WRITERS MOSAIC

Time and writing: why I'm always writing three things at once

Peter Kalu

'Pete, you're like a general that jumps on his horse and rides off in all directions!' a friend said to me, perplexed by the fact I was writing three things at once – a radio play, a monologue and a novel.

Leaving aside the flattery (comparing me to a general; even more flattering, the idea I can ride a horse!), what was my reply? Well, 'Everyone has their own methods, and this is mine – it's how I roll.'

Of course, there is a downside to doing three things at once – dissipating your energies by spreading yourself too thinly. And, along the journey of writing, I've often glanced a little enviously at those better equipped than myself for monomania – obsessing exclusively about one work. 'Doing three things makes me happy!' is my final line of defence. Of course, it does. But it hasn't made me rich, 'and maybe,' – a little voice whispers, as if I'm in a waiting room somewhere with a close, frank, bored, provocative friend – 'come on, be honest, it hasn't made you vastly successful in that instant name-recognition way.' So, do I have regrets? Yes. I can sometimes lose heart and take on board all the naysayers and feel depleted for an hour, a day, a week. But then I rebound, I rebel, and, restless to mount a defence, I start marshalling reasons why my methods work, at least for me.

Different kinds of work require different lengths of concentration. I live a life where I'm never sure what is around the corner. When some disaster occurs that knocks you sideways – a death, your partner leaving you, misplacing a winning lottery ticket – then your head is full of fog, time has no meaning and, for me, in these circumstances, poems at best are the most I can write (in the case of romantic setbacks, reams of them actually, and most of them doggerel, but hey, that's all I can do in the circumstances, so that's OK).

If my day-to-day life looks such that I can see three days clear with no work appointments or major emotional upheaval on the horizon, and being of reasonably stable and sound mind, then I might try a short story. If – and this is something of a dream but we have to dream, right? – if, I see three months of plain sailing hove into view: my love-life calm, my finances solidly in the black, nothing I need to promote or campaign on that can't wait for three months, then I might get light-headed and start a novel. Or a theatre play.

The logistics of each form – the poem, the short story, the novel, the play – demand different things. The poem is the least demanding. A horizontal surface such as a couch or bench, tea, a drink, a clear sky, a blank wall, access to memory, some kind of grain that may become a pearl. That's pretty much it. I love the simplicity of poetry's requirements – poetry does not demand huge tech specifications, fancy hospitality – roses, chocolates, the lighting at the dressing table to be just so – poetry is as easy-come, easy-go as it gets. For the short story, I require an event, something that has happened or that I can imagine happening, then teasing and elongating this into some imagined or recalled time and space; then I need to figure out *which particular* time and space: to get specific with a short story. I

might need to do a spot of research, pop off to the library to check facts or look up maps.

The novel's requirements are a combination of the poem and the short story but multiplied by ten: the grain, the muse, the memory, the facts and wider research – travel. That means planning, being away for days at a time, and of course endless loops of this as the plot develops, the story changes, new things need to be looked up, new ideas and motivations dreamed of. Potentially the most demanding of forms, logistics-wise, is theatre. It is a collaborative form, especially the non-script-based, director- or actor-centred type of theatre. Endless phone calls, meetings, planning documents, milestones, targets, meetups, rehearsals, flounces-off, tears, chastened returns, script revisions, changes of director, space problems, choreography, music, lighting, set design. Getting all this sorted is also often unpaid. Theatre can be a great joy – so many wonderful people work in that world – but its time demands are also the most difficult to manage. Theatre is a diva. I take on theatre only once in a blue moon, and prefer radio to stage, especially when tripling up.

That said, multi-tasking or tripling up is something most of us are familiar with outside of art. Anybody who tries to raise more than one kid knows that you can love two projects at once and keep them both moving or growing at the same time. One kid does something remarkable, like actually managing to finish some homework on time for once, while the other hits the doldrums. You keep geeing them both up, you don't suddenly love one of them less for not gaining traction on something at the same speed as the other. It's the same in the field of menial work with zero-hours contracts – that phenomenon of people holding down three jobs at once to make ends meet. To be poor now is to be juggling jobs, responsibilities and state bureaucracies almost constantly. So why not for writers that same juggling?

Gone are the days of the leisurely writer sitting in an attic, or in the smoking room by the window at the roll top desk, pipe in mouth being gently sucked upon as they contemplate how best to set down in copperplate the infinite mysteries of the universe, said writer unbothered by such mundane matters as a nappy that needs changing, a bill to pay or bailiffs at the door to see off. That's a bygone age. We live in more frantic times.

