

Idea Debt and Conquering Procrastination with Jessica Abel

Cory: Awesome, alright. Jessica Abel is here today. For those of you who are watching or perhaps listening to the audio of this later, if you don't know Jessica Abel I'm super excited for you because you're about to discover somebody who, I think, is one of the most interesting people in the Venn diagram of people who are on the internet a lot and people who make art. There's that Venn diagram of those people and I think Jessica Abel is just super awesome, super interesting. If I'm reading Jessica's formal bio, she is the chair of the Illustration Program at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Both within and without PAFA, the P-A-F-A, Jessica helps creative people with big ideas get procrastination... to get PAST procrastination and anxiety, not get procrastination and anxiety, and get on with the making stuff. Getting past stuck-ness and get making stuff. But that doesn't just begin to describe all of the neat stuff that Jessica and I are going to talk about today, the things that she's done. She has a graphic novel called *La Perdida* which won the 2002 Best New Series Harvey award, she's done several other graphic novels including *Trish Trash Roller Girl of Mars*, as well as two collections of stories from her omnibus comic book *Artbabe*. She and her husband cartoonist Matt Madden were series editors for the *Best American Comics* from 2007-2013, they've authored two textbooks about making comics, *Drawing Words* and *Writing Pictures*, and the book *Mastering Comics*. Her book and podcast *Out On The Wire* is about how the best radio producers in the world use story to keep us listening.

So in addition to being an illustrator and comic artist she's a writer, and a procrastination stopper.

J: I try. Thanks for having me, it's really great to be here.

Cory: Absolutely, I'm excited. You and I have done a couple of things in the past, we've done some webinars together, so our audiences are maybe a little familiar with us, so I'm excited to be able to go deeper today and talk about idea debt and procrastination busting. So I just want to touch on the idea debt piece, just to start with. In case people are not familiar with idea debt, I think you're a better person to introduce the idea than I am.

J: Okay, so idea debt is a concept that I was extremely familiar with, but didn't have a term for until I did an interview with Kazu Kibuishi the author of *Amulet*, which is a great comic book series for kids, among other things. And Kazu's sort of a big thinker about the creative process and so on, so I was interviewing him for *Out On The Wire*, my podcast, and he came out with this term idea debt, which I found really compelling, basically

immediately. It was like, the analogy that he made that made it clear to me is the analogy of snowboarding for him. So he's a snowboarder and when he goes snowboarding as he got to the jumps in the snowboarding park, he would see these young guys like hanging out there kind of studying the jumps as if they were about to really really do something awesome. And he would look at them and think "Okay, number one, you're getting colder physically. You're getting less able to actually hit this jump, and number two, you're making it so big in your head that there's no way you could possibly achieve this. You couldn't make this work, you know, you're never gonna get to the level that you want to get to." And so his philosophy became either hit the jump, or pass it. You know, that's the only way to do it. Either hit it or pass it. And so for me, and he was talking about Amulet and how Amulet was like this enormous work for him and if he'd realized how big it was going to be, he'd thought about how big it was going to be, he never would have done it. He never would have started. And he'd rather just start.

So essentially what he was talking about is perfectionism. The idea that if you concentrate on something in this way, then you're going to make it too big in your own mind, and you're going to potentially prevent yourself from ever starting because it's just so large and so overwhelming. And so basically you avoid thinking about it. You avoid thinking about the big picture completely. And I thought that was pretty smart, but the other thing it brought up for me that, he didn't really talk about directly, but what I've seen over and over again is this idea of "or pass it," you know? So he's talking about just hit it, and I'm talking about, that's one side of it, but the other side of it is "or pass it". There are all kinds of ideas that we hold onto that we allow to weigh us down and that we carry with us like these enormous burdens for years and year and years, and there's no, you know, in some cases those ideas don't even line up with what we want to do anymore, they don't represent who we are as artists anymore or as creative people, but we feel like we kind of owe it to ourselves, we kinda have to do it, and I think that's, you know, even if you aren't actually working on that at the time, it represents debt. It represents like a burden on your brain that you're sort of thinking you have to do this thing. And that weighs you down and keeps you from moving forward quickly on the thing that you're trying to do. Also, you may have multiple things you think you want to do all at the same time and so you have a bunch of stuff you're trying to juggle and therefore you don't really move on anything because you have all of these different things. All those are part of this idea debt concept.

Cory: Right.

J: And I think that was a really, when I had this term idea debt from Kazu it was a way of crystallizing all of that into kind of one thing. And over time I've sort of realized it's really two things- it's perfectionism and it's also holding onto ideas and trying to work on ideas that are, they're not for now. You know? They may be for never, or they may be for some

time in the future, but you really really can't think about them right now, you need to put them away like completely. Get them out of your sort of field of vision. So. Yeah.

