

INTRODUCTION: Welcome to Behind the Circulation Desk, a Wake Tech Libraries podcast. You'll learn about new items in our collection through lively discussions about our new resources with faculty and staff, little-known stories about how things run behind the scenes at Wake Tech Libraries, and, of course, stories about how students succeed because of what we provide here at Wake Tech Libraries. I'm your host, Nichole Williams, instructional services librarian at the Scott Northern Wake Campus.

NICHOLE WILLIAMS: Welcome to the Behind the Circulation Desk podcast, the libraries' podcast. Today, we have Kelli Allen from the English Department here to talk with us about writer's block in preparation for NaNoWriMo [National Novel Writing Month] next month. So, I'll let Kelli take a few moments to introduce herself and talk about some of her accomplishments as a writer.

KELLI ALLEN: Nichole, thanks for having me. So, I have been writing for my entire adult life and definitely some of my childhood, though I don't think I would want anyone to read anything before I was 25, and I also have been involved in the publishing world and the literary journal editing world for about two decades now. So, this is definitely something I'm incredibly passionate about. I do run an international literary journal, called "Book of Matches," and I do publish as well. I've got several books out in the world with C&R Press, a new one that was just released, I'm pretty excited about that. And I do like to travel and give writing workshops when, whenever the opportunity arises.

So, having students at Wake Tech as well being interested in creative writing, not just academic writing, has been a real pleasure. I'm still pretty new to North Carolina, so getting to know the literary scene here has been really wonderful.

WILLIAMS: That's wonderful. So, because of all of your credentials that you just talked about, I think that you're, of course, you know, very probably have a wide wealth of knowledge about writer's block and all the ins and outs of that. So, we'll just jump right in. What has your experience been with writer's block, block?

ALLEN: Well, I have a rather unpopular opinion about writer's block, so I'll do my best to explain what that means. I don't think writer's block is real. I don't, I don't think that it's actually a thing that anyone experiences. I think, instead, there is fear and a little bit of perhaps boredom or inability to see wonder in the ordinary. If we are awake and we are conscious, we have something to communicate. Writing is a conversation. Even if the only one who is reading what you write is the page you are writing upon, it's still a conversation. So, if your eyes are open and your senses are functioning, if your eyes don't work, if your

ears don't work but your hands do, you have access to, to interact with the world that you live in, and that alone gives you something to write about.

So, for example, when I taught graduate program writing classes for Lindenwood University, I did that for about seven years, and we would do a lot of work with creative nonfiction and short memoir writing. And students would occasionally come and say, "I just don't have anything to write about" or "I'm stuck" or "I have writer's block," and we would sit together for a moment and be quiet, and then I would ask them to look very closely at the skin on their own hand, just look at the skin on their hand. And with the other hand write down absolutely everything they notice about that skin: The way that it looks in the light or the way that it doesn't look in the light, the way that it makes them remember when their hands were smoother or when their hands will become less smooth. And focus as much as possible on just that one small moment of the body and write as much as you can. And taking those sensory images and then starting to attach them to other memories or other observations, or maybe a character from a book or a character in a movie, will begin the process of letting the brain open up to write.

Even if you're just writing a grocery list, you're writing, and that grocery list can trigger memories. Maybe you're buying things for a pie that your grandmother used to make. Or maybe you are making the dinner for your family, and you really don't want to be because you have dreams to be a Broadway star and they got thwarted, and off you go in that direction and that story. So, I think just the act of being awake – capital A awake – means that writer's block is not there at all. We just have to take the time to put our hands to the paper or to the machine or to the voice recorder and begin.

Language is all the time. Languages everywhere. So, I, I really don't think that writer's block is something that should ever stop someone from being creative. As soon as they can realize that it isn't actually a block, then they can get started.

WILLIAMS: I really love that, and, to be honest, I had a feeling that that's what you were going to say, to say you didn't really, you know, that writer's block, the idea of it is probably a block in and of itself.