Turning to Freud, as we all sometimes do and must, perhaps another reason to be doing this tripling up, is that my first publication came about this way, and, like first sex, maybe the experience stays with you and steers your future patterns. So how did my first experience of publication come about, how was it for me? Let me confess. It involved a little chicanery on my part. Hear me out. I was writing a crime thriller hoping to get it published. I was about two years in on that, and into about draft three and rejection letter maybe five. Then this piece of news dropped that the BBC were looking for radio plays by black writers. I didn't have one. But I had a short story – some strange gothic thing. So, I sent that out and said (lied) I had a radio version but sorry, I couldn't print it out – my printer had died. I got a letter back (yes, a letter, we're going back in time) saying they loved the story, please send in the radio play version, we assume you've fixed the printer by now? As soon as possible. OK. What to do? I bought a tiny book about 36 pages long – from a charity shop, 'How to write a radio play'. It needed to be short as I didn't have time to read a long-assed textbook. I followed that little manual. The play was accepted and that was my first publication – a radio play called *AfroGoth*. Derived from a short story. The whole writing process for the thing was about two months. And they paid me, in today's money, about three thousand pounds. Meanwhile, that novel I'd laboured over for two and half years, was still reaping rejection slips. So, and I presume the Freudians will agree, I must have internalised the idea that you can't guess the market, you can never know what people want,

and that, contrary to everything your schoolteachers told you, there is no direct relationship between effort (read three years-and-counting on a novel) and attainment (read three months and three grand for an on-the-fly radio play).

Having heard counter-arguments from monomania-supporting writers over many years, I've had time to plunge into deep theory and so here's some further, more academic justifications for tripling up that I've unearthed. Bear with me now (or put the kettle on). I came across David Eagleman, a neuroscientist interested in the nature of time. He's been interested in how time slows in moments of danger or crisis – ever since he fell off a roof at eight years old and noticed the phenomenon. Much of his work has been trying to find and analyse biological clocks. A few have been pretty much located: the circadian clock in the hypothalamus tracks night and day; the cerebellum tracks muscle movement and works in seconds or minutes; the bits of grey matter called the basal ganglia also deal with time though scientists are not yet sure quite how. Time.

Eagleman has done a range of experiments ranging from the bizarre to the plain crazy to test hypotheses. One of the most fascinating points he makes is that the senses work at different speeds, that all sensory information is processed by the brain to form a kind of unified theory of reality; and that there is a processing lag while this happens. So our perception of something is always milliseconds behind the event itself: we are all living in the perpetual past.

Another observation Eagleman makes is that when things become samey, we stop storing them in memory. The reverse also applies. When things go skew-whiff, suddenly the brain, including memory, awakes, and time starts to stretch, recording goes High Definition. The amygdala is thought to be

responsible for this occurrence. If the amygdala is the seat of emotion AND memory, and kicks into overdrive when a threat is sensed, it could explain why some people remember things in great detail and why others hardly remember the same event at all. I can still remember intensely the first time I went wind-surfing some thirty years ago. The exhilaration – a mixture of mortal fear and mind-bending euphoria as I flew like a god across fathoms of water on that blazing hot day in Chicago – is an experience I'll take to my grave.

My favourite example of how time morphs, is the 'brown shoe/flower' experiment Eagleman has written about. When shown a series of shoes interrupted occasionally by a picture of a flower, observers thought the flower picture was shown for longer than the shoe picture. It wasn't. We simply notice it more because of its novelty.

So, what's all this got to do with writing? It might help explain why I've always got several writing projects on the go. Switching then returning to something later defamiliarises the text, so allowing the shoe to become a flower. Everyone has their own way of getting their writing to bloom. Tripling up works for me.

Peter Kalu

Born to a Danish mother and a Nigerian father in Manchester in the sixties, Peter Kalu grew up in Manchester. His short stories can be found in *Seaside Special* (Yorkshire: Bluemoose 2018), *A country to call home* (London: Unbound 2018) and *Closure* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press 2015).

He is currently interested in the problematics of closure in the narrative form — the sense that, in providing neat endings, the story form suggests

the world is fixable. The questioning of essentialist or intrinsic identity – as that may or not relate to the authenticity of lived experience, black 'double-consciousness', the narrative text as an attempt at reproducing consciousness, and the fundamental contingency of culturally-inflected notions of personality – also keeps him up at night, along with worry about paying bills. An associated concern is the nature of self-narrative, and the dynamic between storytelling and selfhood in answering the question 'who am I?' (as opposed to the question 'what am I?'). Retrieving lost, elided and disavowed British black histories is a further trope in his work, and he has written three short stories as part of the Leicester University co-ordinated *Colonial Countryside* project. His chapter 'Strangers at the Gate: Intermediality, Borders and the Short Story' can be found in the Palgrave Macmillan academic publication: *Borders and the Border Crossings in the Contemporary British Short Story* (2020). He tried but was unable to squeeze the word 'ontology' into this paragraph.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**