

Episode 59 - Jessie Kwak

EMILY

Welcome to the Hybrid Pub Scout podcast with me, Emily Einolander. We're mapping the frontier between traditional and indie publishing. Today we are speaking with author Jesse Kwak. About her book *From Chaos to Creativity—Building a Productivity System for Artists and Writers*. Jessie Kwak is a freelance writer and author living in Portland, Oregon. She writes character driven sci fi and fantasy with a liberal dose of explosions, gun fights, crime and dinner parties. She likes to make her readers laugh. She is the author of supernatural thriller *From Earth and Bone*, the Durga system series of gangster sci fi novels, and productivity guide *From Chaos to Creativity*. When she's not writing b2b marketing copy or scribbling away on her latest novel, you can find her riding her bike to the brew pub road tripping with her husband, or juggling various sewing projects. Welcome, Jesse.

01:17

JESSIE

Thank you for having me.

EMILY

Alright, so let's jump into talking about *From Chaos to Creativity*. First, why did you write this book?

01:27

JESSIE

Well, so as you read in my bio, I'm a freelance b2b copywriter, I write novels for fun, I do a lot of other random things in my life. And when I first started, freelancing was about eight years ago, and I was like, Oh, I'll totally have time to write fiction and freelance, which of course, you mentioned, you just took your writing business full time, so it's hard. So I worked, I struggled for a while to come up with a productivity system that would help me wrangle all the things that needed to be wrangled. And once I found something that like, worked really well, for me, I was like, You know what, this is great. I'm a productivity guru, I'm gonna write a book about how the system is perfect. And then I started like, explaining it to people, and they're like, Oh, that would never work for me, I do this, oh, that wouldn't work for me, I do this. Well, I might use that part, but I wouldn't use that part. And I was like, okay. So I started realizing, it's not about finding a perfect productivity system, it's about finding something that works for you personally. And so much of what's out there is written for, like, kind of the corporate world or like, more, you know, if you have XY and Z tasks to do today, and your boss has assigned you this and that, here's how to be productive. Whereas when you're doing creative work, your brain works differently. But then also the work is just different. So that's where this book came from, trying to help people with creative brains who are doing creative work, come up with a way of wrangling the cast a little better.

03:09

EMILY

Yeah, I definitely remember when I was doing part time, freelancing work. And I read David Allen, and I had that exact same feeling where I was just like, this doesn't really apply to me. I'm not a, you know, a corporate CEO, I literally don't have a file cabinet.

JESSIE

I loved David Allen's Getting Things Done. And it took a lot of inspiration from that. But it was exactly, I had exactly that experience of like, wait, but this doesn't work. I mean, I literally pitched this book to my editor at Microcosm as "it's like Getting Things Done but for creative brains."

EMILY

Yeah, I definitely see that too. So let's talk about how you set the book up, you break planning a creative system into four steps, capturing the chaos, setting priorities, sorting the chaos and scheduling the work. Could you give a high level overview of what each of those entail?

JESSIE

Yeah. So essentially, the goal of coming up with a system is so that you can stop stressing about whether you're missing things and actually, like, make the brain space to get the work done. So it's, I guess, I do want to start by saying, like, productivity shouldn't be about like, how can you do more things like more efficiently, about how to do the right things, and free up the space and the mental energy that you need to do your creative work? So part of the system is going to be how to say no to things like how to get things off your plate. But so essentially, I get most stressed out when I don't know what I'm missing. And so that's where the capture part of the system comes in. So it's about making sure you're not missing things that are things that you're supposed to be doing. So whether that's paying a bill, answering an email Mail, you know, maybe recurring things like getting a present for your sister's birthday, things like that. And so I say, in the book, I talk about how to just kind of figure out all the places that chaos is coming into your life, your email inbox, your like physical mailbox, you know, are people leaving you text messages? Is it your own ideas? How do you capture your own ideas, so you don't lose those consolidated as much as possible, so that you're only having to check a few different places, instead of being like, I don't know, sometimes we get like, our physical mail is just scattered all over the house. And I'm like, I don't even know what's happening.

EMILY

I have no idea what you're talking about.

