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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the *Career and Academic Resource Center podcast*. I'm your host, Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School.

I recently had the chance to sit down and speak to acclaimed author Ottessa Moshfegh about the writing process. Taking questions from Harvard Extension students in advance, I was able to ask her about her process for outlining and drafting her work, how she got her start in the industry, and to also hear her advice for budding and aspiring writers.

A native of Boston, Ottessa started off her career as an assistant to legendary editor Jane Stein in New York, and she then received her MFA from Brown University. Initially writing poetry, Ottessa then turned to narrative fiction and short stories, and saw her work published in the *Paris Review*, *Vice*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Balfour Magazine*.

One of her stories in the *Paris Review* won the Plimpton Prize for Fiction in 2013. In 2016, her debut novel, *Eileen*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won the Pen Hemingway Award, and has since been optioned to be adapted into a film by famed producer Scott Rudin. She followed this up by publishing a collection of short stories titled *Homesick For Another World*, which was a finalist for the Story Prize in 2017. Her latest book-length work, *My Year Of Rest And Relaxation*, was published last summer and was named one of the top 10 books of 2018 by *The Guardian*.

I spoke to Ottessa after her whirlwind US book tour of *My Year Of Rest And Relaxation* was complete, and she had returned to her home in the California desert. The following are excerpts from our conversation.

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So, Ottessa, thank you so much for being here today.

OTTESSA You're so welcome. It's my pleasure.

MOSHFEHG:

CHRIS DAVIS: And one of the reasons I was very excited about having you join us here today is because many of our writing students are-- their average age is in their early to mid 30s. I know you were published-- you started to become published in your late 20s, early 30s. So a lot of people have asked kind of how you started writing.

OTTESSA Well, I think like most of us, I started writing the way before I started getting published. I started writing when I was an adolescent and realized I was a writer pretty much instantaneously. Never really gave that much consideration to having a quote unquote "career" that involved making money. I just thought that I would be a writer.

[LAUGHS]

My parents are both musicians, and they didn't really prepare me for what was going to happen when I had bills to pay. So I was really just like, this is what I want to do, this is my life work. And whatever I have to hustle in order to pay my rent and my bills, like I'll be OK. I was lucky that I had lived in New York for like 10 years and had been around the literary scene and around the publishing industry a little bit, so I understood how it worked.

I wasn't totally daunted by what was going to be necessary for me to make some inroads into being a published author. Along the way, up until I started publishing in bigger magazines, smaller magazines would come to me and be like, hey, do you want to give us anything for this issue? Your name gets around and you get asked for stuff. That happens naturally, and I'm sure it's already happening for a lot of you as you're part of a community.

It wasn't really going anywhere, so I decided to try to publish some stories in a larger publication, which was the *Paris Review*. And then I got really lucky because the editor there and I had an instant rapport. And working with him on these short stories that ended up being in my collection, working with Lauren Stein was like-- it was like-- you very rarely meet someone who so intuitively understands what you're doing. It was a great professional relationship that gave me a lot of confidence.

So that was a huge part of how I became more of a published author. I worked for *The Overlook Press*, which was a sort of medium independent publisher. I worked and ended up working in production, which was fun, but I knew I didn't want to be an editor. Other writers I'm sure could relate to just being really frustrated by being part of the process of getting other writers' books published when you're scrounging for time to work on your own. It doesn't feel so great. So I didn't enjoy that.

[LAUGHS]

And so I left *Overlook* and started working for a woman named Jean Stein, who's an oral historian and author who was-- and that became a really important part of my story as well. Working as an editor on her books was totally different. And this is maybe getting more into a question of craft, but as an editor of oral history, Jean Stein basically helped invent the form and genre of oral history, like documentary book, with this book called *ED* that she did with George Plimpton about ED Sedgwick, who I'm sure you guys have heard of, is the factory girl, Andy Warhol muse, et cetera.

The strategy for writing an oral history book is that you do a lot of interview, you transcribe the interviews, you edit the interviews into story, and then you collage the stories to tell a bigger story. So working in that form, I worked for Jean Stein on a book about how these particular families in Hollywood-- it was my job to take 4,000 page transcript and figure out what the stories were and put them into three pages of condensed storytelling.

That was the best lesson I ever could have had when it comes to writing voice, like identifying the peculiarity of a voice and identifying what the voice is actually saying, where the voice is not saying what it's saying, and how to capture that as well. So that was really important to my writing in fact because so much of my writing is in the first person and so much of it is as though the protagonist and narrator are delivering a monologue to the reader. So that was an important job.

CHRIS DAVIS: One thing a lot of students asked-- and you've written short stories and now you've written several novels as well-- how do you go about? Do you start with an outline? If so, do you stick to that or do you kind of deviate from it as you start writing? Do you have a process? Does it vary from story to story or does it differ as well if you are writing a short story versus a novel? What's that process like for you?

