the Great Pause, I've been working, writing-trying to run a writer's organization, while maintaining focus on my own writing life.

I've also been raising my kid, supporting my friends, and checking in with my family in the face of an impossible global pandemic.

I'm exhausted, and I know you must be too.

So, I got out my planner. Scheduled my day. With careful calibration, I could work 6-8 hours a day, with time on the weekends for overflow. I could cook, clean, walk the dogs, and work with my son on his homework which had turned into his schoolwork which he did at home.

I didn't schedule any time to freak the heck on out. The problem with plans is we often base them on expectations of our time and energy.

Unrealistic expectations.

Friends, something has got to give. Maybe it is our beliefs that we can do everything. But I have no idea how to get rid of those.

So I've started chunking things down into reasonable goals and really reminding people of my boundaries. I've taken Zoom calls outside and worked on normalizing parenting.

Parenting and work is a discussion that's coming soon. I'm not quite ready for it yet.

But goals, realistic goals, I can do that. I've been learning that, along with saying NO.

I mention saying no because if you are working on your goals, and you realize that you have no idea how you are going to be able to achieve them all, then you have to start moving and removing.

For those goals that you do choose, make them achievable, make them SMART. A smart goal is:

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

Relevant

Time bound

There are a thousand good resources you can find on the Internet, just by searching SMART goals. Work through those. Do your research deep dive, and start developing your goals. But my suggestion is that after you write down your SMART goals, you end every goal with a **question mark**.

That is the chance for you to ask yourself- is this goal something I want or need to do right now? Or is it movable or removable?

In this time of pandemic and social change, we need to be scaling down-even if we are scaling up. We need to choose to do those things that matter right now, and give ourselves time to ride our bikes in the sun.

So, get out there. Make your goals, make your life, big and bold and beautiful.

Describe: Episode Seven Show Notes

Welcome to Bold, a writing podcast focused on helping you write big, and BOLD, and beautifully. I'm your host, Kate Ristau. I'm a folklorist and an author and a world creator.

I believe, that for riders, it's important to know what you're good at, and what you're not so good at. Not so you can wallow in self-pity at all of your faults, but so you can know what is going to need your attention, what doesn't come easy. Then, you can gather the tools and people you need to fix that issue.

For me, that problem is description. Anyone who has ever been in a class or conversation with me knows that I am literally in capable of describing anything in an eloquent way I'd be like, you know, that bear looking thing and you'd be like... Do you mean Sasquatch? Yes I would say. I do mean that. I totally didn't mean a Campbell.

But, on the whole, that was a good description. The reality of my life is a series of blank walls and empty faces.

The best piece of advice I ever received on description came from Stephen King's book, on writing.

He said if you're going to describe a setting, walk your reader through it. So if you're describing a bar, don't just list the seven barstools, the cocktail napkins, and the pool table.

Have your heroine walk to the bar. Describe things that she interacts with them or encounters them. She sits on the barstool, wipes up a spill a drink with a napkin. Picked up a pool cue.

In this way, setting is a character, and description always has motion and movement. It is alive and active. It doesn't just sit in a paragraph; it is laced throughout the scene – and integral part of the action in the plot.

The bigger picture here is less about description and more about awareness. For me, I am aware that my description is... Not good. So, I focused on picking up tools to make it better.

That's my recommendation to you today. Remember the things you're good at Dash as well as the things that you're bad at Dash well come to find your style.

Don't wallow in your inability to describe a camel. Find the tools you need to do the thing you can't. Then, you'll be well on your way to writing big and bold and beautifully.

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