Cory: I have Evernote as my second brain- I dump everything into Evernote, it's a note taking tool, and I have a specific notebook in Evernote just for ideas that I may or may not work on at some point, and-

J: Which is great, which is great, but I would warn you that I've had those kind of ideas and I'll actually like schedule looking through those ideas and going like hmm, should I really put that, and then it's like still taking up your brain.

Cory: And I don't have time to look at them, they just go there and then I never see them again.

J: It's fine if you never see them again, but you know having a place to keep them so you don't feel anxiety about holding on to them in a current way, but I've had projects that I've sort of intended to work on for fifteen years. I've kind of intended to work on them and I'm like well, I should be doing this thing, and that should, that's a red flag right there. But you have to throw these things away, but I think that when you do kind of stumble on them again, I think taking a moment to just go like okay, seriously, really, is this something I do intend to work on in the future? It's, you know, it's fine to have a holding pen but the someday maybe piece that comes, you know, from getting things done and that system can be really burdensome because it feels like still, you're failing. Like you're not doing the thing you're supposed to be doing.

Cory: Hey Thomas and hey Janet, a couple of people from different places saying hi. So just giving a shout out to those of you who are watching live.

J: Hey guys.

Cory: Janet says hello from Switzerland. I love that. I love seeing people from all over. So just give us a little bit, I don't think I've ever asked you, you know in the various things we've done, tell me a little about how you got into making comics and illustrating.

J: Well, illustration was a result of making comics. I did not start out as an illustrator and have never been really primarily an illustrator. That's a thing that I've done sort of as like in parallel and sort of a sideline to comics. So I got into comics when I was in college. I had been reading them previous to that and just finding them really compelling as an art form but I didn't start- it never occurred to me to actually try to make comics myself, or virtually didn't until I discovered the book Love and Rockets by the Hernandez brothers when I was freshman in college. And the comics I'd encountered before, I mean they were good, but we're talking mid-80's here, so we did not have the diversity of voices and approaches and all the other things that we have now, we are just really living in a golden age at the moment. So you know, really great comics were things like Dark Knight, Watchmen, Maus, of course, was amazing and came out in like '85, '86, something like that. And so these things started to broaden the discussion but really it was like, it wasn't,

it was still kind of superhero stuff, and then there was Maus, you know? And I had no interest in making superhero comics, and when I discovered Love and Rockets it was like this really amazing- so, especially the work of Jaime Hernandez, who is one of the two brothers who drew this book. Both of them I love but his I really sort of identified with because it was sort of about punk rockers in LA living their lives, their relationships, the way that they, the sort of little dramas that happened around and the big dramas that happened around them, was very quotidian, extremely well drawn and extremely well written. You know, Jaime is still one of the number one writers and storytellers in comics I think today. I mean he's a master. And he's been a master, I mean he's gotten better, but he's been a master for a really long time. So I discovered that, and then suddenly it was oh- this was a thing you can do comics about. And it's gorgeous. So I want to do that. And you can totally, I mean my early comics is just like, you know my interest in that just telegraphs straight through the art style and everything else. So I started doing, I went to university, regular college, not to art school, and started doing comics basically on my own with student clubs and things, and became editor of a student anthology of comics and kind of went from there, went into mini comics from there.

Cory: Nice, yeah, that's awesome. I think everybody, like, I was the editor of a literary magazine when I was in college, I think those experiences of like, being able to look at lots of different people's stuff gives you some good perspective.

J: Also just the functionality of becoming a self-publisher, it was a lot easier to conceptualize doing that having been editor when I did everything- getting ads and drawing every page layout to, you know, selling it in the lobby of the building. You know, I did everything. I probably could have asked for more help than I did. That was a lesson I did not learn for a really long time. But anyway, the point is I knew kind of about functionally how do you make a book, functionally how do you sell- you know, at the most basic rudimentary level how do you sell a book, you know, all those kinds of stuff. So when I started self-publishing my comics it didn't feel hard to do that.

Cory: I think there's a lot of lessons, a lot of crossover to be had for like the indie self-publisher, the zines and comic artists who've been self-publishing, like that's been a thing forever. Before self-publishing became sort of a trendy thing like it is now, or maybe it's not even trendy anymore, now it's just a mainstream thing to self-publish. But you and other comic artists have been self-publishing for a long time. What do you think are the things that other people who want to sell whatever their thing is can take away, can learn from those indie publishers and self-publishers?

