

Transcript: Heather - finishing up and moving on

Can you talk me through the final year of the PhD and into the world beyond it?

Well the final year of my PhD I was writing up frantically. I had a very intensive year of writing. I wrote about 2000 words a day for probably nine months to a year so I was incredibly focused. It was really hard work but I just was determined to get it done and all I can remember about it is just writing and writing and writing and writing really and then a very sort of structured process of the supervisor reading it, editing.

Were you thinking about what you were going to do afterwards?

No I don't think I was. I think during the last sort of, oh no hang on, it's so difficult to think back. No I actually had a post doc already, that was it. I had in the first early months of my – sorry – for the latter few months of my PhD when I was editing, when a draft had been finished, when I was editing it I'd already started a post doctoral fellowship that was for one year.

How did you get that?

I applied for it during the final year of my PhD with a view to doing a project after my PhD which I never did but I had this year and I thought I would do it and I actually, because my PhD took a lot longer than I thought it would – as I think lots of people's do – when I started the post doctoral fellowship year I still hadn't finished my PhD so the beginning of that year was spent editing and finishing the PhD and submitting it to my supervisor, waiting for her to read it and then it was finally finished, submitted and then the months of waiting – so while I was waiting I had this post doctoral fellowship. I continued to teach as I had done during my final years of doctoral work so I was teaching undergraduates and working on; I put a proposal in to edit a collection of writing by the author I'd studied for my PhD and that was going through the process so during that post doctoral year in fact I edited a book of writing by my author who I'd studied.

How did you get the opportunity to do that?

I did that by contacting – at the same time that I applied for the post doc I think – I contacted by e-mail the editor of a series of similar works by writers from the same period and I sent a proposal to the editor who got back to me and wanted to publish the work. So during the period when I was waiting to hear about my thesis, it was the very early stages of this very small book that I was putting together as part of the post doctoral fellowship but I was also looking into going freelance during the; no I think soon after, once I had my viva, once my viva was over and I got the PhD I was pretty clear that I wanted to start going in a different direction but I wasn't quite sure how it would work out or exactly what I wanted to do. It was a very sort of open period and very frightening and stressful in lots of ways but also very necessary because I was thinking of applying for academic jobs and looking into what I could publish but I wasn't really feeling that it was the right thing and it already was obvious to me that I needed to go in a different direction. So I started to look into other writing ideas that I'd had. I started reviewing for the national press and started doing the odd bits of journalism. In the final year of my PhD I started writing for websites for free which is a good place to start as a freelance writer and I started reviewing for websites and that provided me with sample writing to send to editors of newspapers and magazines and I contacted editors and in the final year of my PhD I began publishing reviews in the national press. I started reviewing for The Independent, particularly in the TLS and then, so I had some experience of writing outside academia once my PhD had finished and I was in this one year post doc position putting together this book of writing by the person I'd done my PhD on and then I started having ideas about other kinds of writing I wanted to do so I really started doing research on new projects, looking into different ideas and just getting my head round the idea of leaving academia really because lots of friends were moving into academic jobs or JRFs, Junior Research Fellowships, and applying for academic positions and publishing their thesis in academic journals or as books but it wasn't the right thing for me. So it took me quite a long time to get my head round that and in the meantime while I was really making this psychological shift I started working with; I did a lot of research into dyslexia in higher education, contacted a lot of people I went to talk to about what kind of support was provided that I hadn't received myself cos the support that is now currently available wasn't in place when I was a graduate and it became clear that there were openings and a need for people to support dyslexic undergraduates and graduates and so I started working with them and that was very helpful financially and in terms of thinking about my own relationship with dyslexia and my own strategies. It sort of confirmed my own thoughts about it. I did a lot of reading about dyslexia and in fact wrote some articles on my own experiences for The Times Higher Education Supplement so that was a very important strand of shifting into freelance writing. Looking carefully at what my own experience of the doctoral process had been, alongside that I started having ideas for books and contacted literary agents and got the support of a literary agent who advised me on how to develop my ideas into a proposal that could be shown to editors and commissioned which is what I did in the year after the post doc had finished. I continued teaching and writing bits of journalism and I was developing a proposal to try and sell.

A book proposal?

A book proposal with advice of an agent. And I also applied for a research fellowship with the Women's Library in London which was open to freelancers specifically for freelancers, people not in higher education. So I started looking into the kind of funding positions that were available outside academia for freelance people and there are all kinds of things out there.

How do you find them?

