



The Geek's Guide to the Writing Life

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Review of

Vanderslice, Stephanie. *The Geek's Guide to the Writing Life*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

As a first year MFA student at the University of Kansas, every week I have a career life crisis, wondering if the writing life is possible. From my undergraduate studies to now, my colleagues told me that a writing life was attainable—while others said it wasn't. Frustration began to build when my workshops never focused on these concerns. My courses focused more on craft and revising stories, but there were times when I wished my classes discussed having a successful writing life. I have seen writers do it. They were able to have a writing career while maintaining their families, and others were able to have a stable income. Now my question is, how do I get there? To ease my anxieties, I decided to read Stephanie Vanderslice's *The Geek's Guide to the Writing Life* to find guidance.

Vanderslice's introduction establishes the central focus of the guide: how to have a successful writing life. With a blunt and comical tone, she acknowledges that her book is very opinionated since the advice comes from her experience and what has worked for her. Before Vanderslice offers advice to readers, she addresses questions that writers might ask: do they have what it takes to be a writer, and do they have talent? Vanderslice states, "If you don't feel compelled to write, if you don't feel you must write, that you cannot go very long with a narrative or a poem or essay—name the genre—taking shape in your head and then working its way out—then don't. It's not about having the time or the talent—it's about having compulsion—and the determination" (13). To Vanderslice, determination and compulsion are the key forces. If a writer does not feel compelled to write a story, then they should not continue it. However, if a writer does have the urgency to write and is willing to work hard, they need not ask those questions.

To help writers use the guide effectively, the book is divided into twelve chapters that take up a range of topics: from considering a writer's personal life, to writing in academia, to navigating the publishing industry. The advice is written in the form of a memoir where Vanderslice focuses on

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moments of her life and the methods that work for her. She also provides resources for writers who want to know more about each section at the end of the guide. For example, she goes into detail about the publishing industry, and in order to help writers to find a model for how to write a query letter, she gives a list of websites that focus on the genre.

The first two chapters of the book center on the commitment to writing and doing the work itself. Vanderslice discusses family and financial planning as well as why writers should avoid consuming drugs and alcohol to aid writing. Uniquely, she even provides advice on finding a life partner and what they should look for. She lists four key factors: 1) The person should support the writer, 2) The person believes in equality in a partnership, 3) The person is also a dedicated writer, and 4) The person is not overly competitive or jealous (Vanderslice 30-32). The author understands that not all partners have these characteristics, but she does suggest writers and their partners have a conversation about them. Chapter two, “Doing the Work (and, sometimes, not doing the work),” provides advice for writers who need to find the time to write. Vanderslice offers suggestions on either waking up earlier in the morning or staying up late to write. She even discusses the importance of exercising. The author questions the practice of writing every day and that it is fine not to write on some days because writers are human and events or personal situations will happen. She uses the phrase, “. . .you’ll need to be kind to yourself and let it go—for a little while” (44). Being kind to yourself is something that all writers need to do.

The most valuable and insightful section is chapter four, “Writing Geeks Unite: Finding Your Tribe.” This chapter stands uniquely among others not because of how she tells writers to find other writers within their community, but because of how she stresses the importance of literary citizenship. Literary citizenship is where writers contribute to the community rather than expecting things from the community that they are part of (Vanderslice 82). Having a community of writers is a great way to foster the writing; however, it does not always come naturally, and literary citizenship can foster that. She places importance on finding kind and generous writers and on being a generous writer in return. Doing this will create opportunities and surprises for writers. Vanderslice offers suggestions on fostering literary citizenship, such as reaching out to other writers, attending literary events, starting a literary journal, and forming a writing group.

Lastly, the most practical chapter for any writer who wants to obtain a BA, BFA, MFA or PhD in creative writing is chapter five, “Continuing Your Education: What Makes Sense for You?” Vanderslice believes that pursuing a BA in creative writing is beneficial to the growth of a writer. She even emphasizes that if a person wants to study writing, they should also specialize in areas such as editing or digital media. The author then focuses on the MFA—a highly debated degree—and acknowledges throughout the chapter that a writer does not need a degree in writing. However, Vanderslice lists the pros and cons of the MFA program, giving writers something to think about when deciding to apply to an MFA program. Moreover, the strength of this chapter lies in the options she gives after the MFA

such as pursuing a PhD, attending writer's conferences, working at writing centers, and studying independently. These sections are helpful because not every writer wants to go into academia. Vanderslice connects this notion of education to the career path of writers in chapter six, "Making a Living: Careers that Support the Writing Life." She states that writers do not have to be in academia and goes into depth about career options such as editing and publishing, librarianship, technical writing, etc. By having a brief section focused on other options, Vanderslice gives writers different career paths to think about and challenges the stereotype of the starving artist.

However, the chapter on career paths for writers would have been stronger had Vanderslice detailed how writers can arrive at those careers from where they currently are. How does a creative writer pick an area of emphasis that would foster writing in a grad school setting? What schools of thought should they consider as beneficial for their craft? How should students balance literature courses and creative writing courses? Should writers take physical science courses to aid them in technical writing? As a current MFA student considering different career options, I would have liked to see more details in those areas in order to make an informed decision about what needs to be considered.

A successful writing life is what all writers want to pursue, and it can be difficult to obtain, but Vanderslice's guide shows that it is possible to have it. She focuses on how to establish this by considering a writer's personal and career life. The author even gives insightful commentary on being an effective literary citizen and options in different careers. Yet, these suggestions and examples are based on her own experience and it might not work for everyone, especially for writers who have had negative experiences in literary communities or feel marginalized within a creative writing program. As a woman and person of color, I have gone through those experiences, and the guide would have been more beneficial to me if it had tackled those aspects too. Statements or advice from writers of color that she knew would have made it stronger. However, her guide contributes to the conversation of a successful writing life, and it should be combined with other how-to guides where a writer can make their own informed choice for a fruitful path.