ALLEN: It is.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. So, with that, you kind of, you know, went through all of my questions right there in that, in that, that one statement. But you know, since this is the library podcast, you know, I have to ask about resources. So, since we've talked about, it's really just, you

know, a matter of jogging the creativity in someone and trying to spark the creativity, do you have any resources that you would recommend as far as helping people with that? Helping people to, you know, spark their own creativity?

ALLEN: Absolutely. So, I will go two-fold with this. As a writer, one must also be a reader and a curious reader and a passionate reader. And one of the ways to keep ourselves creative while we read is to read multiple genres at once. So, I like to have a work of fiction, a work of nonfiction and a work of poetry in action at all times, so that, no matter what I'm doing or what kind of time I have, I can grab one of my texts around me and have something to either inspire me to keep going, to write something of my own or just to think.

So, what I like to offer new students who have not written a much she yet are a couple of specific titles to get them started, and the titles I like the most come from the Rose Metal Press. So, "Rose Metal Press Guide to Flash Fiction," "Rose Metal Guide to Prose Poetry" and "Rose Metal Guide to Poetry." And the reason I love these three texts and this press in general is that they give examples of each of the genres, but also give writing prompts and tiny micro-essays about what works and what does not work when you're considering these prompts. So, they can be picked up, and you can consume an entire micro-essay in less than 10 minutes, and that could inspire you to go in one direction or to change your mind about a direction you've already gone in.

And I also suggest graphic novels. I know graphic novels are somewhat controversial now, at least they have been in in the last maybe seven or eight years, but they activate our language centers completely uniquely, in a way that standard prose or just visual art doesn't do. So, for example, the Sandman series, which is so popular right now all over Netflix, comes from the phenomenal graphic novel series by the same name by Neil Gaiman. He's been writing for almost 20 years, and taking those novels and looking at how the language references the art or the art references the language really challenges the way that we think about how to write when it's our turn to do so.

Also, John Berger's "Ways of Seeing" is a tiny little text, a little slim book, all about how we think we see and how we actually see. And then it challenges all of our biases on what we're interpreting when we see, and taking that information in also changes how your character might write, if you're working in short story form or even the novel, how that character might be seeing the world versus how you think that they should see the world.

So, I, I read all the time. I'm a huge fan of in general just having access to books. My library is my probably biggest prize possession.

WILLIAMS: Well, you sound like you are a, a book, book lover.

ALLEN: Bibliophile.

WILLIAMS: A bibliophile just like me. I have a, lots of books as well, and in a library, it's, I'm great to see that you're mentioning graphic novels because that's, we do have a selection of those in the library, and they are very popular. But I never thought of them as tools to, for creative writing and to jog creativity. So, you know, that's definitely something that, you know, we'll have to, you know, publicize with students.

ALLEN: Oh, wonderful. There's another graphic novel, I'm not sure if you have it in the library, it's called "Pride of Baghdad," which is about the fall of the Baghdad Zoo and what happens to all of the animals during that particular conflict. And what's unique about this graphic novel is it is heavier on the art and not as heavy on the prose, and many of the images defy interpretation. We're not really sure what we should be feeling based on the way the animals look or the way that they're colored or how clear they are in the frame. I love giving that particular text to new writers and just seeing what they come up with, their interpretation of the images, and then they can go back and look at the pros later.

Graphic novels are great. I'm glad to hear they're popular again. That's wonderful.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, that's a, that Baghdad Zoo, that might be one we'll have to put on our list, or I'll have to check and see if we have it. It sounds really interesting.

ALLEN: Oh, it is.

WILLIAMS: And so, the last question I wanted to ask you is just, you mentioned this before about fear. And so, I just wrote down a lot of different types of fear that people tend to have. And, you know, again, you know this, I'm just imagining somebody on November 1st trying to get through NaNoWriMo, and they'll have the fear of failure, the fear of success, the fear of starting, the fear of rejection from publication. So, I know we've talked to, you know, we've probably touched on this a little bit, but just in general, how would you advise students to get over all of these different types of fear?

