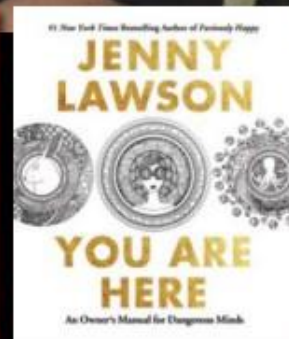


Jenny Lawson



The memoirist talks quitting her day job, making the journey from blogger to bestselling author, and her new Fantastic Strangelings Book Club.
BY CEDRIC ROSE



Jenny Lawson, a.k.a. “The Bloggess,” had been building a following for years with her darkly hilarious and candid blog when she debuted at number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list in 2012 with *Let’s Pretend This Never Happened: A Mostly True Memoir*. Her essay collection *Furiously Happy: A Funny Book About Horrible Things*, hung tough on the NYT top 20 list for five months. Her self-help-manual/memoir/coloring book, *You Are Here: An Owner’s Manual for Dangerous Minds*, came next. The week she spoke with WD, she was a “puddle of relief” from having just turned in second edits for her next essay collection, all while working feverishly to open The Nowhere Bookshop, a community-based bookstore in San Antonio. That project has driven her to seek out diverse books and readers, leading to her creation of a book club for misfits, The Fantastic Strangelings Book Club.

With her hallmark self-deprecating humor, Lawson wins hearts and minds through inspirational writing that goes deep and doesn’t shy away from difficult themes, including her struggles with mental illness and severe depression. Lawson is a writer of broad emotional range and always open about the creative and editorial processes behind her work.

During the course of her phone interview with WD, for which she was parked outside a drive-through Sonic restaurant, Lawson was offered, but graciously declined, someone else’s burger.

As a writer and blogger, do you differentiate between these two forms of writing in terms of your creative approach? Which came first, the blogger or the writer?

I’ve always written. I had (and still have) a lot of problems with anxiety and that made communication difficult for me. Writing was one of the best ways to express myself. I started blogging about a decade ago and it was really helpful in letting me develop my voice and being able to see what reached people and what didn’t. It gave me a lot of confidence to do more long-form writing because the things I thought no one would ever understand were the very things people would love and relate to most. Turns out there are a lot of us weirdos out in the world.

In *Furiously Happy* you write about how forcing yourself to write doesn’t work. Do you have any tricks for getting yourself into that writing headspace?

I struggle with writer’s block a lot, particularly when I’m in a depressive episode. I allow myself time to refill my creative cup by reading things that inspire me or listening to podcasts or watching TV. I take long walks and go over the stories in my head. I take my ADD meds. There is also a writing prompt I use when I’m struggling: *This is what I want you to know*. It came from another blogger named Kristen Howerton [of *RageAgainstTheMinivan.com*]. There’s something freeing about letting yourself tell a story with no real beginning or end, just telling a story because you want someone to hear it. Sometimes those stories become great chapters.

It’s not like, “Here’s the topic and I have to find something.” Instead it’s, “This is what I really want out in the world. The thing that I want for you to know.”

It’s freeing to actually write the thing that you want to write, because everybody when they start out tries to be the authors that they loved. I remember thinking I want to be the next Shirley Jackson. Then I realized I’m not really Jackson and it would be really weird if I was her.

I was able to explore all of these different voices, but every author has to come up with their individual voice. It takes a while. It’s like when you’re a teenager trying on these different personalities and you’re like, “Maybe I’m goth? Maybe I’m preppy? Then you find the one and you’re like, “Oh, it turns out I’m just me.” It’s the same thing with finding your voice.

What was the worst case of writer’s block you ever had? And what was it like fighting through that?

I struggle a lot with writer’s block in every one of my books, but definitely with the most recent, I had several months where I just thought I’ll never write again and I’m never going to be funny again. Everything is lost. Not only that, but eventually people are going to realize that my books are not that funny or interesting. I deal a lot with imposter syndrome and I constantly feel like at any moment people are going to say “Why would we like her? We made a terrible mistake!” Part of that is when I have depressive episodes I get this brain fog. Then when

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I have anxiety, I get this very paralyzed kind of anxiety so I can’t move forward. So in some cases, I’ve had to give myself a couple of months and, you know, really work on the mental illness aspect of it. Finding new treatments and finding what works. That has been really helpful. And sometimes it’s just all about honestly letting go for a little bit. My husband—because he’s very work, work, work, then wake up at six in the morning and work again until 10 at night—he’s like: Just sit down at the computer and write. That’s not how it works for me.