OTTESSA

MOSHFEHGH:

I think the cool thing about it is that the process for every project is different. And the project will sort of dictate the necessary process for itself. Writing a short story and writing a long form story as a novel, I have found out that there are some very major practical differences in how to do that.

Writing a short story, which is really-- up until I wrote *Eileen* I identified as a short story writer. I was like this is my form, this is what I love to do. It's just that the short story form is so gorgeous and it's an economy. You read a short story and you're instantly transported. You don't need to read for 50 pages to get into the world. It's just like, boom, and then it's over. And I love that.

And writing a short story-- the process that I grew into and developed was one in which I was always starting from sentence one. Any time that I sat down to work on the story, I began from the beginning. That was important first to understand what is happening in the reading of the story. So I'm not just looking at parts of it, like satellites, because that's not how people read. People read from the beginning.

And I found that if I kept going into it from the beginning, I wasn't necessarily writing in a linear way. I would write into the second paragraph, OK, but now I've written this chunk that actually should go after this part, and I'm moving it. So if you're always starting from the beginning, you're sort of moving things around in a holistic way in the story and generating from a place of inception. Instead of thinking page 10, I'm thinking about the book-- the story as a whole all the time.

And that was the way that I worked on short stories. That's an impossible way to work on a novel. You can't always, every day-- if you're on page 215, go to page 1 and reshuffle the whole book in order to get page 216. So yeah. Sometimes having an outline is really helpful. And I've worked with outlines and I've worked without outlines. And each has its benefits and its rewards, and each also has its limitations.

When I write with an outline, I feel like I can subvert the inclination to be a perfectionist a little bit because if I know where I'm going, if I've kind of done a sloppy or first pass job on a certain section, I don't need to completely nail it in order to move on.

And sometimes when you just give yourself permission to quickly get something out, you make accidents or you get other ideas like, OK, I'll just write that and it doesn't have to be perfect that are sometimes the very gold of the book. So there's a freeness when you have a map and a plan for how to move across it that can lead to a lot of moments of inspiration that you couldn't have planned.

On the other hand, writing without an outline is a total trip because I really do believe that from a book's-- from conceding to the universe that we are about to do this project, you've committed to it, somewhere in the dimension that book, that project is already completed in its ideal form. And it's the job of the artist to work toward that ideal form.

For some reason, this is what I believe and I believe that there is a book and it exists and I'm trying to get to it. It's not that I'm really trying to invent it. If I was inventing it, it would feel totally fake. But there's something about believing in the book and that it's my job to listen to it and transcribe it.

It takes the pressure off of me as a creator and just makes me feel like a servant to it. And then all I have to do is really show up and really listen and really look. There's always something to be found. And that's really what I do is I look at the draft and I look at what's there, and I look at what I missed.

And when I'm writing without an outline, that's all I'm doing. All I can do is refer to the book and the book will tell me what to do. Writing without an outline is, I would say more of an exercise in faith, which can lead to a lot of personal growth like deepening understanding of the creative process, but also can drive you nuts.

The last book I wrote, *My Year Of Rest And Relaxation*, there is no way I could have planned that out. So much of the connections in the narrative are these subtle movements of interiority. And you can't really-- I don't know. I mean, I don't know how to map that out. Like, OK, she's feeling this, and then she sees this, and then she feels this. I mean, I don't not do that. It had to happen with the writing, through the writing of it.

A book like *Eileen*, although the plot is really not that complicated, I did have an outline. I deviated from that outline and changed the story 100 times, but starting with a plan was really helpful because I was entering the story with the world, with a fictional world that already existed for me. So if I wanted to have a character going into town, I wasn't suddenly building the town. The town already existed and I could have-- there was more of a-- there was like a built-in structure for what the story could do.

CHRIS DAVIS: OK. That leads me to my next question. I'm going to combine a few questions that students have asked. How you decide upon the subject of your writing? Do you write what you know? The cliché that sometimes is taught to writing students. Someone else asked, do you base some or all of the characters that you're writing on people you've encountered or that you know?

OTTESSA
MOSHFEGH: I'm the kind of writer that doesn't write unless there is a pressing need to. There's literally a story or a book or something that is bothering me. Like I keep getting the idea, whether I've decided it's a good idea or not. Usually, if it's a good idea, my mind will go back to it. And usually my life will keep referring to it, and I'll get the message that, OK, this is what I'm supposed to write.