J: You mean sort of in the early days? So, what can people take away. I guess, a lot of lessons that I now sort of look back and learn I forgot in the middle, you know, when I started having somebody else publish me, I sort of thought I'm done with that, I don't have to do that anymore, and so the thing that I did as a self-publisher was I knew I was responsible for my own success or failure. You know, and part of that was the quality of

the work obviously, and that's the thing everybody focuses on. But part of that also was you know, I had a list. I had a mailing list. If only I'd actually kept that from 1992 on, I'd be in an entirely different place right now. But I had a physical mailing list, I'd send out postcards when the new issue came out. There's a whole system of kind of like recommending each other's books that happened, so it was called plugs, so you'd have plugs in your book for other books and other books would have them for you, and that was all pre-internet, so it's a way of, it's a discovery engine essentially. And you can find analogs of that now in the digital age, and sort of partnering up with people, being like in a crew, like I was like other people, and so I would get interviewed, you know, with this group, or like reviewed, like here are the books by these people. So there's that kind of thing as well. I mean, I think there's a ton you can take away from it, and I mean we're in a much better position now in terms of being able to achieve much greater reach and publish at a much higher level much more cheaply and more accessibly and all those kinds of things. I mean, just Kickstarter alone has revolutionized the comics worlds in terms of self-publishing. Not to say it's easy, but it's way better than it was in terms of actually having income from it and actually making a go of it. But all that said, I think that the same things apply. You just kind of have to look for the analog digital you know, crossover essentially.

C: Yeah. The idea of having a tribe or a group that you run with, like, you and I, I think we first encountered each other in Tara Gentile's CoCommercial program.

J: Yeah, that could be, yeah.

C: If we didn't first encounter there, it was we got to know each other a little better there. And that's just to plug Tara for a second, she has a program called CoCommercial that's a membership site for small business owners. And Jessica and I are both members over there, and that's how we, that's how I first decided to invite her to do a webinar or maybe you invited me, I don't remember. Anyway, that's how we first started doing webinars together, and like that happens a lot inside of CoCommercial, like people who are members of that group find people that they resonate with and start promoting each other's stuff and helping each other and things like that.

J: Interestingly it crosses boundaries, you know, and I think this is something else to sort of learn from that, is like I'm doing an event, a live event with Jacquette Timmons in a couple weeks in New York where I'm going to her dinner party. She throws- she's a financial behaviorist, she calls herself, so it's about making the right decisions and understanding how money works in your life and so on. And it's a- so she's in a totally different, like you and I, like there's some obvious crossover. You know we talk to the same kind of people. We do slightly different things, but you know they're very complementary, so there's an obvious match up there. There's all these other people in that group where, there's no like, obvious crossover. But it's still, for me, everything's about decision making and making these conscious decisions about what you're going to

do with your work and how you're going to make it happen, and she's doing the exact same thing but in terms of finances. So it's a really interesting way of finding that bridge and then building that tribe out.

Cory: Right. Yeah. So I guess what I was trying to say is that those who are listening, like, a lot of our audience is young artists or early career artists who are trying to figure things out- have a group of people that you can run with, and have it not just be your, like other artists, right? Having it be financial advisors and other entrepreneurs and stuff like that, people who are doing different things than you. It will not only open your mind business-wise, but will also open you up artistically because you'll discover things that are outside of your experience as an artist that will inform your work. That's been my experience anyway.

J: Yeah, I absolutely agree with that. I think the more interest you have in your network the more you grow as a person and the more that you can grow your business into different directions and find new ways to kind of connect, make connections. Yeah. I actually had this thing that I did back in the late 90s where I created the Artbabe Army. So Artbabe was my comic book, my omnibus comic book, and so that was my first mailing list. And again, if only I'd held onto that, kept maintaining that throughout '97 and beyond. Again, a very different place. So when you build a tribe, I've built it several times and let it fall apart. So hold onto it! We had like secrete handshakes, and I had like a membership card, and there was like, you know, I mean it made it fun. I made it like a fun thing to do. And I still run into people who are like, they'll know "Artbabe Army, reporting for duty," and this kind of thing. And so, you know, I think that it can get overwhelming too, like right now this week I'm teaching a little course about marketing essentially, to a small group of people. And this is the thing I'm trying to help them understand, is like, this can be fun. Like, this is creative. It is creative work. Like, think about how you can, you know, looking for that bridge between me and Jacquette is an act of creativity. Okay, I talk about decision making. She talks about decision making. That's a Venn diagram, like that's an overlap. And looking for that with the people you want to attract as well, it's creative and fun.

Cory: Nice. So how did you go from scrappy independent comic artist to chair of an illustration program at a university?