05:44

JESSIE

Isn't there a bill to show up getting all of your inputs, all of this chaos into a few different I call them corrals, because I grew up on a farm. So I like that idea. And then, yeah, so that is the capture part, capturing everything in a few places, then setting priorities. And this is essentially, you know, it's pretty straightforward. But just because something is in your inbox or in your corral doesn't mean that you should do it or need to do it, or that it should be one of your priorities. So if you, ahead of time, identify a couple priorities, then you can use that to do the next step, which is to sort through all of the chaos that's come into your inbox. So you know, get rid of the fluff. And say, okay, these are the things that I

actually do need to do, I don't need to, I don't need to vacuum this week, it doesn't matter. like nobody's coming to my house, it's COVID. Doesn't matter. Clearing out that fluff and then getting to the next step, which is scheduling the work. So I recommend, instead of just working with like a massive To Do List, actually say, Okay, on Monday, I'm going to work on this; on Tuesday, I'm going to work on this. And I like to break it up throughout the week. And sometimes I will go as far as to break it out, like schedule things during the day to say, Okay, write myself a little less like from eight to 10, I'm going to work on my novel, and then 10 to 11, I've got a call. So 11 to two to noon I'll like, clear out my email inbox, you know. And so when you schedule things, it helps you see a lot easier, like, what can you actually accomplish during the day or the week? And it also kind of keeps you on track? You're like, oh, wow, okay, well, I know, I was supposed to be done clearing out my inbox in like, five minutes from now. And I'm still going so that just me, I need to wrap this up like I can't, this person doesn't need this longer response or whatever just kind of keeps you on track.

07:55

EMILY

So when you're talking about capturing and sorting, you mean like down to the smallest things? A lot of people would probably not even consider a to do item of like inbox sorting, or whatever. It seems like the sort of thing where you would kind of just shove it into the back of your mind and be like, oh, I need to do that at some point. But you're saying, Put everything down?

JESSIE

Yeah. And the reason for that is like, if it's just in your mind that you need to do it someday, like your brain doesn't really have the ability to prioritize on its own. And so your brain will constantly be like, wait, you needed to do that thing, you need to do that thing. And even if it's the smallest thing like vacuum, or mend the curtains or something ridiculous. It's like, once you write it down, then your brain suddenly is like, okay, she's got it, it's fine. I can stop yelling about it. And then that's what helps you actually like, keep that create that space to do your creative work.

EMILY

Yeah, my partner was asked me last night to take something out of the take some bread dough out of the fridge to prove at like seven and I was like, Don't go away. And I had to put it in my little to do list and put an alarm for it. Because I was like, I will literally forget the simplest thing, if I don't put it down. So yeah, I am 100% behind that idea.

JESSIE

Yeah, I mean, that's such a great example of like, write it, jot it down, set an alarm, because then you're not like, you know, say you were going to write for the next hour until seven. And then you're like, glancing at the clock is okay. It's 6:36...:45. Like, I need to take the bread back in 10 minutes. But if you set an alarm, it's out of your mind. Your brain can stop yelling about it, and you can just do your work.

EMILY

I love that. You're saying the brain can't prioritize things on its own. And I know a lot of us feel very strongly about a lot of things. When we set priorities, what are some of your tips for doing that?

10:01

JESSIE

Yeah, I have, like, you know, 85 different projects going on at any given time. And I'm, like all creative people, you're just, there's so many priorities, right? There's so many things. What really helps to me is just to do a little visualization exercise, and tell yourself like, Okay, if I had one day a week, but I had nothing to do, I had no day job, no family obligations, it was just me, you know, me and 10 hours of peace and quiet. And you know, my creative project of choice? What would that project be? Would it be reading your novel? Would it be working on your painting? Would it be starting a business? Like, what would you do if you had one uninterrupted day a week? And like, be honest with yourself, because life's too short to be chasing after something that you don't really feel that passionate about? So that I would say, is my favorite way of helping somebody identify like, what is the most important thing? Because I might be, I would spend that time with my kids, you know, like, and that's great. That is absolutely great. It doesn't have to be, you know, this big life earth shattering thing. It might be, I would volunteer more for a local social justice organization. Using that, to kind of figure out what you really want to be spending your time on. That is one of your priorities, right? That thing that you just identified? We also have, you know, we've got family obligations, we have work obligations, there are things that are just going to be a priority, whether or not they're our passion.

EMILY

Yeah, I got to make that money, pay that mortgage.

JESSIE

And I love Charlie Gilkey who runs productive flourishing. Are you familiar with that? No organization, and he does a podcast with his wife, Angela Wheeler, it's fantastic. I highly recommend checking it.

EMILY

I'll try the notes work, okay.

JESSIE

But he always says like, you can only have five projects at any given time. And one of those projects is probably going to be your family and like household obligations, one is probably going to be work. One might be your health, you know, maybe you're going through a health thing. You know, the last couple years, maybe that project has been surviving the pandemic, like I think that has just been a project for all of us. That's taking up a lot of time and mental energy, whether we want it to or not. So that doesn't leave very many slots for your passion.