So it isn't like an intellectual process. It's more of a-- it isn't really intellectual, it's happening a lot in the part of my mind that I'm not exercising. It's not the voice in my head, it's the voice that I hear in my head that keeps pointing to a story.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I'm going to say something and then tie it into a couple of questions that I wanted to ask you. So when *Eileen* was published and after that, in interviews, you said that you were surprised by a lot of the response that people had towards the main character, the heroine, or the anti-heroine, however you'd like to look at her.

People responded very strongly to what they saw as her being a very unpleasant person, an unlikable character. And that surprised you. Do you think that had anything to do with the fact that she was-- and this is verbatim from a question-- that she was a kind of anti-heroine? Would that kind of response greeted a male character who was kind of in the same circumstances?

OTTESSA
MOSHFEGH: I think that the standards for male and female characters are very different, but also the readership of those books collectively expresses different sets of concerns. I mean, you can look at a book like Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. There are people who would read that book and be like, this character is an abomination. And it would-- it's just people using literature to feed in to what they are already thinking critically about.

So we can pick up any book and be like, this is wrong because I've been thinking this is true-- whatever, socially, politically, spiritually. So this book is an abomination, or this character is wrong. And I think that, sure, that's one way of thinking and it's one way of responding to literature is to get upset by it. But you could also look at that book that's upsetting you more objectively and say, well, this character is expressing something that is irritating me.

Clearly, I'm really into it because I'm reading it and I'm having an emotional response. And I think that what happened with *Eileen* was that people--*Eileen* came out in 2015 at what I think is the beginning of a trajectory in like gender politics, where people are teetering between we love this character because she's disgusting and we hate this character because she's disgusting. Which is-- I don't know-- I think relevant to whatever wave feminism we're in right now. Like, what is a woman supposed to be?

So the book got pulled into that conversation. When I wrote the book, I was not thinking about that stuff at all. I was trying to write an interesting character-- the character that came to me. It's not like I was planning, oh, this will really horrify people, because she's so human. I was just writing a human who had character attributes.

And I think some people were uncomfortable because they felt-- I mean, this is all in the conversations that they're having with themselves and with others about women. I mean, this is the way that you can get pigeonholed when you write about a woman, that people are going to be very critical of how you handle that because it's so political right now.

And I think some people didn't like that I was portraying a woman negatively and that she shouldn't be-- if you have a female character that experiences shame, somehow that's setting a bad example. Looking at books-- because they're media products just as much as a TV show and you can get-- readers can get confused by that.

I'm not Jill Soloway writing television shows teaching mainstream public how to deal with gender non-binary thinking or something. I'm not-- I didn't set up to do that, and I didn't get hired by a corporation to do that to influence culture. All I'm doing is writing a book about an individual. And you can read it or not. Anyway, that's my--

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you for that. So any advice for aspiring women writers in particular?

OTTESSA
MOSHFEGH: I would give the same advice to women writers as I do male writers. Take care of yourself. Protect your creative boundaries. Don't listen to other people very much, especially when you're showing them your work and it's not finished. Find people who think you're amazing and talk to them only. Do not talk to people--

I would say my point here is writing is a very-- it takes so much dedication and involves so much doubt. So number one is to build a fortress around your process and your work. Second to that I would say figure out your day-to-day life in a way that would support your writing.

Live a simple life outside of your writing because your writing should be where the drama comes from. You have a lot of drama outside of your writing life, it's going to eat up all of your energy. So avoid toxic people and environments, and take some care and regulating your schedule.

The third thing I would say is be prepared to have to work 100 times harder than you think you have to. So much about writing is really just writing correctly in a way that takes the reader by the hand. So remember that you're leading a reader or on a journey and the kindness as the leader comes through your precision with every word that you choose.

I can't talk to you about what you should write about or how you should do it, I can only talk about the occasion of your writing. And then just tell you that you need to write really, really clearly. So many good intentions in the work get lost because a sentence is like something that you read and be like, wait, What? What is that? What did she mean when she wrote that? And I have to go back. It interrupts the reading process and it interrupts the fabric of your fiction. Be very hard on your sentences and your clarity. And not just the sentences but the connections you make for the reader.

I have had to learn how to wear a couple of hats in order to feel intact as an artist and still be successful and make a living. I've had to learn how to deal with press, which was a pretty intense lesson because *Eileen* got so much attention. It was my first major book and it got so much attention. And I did so many interviews not knowing what really was at stake.

If you're too much involved in what everybody thinks and what your public persona is, how can you really turn inward and write meaningful fiction? That can be very confusing. So it was important that I stay away from that. It has been extremely important for me to forge friendships with writers and artists who are amazing, and get to know them, and get to see the way that they think and how they deal with life.