J: Well I wouldn't call PAFA a university but a college, a small art college. Well, from this direction the line looks like it's drawn with a ruler. It's directly straight. From the other direction, I mean, no idea, right? Like when, if you had asked me at twenty two how do I get there, I would have had no idea. So basically, I think, the early part of the path was fairly clear in that I went from self-publishing, then I won a Xeric grant which was an important grant for self-publishing in comics that existed up until fairly recently. And they closed it down because Kickstarter basically had taken the place functionally in the market of that. But so I won that award, and that was- it was I think only in the second

year or something like that, so it was still like, people would like announce it and there was a kind of a big moment for me. And then we went from, I went from that to publishing you know, using that grant money to publish sort of my first formally published solo comic book which was, you know, the last of my self-published Artbabes. And then I had been making contacts with Fantagraphics, people at Fantagraphics which is the publishing company that had published Love and Rockets, my favorite comic book, for years, and most of them had been really interested in what I was doing and supportive. The publisher of Fantagraphics was this guy Gary Groth and I had been sending him my mini comics whenever they came out- which was not that often, granted, it was like once a year, twice a year, you know, it was not a ton of stuff. But like when he saw, when he saw the Xeric issues like, "Wow, this is so great, do you want to publish with us, where have you been?" And I'm like just look through the piles on your desk.

Cory: I've been knocking on your door for years, dude.

J: Yeah, exactly, like, your second in command has written articles about me. That's not actually, he's now the second in command, but people at the company were really supportive, but he just didn't notice at all. Which is to say stick with it. Like, if there's some place you want to be, keep going back. The fact that I didn't get any response from him at all did not mean that I was never going to get a response from him. And so anyway he offered me the opportunity to publish with them. Then I did a series of books that were, series of Artbabe individual issues that they published, and then we collected both the self-published and the ones that they did into books at the end of those sort of cycles. And Fantagraphics at the time was kind of, and still is one of the major independent comics publishing houses. And so that affords a certain amount of access and visibility. Just a little bit in this little corner of the world. But the people who pay attention to that, they can be people who are influential in that world. And so basically I went from that, I did my book La Perdida, first did individual issues with Fantagraphics and then did the collection with Pantheon.

So that was my jump to mainstream publishing, and that basically happened because I ran into my editor at a party and she knew my books and she's like oh, can we publish them? And I was like yes, you can. And so, you know. Yeah. Sure! Okay. And she, you know, she was interested in issues that you know La Perdida deals with, it's a book about a young woman who moves to Mexico City, she has a Mexican father but was raised very Anglo, but she has this sort of fantasy version of what Mexico should be like for her and like how it's gonna be, it's gonna, you know, make her feel more true to herself and authentic to be Mexican, but then that puts these blinders on her, and so she misses all of the stuff that's going on around her and ends up getting into very deep trouble. And so all this sort of like stuff about Mexican-American relationships and like class issues and all that other stuff that goes into that book, Anjali Singh, my editor, was really interested in that kind of stuff. And Pantheon was at that time doing regularly, not with her, she did a

few, but with a different editor was doing a number of sort of high profile comics and so it was sort of the beginning of that mainstream book publisher comics boom. And I was kind of like in there at the beginning because I already had this stuff done at Fantagraphics and was sort of visible there.

And then that kind of led to other opportunities, so Anjali was the first editor of the Best American Comics, the in-house editor of Best American Comics had a new job, she changed over, so she asked me and Matt to do that. We also met various other people, you know, we were living in New York, we were teaching at the school of visual arts because we were cartoonists and known as cartoonists, like all of it had to do with that cohort and having friends, and like, you know, being known within this group for doing stuff that was, felt very under the radar. And yet it actually was quite effective in making these kinds of relationships. And so I met Mark Siegel, who is the editor of First Second books, before he even conceived that idea completely when he was an art director at I believe Simon and Schuster. And I can't even remember exactly what it was, it was because he was interested in French comics I think, and he was translating stuff, and he wanted to get the books that he was translating out more visibly or something like that, so we went to meet him in his office and he sort of cold-pitched us this idea for First Second. And so we became involved in the very sort of early stages of that, and that's why then I published Life Sucks with him. I published Drawing Words and Writing Pictures and Mastering Comics, my textbook about comics, with him. And then all of that body of work meant that, and I had also done this thing with Ira Glass because of being from Chicago, back in '99, this book about how This American Life is made, it was like this little comic book. And that meant that I could go back to him, and I could go to big publishers and be like okay, I have this whole track record. And I had this book Radio: An Illustrated Guide, let's do a new book. Let's do a new book about what's happening in radio right now, because this was the birth of the podcast moment, especially narrative podcast, as opposed to, you know, interview podcast.

So I don't know, I just sort of rambled on a bunch there. But the point is all of these things kind of come back in circles, you know. The older I get, the more I see how things I did in the mid-'90s come back to roost now. You know, in a good way. Maybe in a bad way too sometimes. But mostly in a good way. And you know, you have this whole kind of like, you know, my interest in storytelling stems from having to make stories and thinking about that, but then it's also like, working with Ira Glass on Radio: An Illustrated Guide was like, oh, there are systems for stories. And then I was trying to write a novel, which I wrote, and it was like a terrible experience. But that was, you know, another like intense period of learning about story building and structure and so on, and that led to what I did in Mastering Comics and Drawing Words and Writing Pictures, and that led to On The Wire and that led to, you know, doing Workshops and talks about, you know, so everything, all these threads come through. And I think one of the most important things people can do is try to get distance on what they do and what they've done in their lives

and find those threads. Like, find those things that tie things together in an unexpected way where you think you know what your work is about, but do you really? Like it takes a long time to figure out what you're really interested in and what you really do.

