

Q & A

with Alisha Fernandez Miranda,
moderated by Alisha's publisher,
Zibby Owens of Zibby Books!



Pictured left to right; Zibby Owens, Alisha Fernandez Miranda



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At the beginning of the book, your friend Rebecca encourages you to write a book about your journey, before you'd even begun your internships. Were you planning to write this book from day 1 of your first internship, or was Rebecca's encouragement just the spark?

In spite of Rebecca's prescient comment, I did not set out to write a book about this experience. While I loved creative writing as a kid, I didn't ever consider myself a writer. Writers were important people who thought deeply profound thoughts, like Shakespeare, Zadie Smith and Tina Fey.

But gradually, it became something I sometimes told people I was doing. It seemed much more palatable to people that I was leaving my job and my family to make great literature, rather than to explain I was kind of having a midlife crisis. In the right situations, it was a quick response to the much more complicated question of "why are you doing this?"



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What was your writing process like? Did you journal during your internships or record your experiences in other ways?

I did keep a diary pretty religiously throughout this entire journey. This was by force of habit, mainly; I've journaled most important life events since childhood. Here's a real entry from September 7, 1995:

Dear Diary,

Hey! I just made a really big decision. I'm going to attend journalism day at FIU for my yearbook class on Sept. 23. Mommy just told me that they were planning a trip to Sea World for that day. I said I was going to stay home and go to journalism day. This is more important to me than a "thing" at an amusement park. Plus, if I'm copy editor, I have to be there. This is my first "major" mature decision. At this time last year, I would have said "Sea World all the way."

Love ya

- Lish

Even though I didn't know if anything would ever come of my writing, I knew I would want to record my internship journey for posterity. And then when the pandemic hit, it seemed important to ensure I made an honest recollection of my life during this extraordinary period of human history. When my future grandchildren did one day ask me about it, I wanted something authentic to share with them, not just my memories which would of course be colored by time.

As I wrote about my days and weeks, the people I met and the mistakes I made, I came to realize that I actually really loved sitting down to write. I saw connections to events of my past, patterns in my behavior. It made me question the stories I had told myself about who I was and why I made the choices I had made.

So at some point the fake "I'm writing a book about this" excuse became "maybe I will write a book about this." Still, it seemed almost comical, frankly, that anyone would read it except for my mom and my husband. It was like saying "Maybe I'll audition for the New York City Ballet" or "Maybe this zero-calorie ice cream really will taste like the real thing." But the more I said it and the more I wrote, the less far fetched it seemed.



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Near the end of the book, you talk about the importance of seeking joy. Did you intend to create a more joyful life, or was that an unexpected benefit from your internship journey? Did you learn any other unexpected lessons?

I think it was like Georg Baselitz's "happy accidents." I've always been a joy seeker but what I hadn't realized was how far off the path of seeking my own joy I had gotten in the previous years. I had been attempting to Band Aid over my unhappiness by taking on small, joyful hobbies – knitting or tap dancing or French – but they didn't help the bigger issue: that I was questioning the direction of my life.

It would probably take me a whole other book to write about the unexpected lessons I learned from my internships – how if you wear black, no one will notice if spill a whole entire bottle of Coke on your outfit (except dogs, you will become irresistible to dogs); or how to price a Hockney or how do to a one-legged side plank. But the biggest lesson was that I had so much time ahead of me to explore what I wanted to be when I grew up – the idea that I was already on a path I couldn't diverge from was a barrier put in place by me, and me alone.



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What books or authors inspired you to write your own book?

I have always been an avid reader since my Pat the Bunny days and there are so many authors across genres, countries and languages that I love and admire. But for this project in particular I was inspired by a lot of funny memoirs: Tina Fey's *Bossypants*, Mindy Kaling's *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?*, Dolly Alderton's *Everything I Know about Love*, and Caitlin Moran's *How to be a Woman*.

I also found inspiration in a lot of "behind the scenes" books that looked under the hood of different types of jobs: *Cork Dork* by Bianca Bosker was a huge inspiration. I also loved *Seven Days in the Art World* by Sarah Thornton, *Heads in Beds* by Jacob Tomsky and *Razzle Dazzle* by Michael Riedel.