So it's not that I feel like I need to save myself from other people, it's just that I feel really, really protective over who I let into my world and what worlds I creep into. That's my spiel.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, talking about fellow writers, that leads me to my next question. And we have time for just a couple more. Several students asked about who your writing inspirations have been, and also specifically if you read other writers' work as you're writing. Do you find that distracting or does that help you? Do you have any inspirations? People who have kind of inspired your style or the kind of subjects that you want to write about?

OTTESSA
MOSHFEGH: I always have so much trouble answering this question about inspiration because everything that I've read has been part of what the input has been that does directly influence output. I mean, there isn't any-- I mean, there is a lot of writing that I dismiss because I'm not interested in it.

But I can be interested in anything at the right time. When I was 13, Kurt Cobain was a huge influence on how I saw myself as an artist and how I saw the world. When I was 32, I went on an Anne Tyler jag for six months and read every single novel, all 10,000 of them that she'd written. Totally-- she's a pretty conventional writer. I didn't feel like I had anything in common with her as a writer. I just really enjoy reading her books.

I don't like reading fiction when I'm writing fiction, which is most of the time. It's weird. I read so little fan fiction. And I actually have very little tolerance for fiction when I'm writing because if something is bad, I'll be like-- oh, this is a waste of the fiction brain. But if something is good, I'll get really upset that somebody did this, like, oh, I want to-- I'll make me want to go back to my own work.

So it's difficult. But mostly, I read research when I'm writing for research. I also watch a lot of things for research.

CHRIS DAVIS: OK. A question on mechanics of writing. There were-- and again, I think probably each writer's path is a unique one and there isn't necessarily a template to becoming a successful published writer, but several students ask about what you would recommend in terms of someone who is just kind of starting out. You know, the traditional publishing industry doesn't really look like what it did 20, 30 years ago. There are a lot of authors who are now self-published. It's a smaller industry.

If someone is trying to get their work published, what would you recommend? Do you need an agent, first and foremost? Does a degree in writing help you to be seen more seriously? Is it all kind of commercial what will sell, what will motivate someone to publish or want to publish your work? If you're just starting out, what does the landscape look like now?

OTTESSA I'm not sure what it looks like now, but I can say what it was six years ago for me. And that was that-- well, from
MOSHFEGH: what I understand from people in the book industry, your degree isn't going to make your book better. People seem desperate to find interesting books. And there are all these variables depending on what the political climate is like. And right now, it seems like there is a movement towards publishing people of color and women. The industry isn't as interested in white male authors as it used to be. Which doesn't mean that they're not interested in them, it just seems like the emphasis is off of them.

But because of that, there is also a lot of interest in books that are sellable in ways that feed into social movements du jour. So I'm sure in the next year there's going to be a lot of novels about "me too" stuff. I would really not focus on that at all. I would just focus on what you want to write, but know that the industry is all about making money.

There-- if I was starting out with a book, let's say, like I had a first book, I don't know if I would do what I did now that I did back with *McGlue*, which was entered into a contest for publication. I kind of feel like the advice that I should give you is to aim high. Send your work to the best agents in New York, find really good representation, because that's what other people are doing. Who's to say that their book is better than yours? Self-publishing-- if that fails, go to an independent press. Some of them have excellent taste and do a really good job publishing books.

CHRIS DAVIS: I just want to say thank you so much for taking the time to do this. I think it's really helpful for aspiring writers and students in this field to hear from those in the industry. And I think your answers have been very thoughtful and interesting, so I want to thank you.

OTTESSA You're welcome.

MOSHFEGH:

CHRIS DAVIS: And Ottesa, I hope you have a wonderful rest of the day. I can't wait to read your next book. Do you know when it will be published? It sounds like you're still working on it.

OTTESSA Well, I have three years to write it.

MOSHFEGH:

CHRIS DAVIS: OK. So have some time.

OTTESSA So yeah. We'll see if I can do it in three years. And then-- so usually, when you finish your book and you give it to the publisher it needs a year usually for the books to come out. Just FYI for everybody out there. Yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: Is that usually for the editing process?

OTTESSA It's really for their sales schedule. They plan books a year so that they can-- publishers do so much sending reps from all over the country to bookstores, sending letters to booksellers just so that they'll stock the book. It's really amazing. When I think about it that way, it's like, thank god this is still going, you know? I can talk about how corporations don't necessarily jive with artistry, but thank god that people are still interested in buying and selling books. It's pretty ruthless out there, so it's like a beautiful thing that people still care.

CHRIS DAVIS: Do you enjoy doing book tours, by the way?

OTTESSA You know? Part of me really enjoys the tour because I get to leave my apartment and meet so many people. And it's a totally singular experience to be on a book tour and traveling alone to cities, some of which I've never been to, navigating life in this totally different zone, and showing up at bookstores not knowing what it's going to be like, there to sort of entertain people but also talk about writing and that's really awesome.

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is the podcast from the Career And Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.