Cory: Yeah, so like following your interests and following the things that continue to tug at you. So you mentioned *La Perdida* is about this girl that moves to Mexico, but you lived in Mexico and you lived in France as well?

J: Right, I wrote *La Perdida* after I got back from Mexico. It's not about me, it's not memoir at all. But it gave me a lot of information about various kinds of expats who live in Mexico and also lots of sort of cultural information about what it's like to be in Mexico City, like what it's like to live there. I loved it and I had a great time there, and there were no major crimes involved in my life. But I did- it gave me this rich experience that I was able to draw on to make this novel.

Cory: When you- so how much time did you spend in Mexico?

J: It was two years.

Cory: Two years. And how much time in France?

J: Four years.

Cory: Four years. So you spent a substantial amount of time living overseas. You mentioned like seeing expats, and getting cultural information and stuff, like how else has it informed artmaking to live outside of the country where you grew up?

J: I think it's a really interesting question, and I probably don't know the extent to which it has, but I think that the very first thing that it did for me and it continues to do for me is give me an enormous amount of perspective on who I am as a human being and as an artist. Because, and I made this analogy actually in an article that I wrote on my blog, what I feel like is when you're, especially when you're an American, when you're part of the dominant culture in the world, especially if you're a white middle class American like me, you can feel like the culture is like the water we swim in. It is for everybody, but even more so when you are in the dominant culture in the world. You know, you see yourself everywhere. And this is one of the reasons why having diverse viewpoints and diverse characters represented in books is so important, because people who are not of that dominant culture don't see themselves reflected all the time. And it's really really valuable to see yourself reflected and kind of understand stuff about yourself. But that's sort of a side note, and I would say that even people who are non-white Americans don't realize how much they are of the dominant culture until they go somewhere else, right? You go somewhere else and all of a sudden you, it's like you're a bas relief, you know? And you suddenly realize what you're attached to. Like in the back. You know, like that giant hunk of granite that you're a part of. It can kind of sense all the way around you, and how those, you start to see how these cultural attitudes and sometimes privilege,

sometimes not privilege, but the point is these things that come from your culture, how they affect your behavior, how they affect your interaction with the world. By contrast, with people who are around you who don't have those same, you know, they have a different bas relief, they have something else behind them. And so that, and as an artist, I feel like that understanding is incredibly valuable. Especially as a narrative artist, when you're trying to write stories about people. Like, you really have to be able to understand how your characters move within their culture and how their culture affects them in order to write them really well, you know? And also to be able to write diverse characters and people who are not of that culture. The only way you can do that is by recognizing what is that culture. You know, what's in it, and so what's out of it, and how do those things interact and have a relationship with each other? And so historically, before I moved abroad I was already very interested in relationships and the way people are to each other and how they interact and have these kinds of layers of meaning and the way that they speak or act towards, you know, physically, like earn space towards each other.

That's always been a strong interest of mine. But when I went abroad, I think that that interest broadened for me and got deeper. And I think that there's kind of a turning point with *La Perdida* and that book, and books after that. I've had this like very sort of pervasive interest in class in my work that comes I think from- class is the best word I can think of for it. It's not necessarily that- it's like cultural difference and like trying to communicate and have relationships across cultural and class boundaries, and like how does that work and what does that mean? And if I talk about that like in a book review, you know, like a book blurb or something, where you just like glaze over and go wait, but I find it fascinating and I think most people probably do in practice. Because that's what we're always trying to do in our lives, is cross those sometimes what feels like impassable boundaries with other people. So I think that's the kind of biggest thing. You know, it's also really exposed me to so much work from, you know, different people and different languages, and there's something so cool about, like, for a writer knowing other languages well enough to speak them, cause I wouldn't say I'm super fluent in either French or Spanish, but I'm very functional. Like I'm totally willing to just like jump in and talk about anything and like trying to figure out a way to express it, you know? But when you see how other people phrase things and how their language forms their thought process, because the form of the language, the words that are available, the approach to putting thoughts together, affects how they think and what they think, what's available to them. And when you see that as a writer, that's like even though I write only in English, it's a real lightbulb moment where you go oh, this is actually happening with us as well. So again it's perspective, but on a different thing.