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At the end of the book, you were working for Harry, had stepped down from your CEO role, and had moved your family to Scotland. Have any other big changes happened since then?

I once heard the saying that the only thing constant in life is change, and I think that is true for me as well. Since I finished the book, we moved again, this time to Edinburgh. We still spend as much time in Skye as we can manage but I can't tell you the joys of being able to walk to a coffee shop again.

In addition to working with Harry, I ended up coming back into the Kinloch family and penning a cookbook for them (50 Years, which came out this fall) and writing up a storm. And I started my podcast, Quit Your Day Job.

Before I take on any work, I try to gut check if it's interesting, intellectually stimulating, and will give me that good, juicy, spirit of the intern type of vibe. Mostly the answer has been yes!



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If you could go back and have this experience again, is there anything you would do differently?

I think probably not, because I'm not a person who deals in regret. I'm so pleased with the result of my What If year, even if it wasn't all perfect. I will say though that I still have some internships in my future. Marine biology, working in Disney and heading back to a different side of the theater world, like casting or producing, are still on my bucket list. If you'd like to hire me (for free) in any of those spaces, I'm all ears.



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How are you continuing to cultivate, nurture, and appreciate joy in your life?

One of the (only) things I appreciated about lockdown was that it gave ample time for reflection. Too much time, probably, but once we came out of restrictions and life got busy again, it's been a really conscious effort to try to continue the practice of cultivating joy.

I have however really tried to live the lessons I learned throughout my internship. A great example: I have been dying to get back into singing for years and not done anything about it. Last spring, I joined a choir in Edinburgh that sings Broadway songs. We performed at the Fringe Festival and I even had a solo. It was pure joy from start to finish. I made the time for it and saw it through.

I suppose the key is to be intentional about it and to not let fear stop me. I have not always succeeded, but I'd say on the whole I give myself a B+.



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What goals do you have for the coming year? Did this experience change how you think about goals?

I can't wait to bring My What If Year to the world and getting it out there will be a huge part of 2023, as will be, hopefully, completing and selling my next book. But my big goals are the same every year: take the most out of each day, appreciate each experience, even the bad ones, and do the best I can for the people I love. And, every year, I say I'm going to learn French. Maybe this year is it? Peut-être! (I had to Google translate that.)



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What are some of the books you've been reading recently? Any books you're looking forward to?

For the first time, I started tracking my reading in 2022 using the Copper Books app, so now I finally have a good answer to this question. I developed a deep obsession with the Sarah J. Maas Court of Thorn and Roses series this year, for better and for worse. I also loved Emily Henry's Book Lovers (can't wait for Happy Place), Andrew Sean Greer's Less is Lost, Olga Dies Dreaming by Xochitl Gonzalez and Gabrielle Zevin's Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, which has rapidly ascended to a place on my own personal best ever list.

I'm really excited for upcoming books by Annabel Mognahan and Kirithana Ramiseti but I have to shout out ALL the 2023 Zibby Books authors. Their books are top of my TBR.



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Did you continue a writing practice after your “What If” year? What other projects are coming up for you?

I have loved developing my writing and been really delighted to have pieces out in Vogue, Romper and some other publications I adore. I hope to keep up with my personal essay practice. There will be at least one more season of Quit Your Day Job coming soon. I have also just finished the first draft of a novel, tentatively titled Unrestricted Giving. Crumbling under the pressure of new motherhood, people-pleasing do-gooder Lucia Gutierrez-Barrow gets a dream job advising the rich and powerful on their philanthropy; but as she dives deeper into the excess of extraordinary wealth, she must figure out what it really means to do good before things in her life get very, very bad. Watch this space!



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If you could give someone who wants to have their own “What If” year one piece of advice, what would it be?

The best, weirdest advice that I repeat to everyone who will listen all the time (including my poor children) is, paraphrased, that you have to eat an elephant one bite at a time. See? It's gross. But in all seriousness, planning a big change is terrifying, but taking a small step, then another, toward your goal is much, much more manageable. And delicious.

What's one thing you can do to move toward your what-if goal? Maybe it's blocking off a weekend to take a course in a subject you've always wanted to learn about, or reaching out to an acquaintance for coffee to ask them about their job or life. Then take the next small step. You'll be far down the path of your own What If Year before you even realize it.