12:43

EMILY

Mm hmm. That's right. Oh, yeah, that's, it's always going to be difficult no matter what to be able to make those decisions. But thanks for giving a couple of ways to think about it. That said, you acknowledge every person, particularly creative people, have their own way of approaching their work.

Assuming that the four steps that you laid out early on are core principles that apply to everyone, or almost everyone, what parts of your system are adaptable to different individual's needs?

JESSIE

Yeah, that's a that's an awesome question. I love that one. So, essentially, like, I would say, the priorities, using your priorities to filter what's coming in and figure out what you need to do. That is the one thing that should be a constant, no matter what else you're doing. But how you gather your chaos, like, how you collect it, and then how you work how you schedule that chaos? Well, hopefully at that point, it's less chaos and more, you know, individual tasks that actually make sense. corrals, yes. But I would say, though, sitting down with all of the things you need to do, and using your priorities to filter that, that would be the one thing that everyone should do that is about the same way, I guess. But yeah, like so for example, my husband, I look at his phone, and he's got like 8000 unread emails, which just makes my blood pressure do crazy things. Yeah, I don't get to inbox zero. But like, I know what's in my inbox.

EMILY

Inbox like 25 or 50.

JESSIE

Yeah, not inbox. 1000. Oh, God, but that works for him. He also kind of does like a, it's almost like a modified bullet journal. I might say he's just got lists and lists that he kind of checks through every day and moves to the next page. And he's just got a really analog way of handling everything that he needs to do throughout the day. And to me, it doesn't make any sense at all. But somehow he's managed to capture all that, and create something that he can work off of.

EMILY

I don't understand bullet journals. I've I've tried, but I don't. Yeah, it just doesn't go into my head for some reason, but I know that a lot of people really like them. Yeah. So yeah,

JESSIE

I don't get it either. But I have a lot of friends that just swear by it. So, I mean, if that's you, that's, that's awesome. Congratulations. You're obviously not me and Emily.

EMILY

you get to use the fun pens, you get to have the fun notebooks. And here I am doodling away on Evernote. Yeah. So it sounds like there's a lot of wiggle room here for the way that people kind of what they do with the tasks and information that they collect, and the way that they sort it.

15:50

JESSIE

Yeah. And so that's, I mean, that was my main goal. And like writing this book was, you know, here are the general principles of how to, how to collect the Chaos, how to prioritize how to schedule it, how to do the work in a more efficient way. But like, one of the things I did was I interviewed a bunch of other

creative people and brought in a bunch of, you know, examples of things that I'd found in people's memoirs or articles they'd written. And so use all these different things like, Okay, well, I may do it this way. But my friend, Alicia, does it this way, or my husband does it this way. Or, you know, so and so does this related to the other thing. So there's a lot of different examples besides just like, what just do this.

EMILY

I love that you are able to gear this toward creative people in such a way that it also appeals to that psychological side of most of us where we, and I don't mean this disparagingly at all, but we sort of consider ourselves special. And that we look at the world in a unique special way. And that, at least for me, there's kind of this impulse to rebel against what I'm being told to do. Even if I'm trying to do it for myself for my own good. So you see someone go put this down in this app in this way, and wake up at 4am and drink a glass of water. And it just makes my brain go. No, I'm not doing that like that little Pingu meme. And so I like that you're giving all of these options for people because I think that really appeals to the rebellious creative in many of us.

JESSIE

That's funny, I hadn't thought about it that way. But it's totally true, because I'll read it, you know, a productivity article that says, here's how you bullet journal and Wi Fi only way and I'm like, What? No,

EMILY

I will not put post-it notes on that board, no matter what you tell me to do.

JESSIE

Yeah, exactly.

EMILY

So doing creative work can take a lot of mental and emotional energy, as we know, especially if we're doing that type of work, both for day jobs stuff and for personal, independent work. How do you recharge and manage your energy? How would you recommend other people do so? And when you hit a wall, but you still have work to do? How do you how do you manage?

JESSIE

Yes, that's my favorite thing about reading articles about like, you know, burnout and will just, you know, don't push yourself when you hit a wall, you're like, Yeah, but I still have a deadline.

EMILY

Exactly. I'm not gonna write it.