Cory: You know what I find, like so learning... let me finish my sentences. What I find fascinating when learning a new language is one of the things that I think is super interesting is the way the neutral sounds that people make when they're trying to figure out what to say next. So in English we say um, right? But in Ireland they speak English, but they come

from a culture that speaks Gaelic, and they say ehm, and so where I might say uhhh, they say ehhhh. But in Mandarin it's completely different. In Mandarin it's nemah.

J: Yeah, in Mexico they say esse, which means like, this. So it's actually a word like um is not a word. It is a word.

Cory: Yeah, nemah is "that" in Mandarin. Yeah. Uh, nemah nemah nemah. Except they wouldn't say uh. I'm mixing my Mandarin and...

J: Yeah, mixing those little tiny words that hook things together is one of the biggest sort of triumph moments in being comfortable in another language. Like what do you say when you walk into a room, what do you say when you leave? What do you say when someone says something nice? Like what are all those things? And then how also you hook sentences together like this idea, like what are those little mini words to fill space.

Cory: Yep. I'm going to Ireland, going back to Ireland in November, partially because I'm going to London for a conference, that gives me an excuse to be there and go to Ireland. And partially because I'm working on a book and I want to study Gaelic more intensively. I'm going to try to pick up a little more Gaelic while I'm there and investigate a couple of Irish fairytales that I want to incorporate into my book. So I'm super excited about that and last time I was there I went to a storytelling night where half of the stories-ish were told in Gaelic. And that was super interesting, even though I only understand like phrases and words in Gaelic, it was super interesting to just see the way that their personas changed when they changed languages, right? And then they did a game where one person told a story in Gaelic and then the other person translated the story into English for the audience and that was super hilarious. But yeah, I love traveling, seeing the ways that cultures translate. One other story and then we'll go back to you- but speaking of ways that cultures translate I was at a board game café in Chinatown in Paris, and it- at the board game they have food and stuff, you can order food, and so I ordered a cookies and cream milkshake and French fries. Which I know, like, where I grew up in Utah that is a very common thing to take your French fries and dip it in your shake and eat it.

J: Oh God. I can't imagine what the French would think of that.

Cory: Apparently that was not a thing for you. But where I grew up in Pleasant Grove Utah, everybody did it. It was just normal. And so not only were the French disgusted by what we were doing, but there were seven of us playing a game called Seven Wonders, and it wasn't just French people, like because it was an English-speaking board game night, we had seven people from like four different countries. Four or five different countries there. And so I've ordered it and started eating and everybody was immediately grossed out.

J: I feel greater confidence in the human race now.

Cory: But, this might depress you. They were all grossed out and I said don't knock it 'til you try it. So every single one of them ordered French fries and a shake. And we all sat there and ate French fries and milkshakes and played Seven Wonders.

J: Oh Lord.

Cory: So I love like those sorts of experiences, they're so incredibly unique and fun. And they inform the way that you make art and the way that you see the world, and I love it. So next question for you that I was gonna ask you, Dorothea says yes that's gross, fries dipped in milkshakes. That's gross. Oh well! I'm disgusting. So talk to me about your work with procrastination. Tell me a little bit about, tell everybody a little bit about what you do there.

J: Well, I've been working on this idea of creative focus for the last two years, essentially. And obviously I'm working on my own creative focus a lot longer than that, and it took me a really long time to get to the point where I could just like get up in the morning and sit down and work, get stuff done, finish, you know, like, get projects finished on a schedule. But I got really good at it. And better than a lot of people do. So when it turned out that a lot of people in my audience were really struggling with that, I was like oh, well I can help that. And so I started writing about it, and running the creative focus workshop. And so I recently wrote a book about this idea called Growing Gills: How to Find Creative Focus When You're Drowning in Your Daily Life. And what I realized, when I put all the things together that I'd written and thought about previously into the book, from where I was really kind of coming up with overarching threads, is that the core idea that I teach about this is this idea of conscious decision. That everything- that the kind of work that we're trying to do that is so difficult to get done, is the reason, one of the reasons, I think the primary reason that it's so difficult is that it's self-generated work. It comes completely from inside, and so there are all kinds of problems that emanate from that. So you've got the problem of sort of imposter syndrome, believing that you're not, you're not the right person to do that, and you can't do it, like you don't have enough, you are not enough to do this work. So that's one problem. You also have the problem of not feeling like you can, like you deserve to prioritize that work and to do it in lieu of other stuff, cause there's always other stuff. So how does that prioritization piece fit in there? And then there's another problem which I kind of pinpointed late, really, in thinking about all of this stuff, which is this idea of dilemma. And that's where the conscious decision thing really comes into play.

So basically whenever you make the decision to work on something, on some creative project that's self-generated and important to you, there are gonna be other things that come up. There are other things that you have to make decisions about, to not do something, to spend money on it, to do, you know, there are all different kinds of things that you're gonna have to decide. And mostly we're not aware of those things. You're just thinking like, why can't I get my butt in my chair and sit down and write my novel?