Were there any special people in your life who taught you or helped you teach yourself? People who, knowingly or not, helped you become a writer? My father is a writer, although I don’t think he would qualify himself in that way. He’s a taxidermist and a creative and just a strange sort of guy. But when I was growing up, he wrote these small, funny stories in these little free papers that would come out in our tiny town. So I probably got it from him more than anyone else. These nostalgic, sweet stories became love letters to his family and his parents. He definitely inspired me. And there were a lot of different writers who absolutely inspired me. David Sedaris was one of the first where I thought: I had no idea that you could just write essays, that you didn’t have to write a memoir. So that was extremely freeing. And there are lots of people who even now really inspire me. If I have really bad writer’s block, I read Samantha Irby’s books, because there’s something in the way that she writes that makes me feel like we’re having a conversation.

Let’s Pretend It Never Happened drew comparisons to David Sedaris, which on the one hand, if I squint really hard I can almost see but on the other hand seems like the sort of stretch that critics make when,

confronted with a unique work, they’re strapped for comparisons. By which I mean, do you secretly harbor an inner, chain-smoking gay man?

Oh my gosh, I love it. I would very much love to be in the same category as David Sedaris because I adore his writing. But no, I don’t think we’re similar. We’re both honest and strange and humorous, but I’m not sure that I would go much further. We’ve actually e-mailed before. And my publicist and his publicist were the same. And so I sort of got to know him through that. He was very nice. But I don’t think we’re the same person. He’s a real extrovert and he’s interested in people. Oh, yeah, we’re not actually alike *at all*. We just bring about the same emotions in people about being able to relate, and being weird, and making you laugh.

What was it like to leave your job in HR to write? What prompted the decision, and how did you feel when you took that leap?

It was terrifying. I was sucking at my job because I really wanted to write and couldn’t concentrate on anything else. My boss actually sat me down and had a come-to-Jesus meeting with me, but instead of just talking about how I needed to be a better employee, she told me that she sometimes regretted staying in the career she was in, the one that I could be in if I cracked down and worked hard enough. She inspired me to try writing full time and I’m still so grateful for her. I was lucky that my husband had just taken a good job and was able to support me for a year as long as I kept taking writing assignments. I feel incredibly lucky that I had the support of so many people. Not everyone has that and there are so many amazing writers out there who haven’t been given the chance to really share their story yet.

What sort of assignments were you taking, and how did you get from freelancing to writing your memoir?

When I was in HR all of the writing that I was doing was through the *Houston Chronicle* and it was free. I did a couple of blogs for them. Then I took some writing stuff with CafeMom and places like that. They were less journalism and more like freelance blogging. I thought I would just be doing that forever. It wasn't until I met my agent at a blogging conference where I sat in on her speech about how you do a proposal and what you do and don't do as an author.

Halfway through, I got up and left. I was like, "Fuck this. I can't follow any of these rules, forget it." I got drunk immediately and embarrassed myself at the conference, which she witnessed and was like, "Who is that?" And everybody was like, "That's Jenny Lawson." She started reading my blog and was like, "You've got a book in you." So it was a strange, lucky moment of finding the right person and shows how stupid I was because before that, when I was just blogging and working in HR, this lady reached out to me and was like, "I'm an editor. I think you should write a book." Because I knew nothing about books, I was like, "This lady just wants me to write a book so she can fix my grammar and charge me for that."

So I was like, "Yeah, I don't think so." I had no idea that editors *buy* your books and work for the publisher. So basically I got pitched to get a book bought, and was like, "No, I can do grammar myself."

On *The Bloggess* you told a new writer who asked you how you deal with negative reviews that basically, you don't. You filter them through family and friends. Beyond criticism, with as much as you have going on, how do you firewall against distractions and keep your creative light shining in this complicated world? I feel like I fail at this all the time. I have so many problems with self-loathing that I don't really need to read bad reviews because I already said everything terrible to myself. And then suddenly some new idea will shine through and I'll realize I can't stop writing even if it's hard.

I'm intrigued by that, the fact that you can't stop writing even if it's hard. How did you become that person, that writer who just can't not write?

I don't have a memory of when it first started happening because I've always written, even when I was little. I

have always had those sort of breakthroughs like, "Oh my gosh, I know exactly how this needs to go, and no one talk to me because I have got to get this out of my head." These moments don't happen *very* often, unfortunately. I wish they happened more. But whenever they do, I always feel like, "This is what I'm supposed to be." Even though it may be two months in between each one, it's still enough. And especially because when I was younger, I didn't have a whole lot of communication skills because my anxiety was so bad and untreated. Writing was the one way that I could really express myself. When I was going to high school and junior high, we didn't have email or any of that. So you just wrote notes in between classes. That would be how I would talk to my friends. I'd write these long, ridiculous, funny notes and then at lunch they would be like, "Why won't you talk to us?" And I'm like, "I've got to go hide." I'd just hide in the bathroom. They were like "She's so weird. And why is she so funny on these notes when in real life, she won't talk to us?" Well I don't know. I'm broken. Sorry.