18:39

JESSIE

Yeah, so I, I love going for walks. That is probably my favorite way of refreshing myself in the middle of the day. I normally go for a walk around this time of day. And you know, kind of the two o'clock, three

o'clock is when my brain starts melting. And I'm like, well, I need to get out of the house. So I highly recommend just taking an actual break. Even if it doesn't feel like you can just, you know, 20 minutes to go walk around your block. It can do wonders. And I know that because every day I'm like, Oh, I don't have time to do this. And then I just take 20 minutes, and I get so much more done after than I did while I was like spinning in circles in front of my desk.

EMILY

Yeah, you just be staring at your screen not writing anything anyway.

JESSIE

Yeah, exactly. Like it's not like you're getting worked up.

EMILY

Right. You might as well go outside.

JESSIE

Yeah, exactly. But one thing I would also really recommend is paying a lot of attention to your own, like productive rhythms. Like when are you best at what kinds of work like, you know, are you more creative in the morning? Are you more creative after dinner, you know, you should figure out when those times are and set those aside for the really creative work. But then also figure out the times where you know, Maybe you're better at doing more rote tasks, like, you know, I sometimes will have to do a lot of transcribing of interviews and it takes concentration, but not nearly as much concentration is trying to write fiction. So you know, I'll put those in the like three to 5pm slot of the day. So scheduling, looking at your schedule and be like, Okay, I know I'm going to be distracted between these couple hours because of, you know, waiting for a repairman or something. That's when you schedule Okay, I need to clear my inbox. So really paying attention to what tasks are most suited to what energy levels and times of day for you, I think helps quite a bit.

EMILY

And it sounds like you would have to start with a certain amount of mindfulness and self examination before you're able to make those calls.

JESSIE

You know, just looking back at your day and set a timer at the end of your day. And when the timer goes off, just say, Okay, well, what did I get done? How did I feel about this? And I mean, it's taken me a while to identify certain times, but since I've started paying more attention to that, I think it's really been quite effective.

21:12

EMILY

So if getting started, in addition to the looking back on your day, seeing how you feel about things, and when the best times might be for you to use your energy, if getting started seems overwhelming to any

of our listeners, what would you suggest doing as a small micro step to being able to create the kind of plan for a creative system.

JESSIE

I would start with doing a brain dump. So just take out a sheet of paper, or if you're a digital person, open up a new file, and just write down every single thing that's in your brain right now. And that is trying to get your attention, your like we talked about earlier, just even the smallest tiniest tasks, don't, don't let them stay in your brain, get them out, get them out. I even keep a little notepad beside my computer. So as I'm writing, or as I'm working, you know, I'll be like, oh, I need to do blah, blah, blah. And I instantly alt tab, like over into Google, I was like, no, no, write it down on a piece of paper, go back to what you were doing. And so then I'll have just this list of lookups or call grandma or whatever it is that my brain in the middle of something was like, hey, it's just written there. And I can keep going.

EMILY

You've gotten it out of your head, and it's not going to be distracting you from the other stuff going. And so your book, you recommend that a person not try to do everything prescribed in it all at once, for creating a plan you have, I believe you say block out a couple times a week to work on stuff so so how long might it take a busy person to go through all of the steps you lay out in your book, as you have recommended,

JESSIE

I would say probably just over the course of a few days, you know, an hour here an hour there. The first half of the book is really about creating a system and kind of those principles of getting yourself organized. And then the second half of the book is more you know, how to work better and smarter, how to take better breaks, how to play and refill your creative well. So it's really the first half of the book that will hopefully make you feel a lot better by the time you get through it. And then the rest is just icing on the cake.

EMILY

Even just that brain dump feels so good sometimes

JESSIE

right now, my favorite thing.

EMILY

So what are some of your favorite technology or non non high tech tools for managing your day and your career?

JESSIE

So you already mentioned Evernote, that is I live in Evernote. That's where I collect just notes about any projects that I'm working on. brainstorms anything that I need to do that's where I keep my to do list and I have a template of for like you know my my weekly schedule things like that. And you could use

something like one note or notion is another really good one. Honestly if I notion is great because it does a lot of cool hyperlinking but if I didn't already have like 2500 notes and I might switch to notion

EMILY

I would be a big task moving that over maybe you...