ALLEN: OK, let's, let's take a look at their starting first. Fear of starting is eliminated the moment you start, so just writing that first sentence. Think about the, the great first lines of novels, which I also love to give to students. Take a look at all of these first lines of all these

novels cross-culturally from history and see what they're doing. Just creating one line is often enough to push us toward that second line. So, starting with "It was a dark and stormy night." Wait, why was it dark? What time of year was it? Why is it nighttime? What part of the world are we in? We have all of these questions that must be answered based on that single line. So, the fear of starting is something that has to be tackled by just writing that one sentence, and once that happens, everything else follows.

The fear of failure, I don't feel that one very much, and not because I've had great success or not great success. It's that the writing doesn't belong to us. Once it's complete, once we have a full story, once we have a full poem and we send it into the world, it's already successful because it's been birthed, it's been created. What happens to it after that has nothing to do with us. It belongs to the reader, and it's going to work for some readers, and it's not going to work for other readers. But the fact of its creation is its success immediately.

And fear of success, this one makes a little more sense, especially if you're writing fiction or you intend to write screenplays, because if you do get a contract and you wind up with a successful book, how are you going to follow that? What comes next? And the answer is, you make something new. That's it. You make something new. You look at every single opportunity to write as a brand new birthing, a brand new creation, and that takes a while. But experienced writers begin to feel less of that fear after the first few major publications.

And worrying about getting published. Well, rejections are going to come. They're going to come so fast and so frequently that that thick skin we all need to have develops so much quicker than anybody realizes it. The first few rejections hurt, and the next few hurt less, and then they continue to hurt less and less because, if you're sending your work out into the world, it is going to land. It is, every single time. If it takes a month or six months or a year or 10 years, it will land. You just have to have faith in your word-babies, and they will always get out there.

Fear is a part of any creation, visual media too. If you're creating a painting and that canvas is staring at you, to me, that's, that's real fear as an amateur artist. And the same thing, though, once it's finished, it's not yours anymore. It's gifted to whoever wants to view it, and that's success.

WILLIAMS: Well, thank you so much for that. All of this is just helpful to, you know, I mean, you know, me. You know, I write as well, and I'm sure that the students that are gonna be listening to this as they go into November, are gonna find all of this very helpful, especially

taking the pressure off. When you say that, once you write something and you put it out, it's no longer ours, you know. It's, it's kind of a gift to the world. That, that takes a lot of pressure off of off of us to, you know, you know, just kind of let it go and move on to the next thing. So, thank you so much for giving us all of these, you know, jewels to help us to, you know, like I said, attack November and do our best to try to get our best manuscripts done.

ALLEN: Oh, you are welcome, and I would love, if anyone needs to at any time, have some suggestions. I've got some for publication places, ways to submit, how to get yourselves ready for submission. So, please feel free to send anyone in my direction, and I will give them everything that I can to help them get their work into the world. I think that's one of the hardest steps if you're just starting is just where to begin.

WILLIAMS: I will start submitting.

ALLEN: Thank you.

WILLIAMS: Thanks so much, and I'll give you the last word to promote any project you'd like to talk about or just anything that you might wanna, wanna add on.

ALLEN: Oh, I don't need to promote anything, but I really appreciate that. If anybody wants to find me, my websites are out there, and I'm quite searchable. So, yeah, I've got plenty of books. Most of them are poetry, and I don't know how many poetry lovers we've got out there, but there are some short stories, too.

WILLIAMS: Well, thank you so much again for joining us, and we'll definitely find you and we'll enjoy getting in touch with your work.

ALLEN: Wonderful. Thanks so much for taking this time this afternoon, and happy almost Writing Month.

WILLIAMS: Thank you so much.

ALLEN: Bye-bye.

WILLIAMS: Bye.

CONCLUSION: Thanks for listening to Behind the Circulation Desk. Make sure to follow us

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