Just looking on the web. The Society of Authors has advice but it's slightly just luck, you just come across things and apply for them.

How did you get an agent?

I just contacted an agent. They're all listed in The Writers and Artists Year Book.

How did you know which one to contact?

I was actually advised by a friend who to contact cos he was a non-fiction editor and the book that I was wanting to do was a non-fiction book so I contacted him during my post doc year and he wanted to meet me so we met and discussed various ideas and he gave me advice on how to write a proposal, what a proposal involved and I went away and then spent the rest of my post doc year on it and then I had this fellowship at the Women's Library after that year which was basically just an opportunity just to do some research and to give public lectures on my research so it was similarly a kind of transitional year as well as after the post doc and during that year I wrote the proposal and the editor gave me feedback and advice and I edited it and rewrote it and there was a lot of work involved.

The editor or the agent?

The agent, sorry and then that was finally ready for sale and the agent sold it and I was commissioned to write the book and then that's enabled me financially to write pretty much full-time with a little bit of teaching. And from my experience at the Women's Library, where they host creative writing workshops, I started to – my own experience is I attended a creative writing workshop myself which helped my writing shift from academic to creative writing called the Paris Writers Workshop. It's this week long summer school run by established writers so I attended that and that was a significant turning point in my writing style. I think it helped me to get the book deal.

What was that like, that workshop?

It was very helpful because it was an opportunity to meet other aspiring writers and to talk to established creative writing practitioners about how they worked and so it was very helpful. It gave me some advice about how to change my writing style and was very sort of, quite ruthless in that we had to submit written work and our tutor was quite ruthless with us and it was quite difficult cos he really said what didn't work and what did and made you kind of face up to what your own writing style was and where you wanted to take it so it was very kind of, it was a really important week. It was really useful.

What kinds of things were you having to write?

Erm, we didn't have to write very much while we were on the course. We only had one bit of writing that we did where we had to write about – did we have to write about house? I think we had to write about a house from our childhood. Mainly what we did was look at passages of writing, and we submitted written work to him the week before and he'd read it and then did tutorials with us so we had feedback on work that we'd written previously.

Coming from academic writing how did that feel?

It felt quite difficult and I was quite resistant to him and his comments but I knew he was right and actually it was — a breakthrough kind of happened during that week with my writing. I felt that it just sort of turned and went in the direction that it needed to go in so it was very, very helpful and shortly after that the proposal was finished and the book deal went through so, and from my experiences going to a creative writing workshop and seeing the creative writing workshops at the Women's Library I was keen to start teaching creative writing. I kind of intuitively knew that that's the kind of teaching I would like to do and that I'd felt unsatisfied. I'd felt similarly unsatisfied with teaching criticism during my doctoral work as I had with writing criticism so I started teaching creative writing workshops at the Women's Library and those went really, really

well. It came very naturally to me and I've started to develop that in other areas now and I teach creative writing workshops regularly now so there was a similar shift in my teaching as there was in my writing, I think, over to creative writing, away from criticism.

Can you unpack a bit more about how you made that transition then to teaching creative writing?

Well I think it sounds like it was quick but I think it had been growing for a long time. I think by the time I actually attended the creative writing workshop my writing was sort of nearly there, it just needed to be tipped over the edge really into what I really wanted to do and sometimes you do just have to leap in. You do just need to start doing something; you just need to do it and there's no, you know, you just have to make a decision and I just leapt into the dark you know and said I'm going to teach a creative writing workshop. I read lots of books about teaching creative writing and I drew on my own experiences and it just, you just had to do it, I just did it and it worked and it just was natural. It was like someone, it was just like a baby knows how to swim or something. You just do it and it's right so it confirmed my instincts that this was what I needed to do.

How did you find out about the opportunities to teach these workshops?

Just from being at the Women's Library and having the residency there. They have lots of, well they run lots of workshops so it kind of opened my mind to the possibility and I looked into it and I kind of just thought about what I'd find useful and I think that's another way you can find out what you need to do in terms of teaching. I thought what would help me and what would I enjoy doing and then I thought 'well, if I enjoy it and I find this useful that means other people probably would as well cos I'm not different to other people' so that was the kind of quite organic way in which I moved towards it. So I think I drew on teaching experience I'd had previously, knowing how to help people to read their own work critically, read other work critically, so the work that I did for my PhD certainly feeds into the creative writing teaching absolutely in the same way that it feeds into my own writing, but it's just slightly differently focused so it was about building on previous skills and then adapting them to slightly different purposes I think.