It's the thing that I want to be doing, and instead you find yourself, you know, folding the laundry or answering emails or anything, really. Anything. And I think that what it comes down to is like you have not actually dealt with those decisions, you think you've decided to write your novel, but you haven't really decided to write your novel. Cause you have to also decide not to do this, and to take on this particular issue, this problem over here and say like okay, well, I know this is going to mean that I've got to, you know, block out 60 minutes, and I have to turn off my phone, and that's, I'm not gonna get notifications, and that means I'm going to feel lonely. And like, knowing that, that is actually the core issue. Feeling lonely is the core issue, and deciding, like, okay. I can feel lonely for an hour. That's okay. I can do that. I will have it back afterward. It's such a simple thing when you actually do it. And when you decide that, you're like I'm being silly, like obviously, 60 minutes, that's no big deal. And you can make that decision. But if you don't know that it's in there, you can't make the decision. And if you don't make the decision, you're going to be sitting there on your phone on social media instead. Right? You're not going to write the novel.

So there, I mean, there are a lot of different pieces to it, and a lot of different ways that people come into this and a lot of different things that people struggle with. Like some people, it's more the sort of mindset issues of you know, I don't feel like I can handle this, and for some people it's much more like just the organizational issues of how do I structure my time? Everybody's got all of those things to some degree. But you know, I do have people, like students who come to creative focus workshops and some are like oh I don't have any problem with making lists and organization, but I just have this other thing. And it's fine, cause like you know all of those pieces are there for different people. So this idea that we talked about earlier of idea debt is a super important one in getting over procrastination, because one of the ways you procrastinate is by doing work.

Cory: Productive procrastination, yeah.

J: But it's not productive. It's just procrastination by doing work. So like, I need to, what the really most important thing for me to do is this project. I may not know that because I haven't actually gone through the process of deciding. But let's just pretend we in our god-like powers know that this is the most important thing. But then you end up like doing research on this other project. Or doing, you know, getting out your notebooks for this other projects and getting it all in order and getting ready to do something. And because you're flipping back and forth between things all the time, you never make progress on any of them. So making that decision to have one single solitary creative goal at a time, which is not to say you can't have another one later, you know, is one of the most powerful things I've found for people in getting over procrastination. Like, you decide consciously, you're going to have one thing you're working on every time you sit down to work you're going to work on that one thing. And then you do it, you know? And the doing it requires other kinds of decisions, requires some structure and some support.

But it's not, it's something anybody can do. You know it's not superpowers to do this. You know once you kind of start making these decisions super constantly and implementing them, it's achievable by anybody, you know? Everybody's like oh I'm so disorganized, I'm an artist, I'm right-brained. Ugh. Whatever.

Cory: The lamest excuse ever.

J: I know, and it's completely not true. First of all, structurally it's not true. You just don't have the tools, you never learned to do it. Some people are going to have a little more natural inclination, hello, me, than others to be super organized about stuff, but anybody can do it within their powers.

Cory: If I can get organized, anybody can get organized. I am the world's least organized person. I'm really lucky that I married my wife, because she's more like you, she's really good at structure and all that stuff. Me? Mm. No.

J: Once you get the structure you can implement it, right? Once you figure out what it is. I mean that's what we do in our workshop, I mean it's also in the book, in *Growing Gills*, but in the workshop we do that with support. So it's like people are helping each other make these decisions like what is the right one goal? It just feels like this enormous decision which it really doesn't have to be. It could be 6 weeks and you switch, it could be a week and you switch. When you finish you switch. So it doesn't have to be forever, but it feels like, oh my god, how can I put this thing aside that's been on my mind forever? And then you go on to the next thing. You need to figure out, you know, mindset issues, you need to figure out an actual system, you need to break down your project into small bits. You need to focus not on your big project but on the small bits. So there's all these different things, and you know having that, like we were talking earlier, having a team, having a cohort, having people who are there supporting you going through this stuff is not essential, but incredibly helpful. And will totally like, accelerate the speed with which you can implement all these things.

Cory: Yeah. I feel like, so this idea of creating work patterns for yourself and understanding priorities and all that kind of stuff is sort of things, problems that are endemic to creative work. Versus knowledge work or manual labor or other things like that, like I think that in America at least, our, and this is me just sort of wildly speculating and I want to know what you think. There is a body of knowledge that we have about how to do labor work, or knowledge work, pretty well. But as the American economy shifts to a primarily creative workforce where a lot of the repetitive tasks are either automated or outsourced, I feel like we are not ready as a culture to support large groups of people doing creative work. So I'll stop there, do you have any thoughts on that?