JESSIE

I think about it every once in a while like if I'm there for a client's stuff and it's so cool. But I never know girls, I'm stuck. And it's great. I do really love Evernote and then I've got a whiteboard on my in my office where I kind of keep track of like, here's the big things that are coming up. So, you know, I'm, I'm launching a new series of books in March and so it's like okay, when does this need to be to my editor or when do I need to have hired the cover designer. So I've just kind of like, use this whiteboard to break apart this large, large task into the milestones I need to meet kind of every month. What else I already mentioned my little like notebook beside my desk, that that is probably my favorite low tech tool for just keeping myself on track. And then Google Calendar, that's, I just am constantly, you know, obviously, like, events. But then if I need to remember, you know, I've got this series is coming out of Kindle Unlimited on November 30, whatever, I'll just go and write that in my calendar. So once I get to that week, I'll look at my calendar and be like, Oh, here's the thing that I was supposed to remember to look back into that week, that sort of thing.

25:48

EMILY

And what about for staying on task, when you're, when you're trying to do that deeper, more creative work.

JESSIE

I love Freedom, which is an app that you can get on your computer that will block off any social media site that you wanted to. And you can turn it on, either full time, like, just, you know, turn it on, and let it go until you turn it off, or you can schedule sessions. And so it'll block everything until like noon, and then from noon to one, you can go on Twitter and do all the things and then at 1pm It's like, No, you have to go back to work. Yeah, so that is really helpful.

EMILY

Yeah, I use I use self control, which I think is basically the same thing. But it has a skull on it. So it makes me feel edgy.

JESSIE

Yeah, yeah, I haven't tried self control. But I've heard good things about it.

EMILY

It's pretty, pretty simple, straightforward. Not too many, little gadgets on it just does exactly what it says on the tin.

JESSIE

Yeah. The other app that I love is Forest. And you plant a little tree, you say, Okay, I'm going to work on this for the next hour. So you plant a tree on your phone. And if you open your phone, the tree dies. And you at the end of you know it, you build this little forest on this little like isometric grid, and then you see all any dead trees. And so it's very motivating for me because I don't want to kill trees.

EMILY

Oh, and it leaves the dead trees there. So you can always see it. Oh, my.

JESSIE

Oh, I killed three trees this week. It's terrible. And they have a Yeah, or an extension. Yeah, for Chrome. And so I can if I find myself just like, you know, I've turned off freedom, because you can just turn it off. And then I'm like, Oh, why am I on Twitter so much? I'll just plant a tree in Chrome. And then if I go accidentally hit, you know, Twitter, then Chrome is like, do you want to kill this tree? I was like, wait, no, no, no.

EMILY

Oh, man. Oh, man, that's scary. Yeah, I will lose self control. Like you literally can't bring anything up. And you have to reboot your computer, if you want to be able to like look at the website. And sometimes not even then I tried to do that recently. And it didn't work. So I was like, Well, I guess I have to work now. I don't know. I feel like that tree thing would stress me out. But I guess you know, all of us have our different things that we like. Yeah. That's really cute. And also stressful. Exactly. So you mentioned your upcoming series. But are there any other projects that you're particularly excited to share with, with people who may be listening right now?

28:33

JESSIE

Yeah, so I'm working on another book with microcosm publishing, which is called From Big Idea to Book. And it's kind of very similar to chaos to creativity, where it's a choose your own adventure guide. But this one's going to be about writing, either a novel or a nonfiction book, but how to take your, you know, whatever idea you have into the finished product. And again, like I'm interviewing a bunch of different people and finding other people's methods, because there's no one right way to write a book, just like there's no one right way to do anything.

EMILY

How did you get hooked up with Microcosm?

JESSIE

Um, so I had worked with Ellie Blue, who's the editor. They're one of the editors there for a couple years when she was doing taking the lane publications, and she did bicycle feminist bicycle stuff and had a series of feminist bicycle science fiction stories that she had started and then took her to microcosms. So they're still doing that series. But so I gotten to know her through that. And then we were chatting

one day, and she asked what I was working on, I was like, you have kind of got this idea and, and it was born, I said, of getting things done for creative people. And she was like, yes.

EMILY

I'm just that that cute little design vibe that all the microcosm books have that are so, so fun.

JESSIE

I know all their books are so great.

EMILY

And where can people find you and your work?

JESSIE

You can find me at Jesse Kwak dot com. And that is my hub for all things. It's mostly my fiction, which is like gangster Space Pirate science fiction stuff. But there's links out there to find more about chaos to creativity and find more of my copywriting stuff and other things like that.

EMILY

Great, and you can find us on Facebook and Twitter at hybrid pub scout and on Instagram at hybrid pub Scout pod, please leave us a five star rating and a review on your favorite podcast app. And thank you for joining us today. Jesse.

JESSIE

Thank you so much. This was great.

EMILY

And thanks for giving a rip about books.