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Book Review

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Daily Rituals: How Artists Work. By Mason Currey (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. 278 pp. ISBN: 978-0-307-96237-9. \$20.99)

Daily Rituals: Women at Work. By Mason Currey (Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. 416 pp. ISBN: 978-1-524-73295-0. \$14.49)

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Time is short, my strength is limited, the office is a horror, the apartment is noisy, and if a pleasant, straightforward life is not possible, then one must try to wriggle through subtle maneuvers (Kafka 21-22).

The passage above is excerpted from a letter Franz Kafka wrote to his beloved Felice Bauer in 1912. In the letter, Kafka conveys his dissatisfaction with his cramped living conditions and monotonous job, reflecting his belief in using subtle, strategic maneuvers to remove his constraints. Mason Currey, a Los Angeles-based writer and journalist, cited this excerpt in his book titled *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* (2013 83-84). *Daily Rituals* books illustrate how successful individuals overcome numerous challenges in their creative pursuits. In the first book, titled *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*, Currey explores the

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daily routines and habits of what appears to be a random selection of 161 creative individuals, including writers, artists, composers, and other influential figures, to provide insights into how they structure their days, balance their work and personal lives, and find inspiration. Currey utilizes direct e-mails, magazine profiles, newspaper obits, and biographies, as well as direct quotes from letters, personal diaries, and interviews to let them speak for themselves. In other cases, he has assembled a summary of their routines from secondary sources, and if another writer has produced the perfect distillation of their subject's routine, he has quoted it at length rather than try to rewrite it himself. Mason Currey assures readers that they will “find more information on particular subjects' routines, habits, quirks, and foibles” (237). This book, in the form of vignettes, caters to intellectual curiosity while also offering readers a fascinating look into diverse ways that creative people such as Franz Kafka, Soren Kierkegaard, Arthur Miller, and Jane Austen manage their time and productivity.

Focusing on the themes of routine and creativity, Currey emphasizes that there is no single formula for creativity but rather displays a wide range of routines and habits that work for different people. Some individuals thrive on strict schedules, while others prefer a more spontaneous approach. Among the sources of the habits of cultural icons, Ludwig van Beethoven had a “strict routine” in which he would start each day with a precise coffee-making ritual, counting out exactly sixty coffee beans for his morning brew. And then would spend the rest of the morning composing until 2 or 3 pm, taking frequent breaks to walk outdoors (Currey, *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* 17-9). Maya Angelou, on the other hand, preferred a hotel room rather than a study to which she would arrive at 6:30 am with a dictionary, a Bible, a deck of cards, and a bottle of sherry (122-124). She would write until around 2 pm, then return home to relax and read what she had written on that day. Haruki Murakami maintains a strict routine when working on a novel (60-61). He wakes up at 4 am and writes for five to six hours; in the afternoon, he runs or swims, then spends the rest of the day reading and listening to music. He goes to bed at 9 pm. Twyla Tharp, the choreographer, starts her day early, at 5:30 am; she begins with a two-hour workout, which includes weight training and cardio (222-223). Tharp believes that this routine sets the tone for a

productive day and primes her for creativity. These examples highlight the unique and often idiosyncratic routines that different artists and creatives follow to foster their work.

Mason Currey's first book addresses a very recent fascination with daily routines and quotidian realities that have become prevalent concerns in our contemporary era in which nearly everyone struggles to focus amidst the distractions brought by technology and social media. From this book, it can be inferred that small steps lead to significant differences and that success is achieved through discipline and adherence to daily routines. The word "routine" (Currey, *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* xiv) might suggest ordinariness, triviality, or being on autopilot. However, as Currey suggests, sticking to a daily routine is a deliberate choice, and by the end of the day, these routines often become rituals for these creative profiles.

Six years after the publication of *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*, Currey published "a sequel" and "a corrective" titled *Daily Rituals: Women at Work* (xiii). He indicates that the fact that only 27 out of the 161 of the figures he focused on in his former book were women was "a major flaw" (xiii). Thus, this second volume can be taken as a meaningful belated effort to correct that gender imbalance. In the first book, Currey tries to explore answers to questions like "[D]id they write or paint or compose every day?" "If so, for how long, and starting at what time?" "Did that include weekends, too?" "How did they do that and also earn a living, get enough sleep, and attend to the other people in their lives?" "And even if they could manage the logistical side of things – the when and where and for how long- how did they cope with more slippery crises of self-confidence and self-discipline?" (xiv). In the book, it is revealed that for male profiles, most of these obstacles have been alleviated by female contributions in the form of "devoted wives, paid servants, sizable inheritances, and centuries of accrued privilege" (xiv). This perspective may yet appear somewhat blunt to a contemporary reader who may not benefit from such entitlements. However, when the focus shifts to women, the situation appears significantly more severe, characterized by frustration and compromise. Despite this prevalent milieu for most women creatives, there are still some women in the second

book coming from privileged backgrounds, like Lillian Hellman, the American playwright. She could flee New York for a farm, a 130-acre property, and hire maids, cooks, and farmers to give her some time and space to write (27-29). However, most of the women included in the book faced substantial obstacles in their daily lives. Many grew up in societies that either overlooked or actively rejected women's creative endeavors, and numerous of them contended with parents or spouses who opposed their efforts to prioritize self-expression over traditional roles as wife, mother, and homemaker. Additionally, many of these women were burdened with the responsibilities of child-rearing and endured the internal struggles of anger and resentment stemming from their experience as a disadvantaged gender within a patriarchal society.

Mason Currey, in the second book, groups women's creative profiles under some interesting themes like "Oysters and Champagne," "The Vortex," or "Boredom and Suffering." Among these creative profiles, Shirley Jackson appears as one who had to divide her time between her art and managing a household of four children, several pets, and a husband who was not willing to take part in parenting duties (Currey, *Daily Rituals: Women at Work* 269-271). Another female figure suffering from a sexist mindset is the actress and scriptwriter Ida Lupino, who "employed a calculated maternal façade" to work in cooperation with males on sets and to avoid criticism (97-99). Most women included in the book are reported to have faced substantial gender-based barriers in their careers, and their works were often undervalued or dismissed. Despite the challenges of overcoming traditional norms and managing the demands of familial and social obligations, these women discovered various methods to foster their creativity and maintain productivity. Each profile illustrates how they structured their days, motivated themselves to engage in their work, and stimulated their creativity.

In conclusion, although Currey modestly refers to his work as "a superficial book" in *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* (xiii), it is anything but. As he explicitly states, the books are concerned with "the circumstances of creative activity, not the product" (xiii). While readers may appreciate the final product in their unique way, the creative process itself—such as the one that led Beethoven to compose

the Ninth Symphony—possesses immense potential to inspire and offer fresh perspectives on the product. By providing intimate details and insights into the inner workings of creative minds, these books foster a profound connection with their audience.

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