J: As a culture we don't want to support people doing creative work? Or we-

Cory: Maybe not that we don't want to, that we're not good at it, Like we don't have the sort of cultural understanding of what it takes to do creative-

J: I don't think anybody does. And I would say, actually, knowledge work falls completely in this category, you know. Anybody who's trying to like write a book or create a course or create a business, you know, do marketing, like whatever, if they have to sit down and do it on the spot, that's creative work. You have to, like, we talked about earlier this idea that marketing is creative as well. You have to be able to create space and time to focus on this project that the project you know, bring the ideas in and kind of build them and do something with them. And if you're not doing it in the context of a team where there are all kinds of deadlines set already, you have a boss, you know, hovering over you waiting for the thing, all of that- you can still procrastinate, it can still be difficult, right, but doing it on your own, that's when you really kind of can flail, and much more so.

I mean, I know people struggle with procrastination with their day jobs as well, but it's just less of an overall, because they know they're going to get fired, you know, there's a lot of motivation there. And it's also like they're being paid, and they're physically in a place, and all of these other signs that are like "it's time to do this now". And that's just not the case, so I think really the distinction is, are you doing this on your own or virtually on your own, you know, or is it motivated entirely by you even if you're doing it with like a small team, if they're, you know, behind you, or are you doing this within a teamwork structure that's fairly organized for you. And those are kind of two different things. And I think we're trained through our lives in school, in professional training and other things, to work in the latter case, you know, where the teacher says this is what to do. You may or may not actually do the assignment ahead of time, but she certainly tells you when you should be working on it. Certainly gives you opportunities to hit milestones earlier. And those who are successful at school learn how to do that. They learn how to pace out their work. And have these kind of you know, milestones by the teacher and so on. It's certainly built into- and regardless you're going to finish it in three months because the semester's over, you know? You're gonna actually- you have to, you know, finish in that sense. And then the second part of that is you know, when you go to work you sort of go straight from school into work and you have that condition directly. But there's no training at any point that handles how do you do this without anybody there watching you and waiting for anything? I mean I don't know that there's any culture where that does happen.

Cory: Yeah, I mean I wonder if it's possible for us to create that at the cultural level or if we just have to find other creators, other self-motivated creators and hold each other accountable or something like that. Dorothea LeBlanc says "Sometimes I'll flop on my couch to look at Facebook, and get stuck for two hours." She asks, I think she's asking you Jessica, is your solution for me to decide consciously to do what I'm doing? Like, it's okay to be on Facebook and Instagram for two hours? That's the solution to that, yeah?

J: Yeah. Absolutely. Like, if that's what your choice is, make it your choice and then you don't have to feel weird about it. Like, that's the solution. I mean, if what you decided like, know what I actually would rather be doing is this other thing, you know, whatever the work is, then decide that. But you're like, okay that means I'm not gonna be on the couch for two hours, you know, on Facebook. That's the sacrifice you need to make. But what you try to do is you make the decision ahead of time. Not in the moment. In the moment is too hard. You make it the day before, the week before, and you say this is gonna be the time that I do this stuff, set the table for yourself. And when you sit down, you're ready to eat. But people need breaks, and there's nothing wrong inherently with social media, there's nothing wrong. I'm absolutely in favor of having fun and hanging out with your family and friends, I'm in favor of all of that stuff. But when you run into trouble is when you're like spending time, you know, at a family event, and you're thinking the whole time like goddamn it, I should be working on my novel, you know?

And when you're working on your novel you're like oh my god, all I want to do is go out with my friends. You have to be where you are, you know? So when you're taking time off, the thing I teach about scheduling is like you start with your calendar, you start with your time off. You start with time that you already have committed- sleeping, eating, blah blah blah. The first thing you put on there in terms of allocating other time is when you're not working, and get that in there so you know you have time when you're not working. You know when you're permitted to spend whatever time, permitted by you, by the way, to spend whatever time you want watching Netflix or whatever it is, going out with people. Then you look at what time is left over, and if you need to make compromises about that you're like, okay, I'm spending too much time hanging out, then you have to think about, like, okay what's my best use of my time here?

Cory: I like it. I love it. I love it. By the way, Helena says she bought your book and is working her way through it. So.

J: Awesome. I'm really happy to hear that.

Cory: And Michelle Leivan says fries and milkshakes are the best. So I am not the only ignorant...

J: I would eat fries and drink a milkshake at the same time. But I would not put the fries in the milkshake.

Cory: Just dip it and eat it, that's all.

Jessica, if people want to find out more about you or get your book or follow up with your workshops, where would they go?

J: Just jessicaabel.com.

Cory: Excellent. Well thank you so much for taking the time with us today, I love your wisdom and the way that you think about ideas and procrastination and art and illustration and comics. So thank you so much for taking the time to be with us here today.

J: Thanks Cory. My pleasure.