In your TEDx talk you spoke about how our stories set us free. You said " ... it is only through trust and authenticity and radical honesty that we can see how far we've come and how far we still have to go. You can change the world in ways you cannot possibly imagine by sharing your story. So start small. Tell a friend or family member. Write your story on a piece of paper or stick it inside a library book."

I love that idea of sticking it inside a library book, the safety of just putting your story out into the world. So I wonder what advice you have for other bloggers and writers who are at that point where they're just starting out and beginning to see the platforms on which they tell their stories grow. You know, it's so hard to make the decision to share the harder stories because once they're out there, they're always out. I would say anything that you write about, that you think you're the only one, you're going to find so many other people who not only deal with the same thing, but are relieved and grateful to hear that they are not alone. It almost always ends up being a really good and wonderful thing. But I have learned that it is important before you share the hard stories that you make sure that you have a support system, whether that's a therapist that's on call or friends and family who you've told first, and have got your back. It was really

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helpful for me when I would struggle with some of my harder stuff, I wouldn’t read the comments. I would instead go to a friend and be like, “Can you tell me what’s happening out there?” And she could look and be like, “Pretty much everybody thinks you’re crazy, but in a really good way. And it’s all good.” And then also she can legitimately and honestly say, “Here are the questions that some people have.” Or, “Here are some misunderstandings.” That to me was really helpful. I don’t need it so much now because I feel way more confident than when I was first getting out there.

The other thing is that often when we’re sharing the harder stories, they’re not just our stories. I was lucky that my family was really supportive. And any time that I wanted to share something, my agent and my editor were like, “Is your family going to be OK with this?” And I would be like, “Oh, yeah. I read it to them before anybody got to see it.” And they were the ones that helped me more with it. Very often we underestimate the support that we get from people, especially when it’s the sort of thing where this is my memory of it and I’ll tell the story. And my mom will be like, “Yeah, that’s kind of what happened but really it was like this,” and my sister will be like, “No, really it was like this.” And my dad is like, “Really? You’re all *wrong*.”

With opening a bookstore you’ve probably thought about books and the publishing industry. It seems like we’re seeing a transformation in publishing. We’re talking about this opening up to new voices that aren’t all male and white, but most would say there’s still this tremendous amount of work to be done in that area, because these are entrenched institutions. I wonder what advice would you have for yourself if you suddenly found yourself sitting in the big plush leather seat at the top of the headquarters tower of an international publishing house. That is such a good question. We started a book club a few months ago and although I can’t tell you all of the

selections because we reveal them one month at a time, I can tell you that so far the authors have all been women and many are women of color or identify as LGBTQ, so I’m happy to be able to choose such amazing books that happen to be from diverse voices. There are so many great writers out there that aren’t amplified the way they should be.

What I keep going back to is there is never a point when I’m like, *I’m all full up on books. I don’t need any more stories*. Let’s continue to have all of the same voices that we have but then more, because you do tend to get to this point where it’s like, *I can think of, you know, five authors* and then you get further along in your life like, *There’s actually all these other voices*. It’s like Netflix. You’re never like, *Damn you, Netflix, you came up with another good show!* No. You’re like, *Oh. That’s wonderful*.

The wonderful thing about looking for diverse voices and looking for voices of people who we’re not necessarily hearing from is you find all of these voices and stories that you’ve never heard, and that changes the way you think. And all of a sudden you’re looking at things with a new perspective. There’s something amazing about that, because I know I get to the point where I’m like, “I’ve seen it all. I’ve done it all. I hate the world. Everybody sucks, politics are awful, and everybody hates everybody else.” Then some amazing book or podcast or show will fall in my lap and I’m like, “There is so much hope out there.” And that’s the thing: All of those stories are little messages of hope. If we can get all of those stories to everyone else, then we continue to inspire each other and the world just gets better. So, yeah, I think if I was in the big plush seat, I would be like, “Let’s publish everything. Let’s get it all out there.” **WD**

Cedric Rose is a librarian and freelance writer living in Cincinnati with his partner, their son, and a very tolerant dog. His writing has appeared in *Saveur*, *Belt*, *The London Library*, *Cincinnati Magazine*, and *Edible Ohio Valley*.