

Jenny Odell's new book 'Saving Time' gives fresh perspective on the meaning of time

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We're all used to being 'on the clock' and ruled by it. But a new book by Jenny Odell takes on the very idea of time in our lives. "Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock" is Odell's follow-up to her best-selling title, "How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy." Jeffrey Brown sat down with her for our arts and culture series, CANVAS.

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Geoff Bennett:

We're all used to being on the clock and often being ruled by it.

But a new book by Jenny Odell takes on the very notion of time. It's a follow up to her bestselling title "How to Do Nothing."

Jeffrey Brown has the story from San Francisco for our arts and culture series, Canvas.

Jenny Odell, Author, "Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock": I feel like this is just a really therapeutic contrast to the more deadening sense of clock time, where all the time feels the same. Time is just kind of stuff.

Jeffrey Brown:

And part of it is just get away from the clock.

Jenny Odell:

Yes, like literally get away, yes, right, right, right.

Jeffrey Brown:

It's easy enough to get a sense of timelessness on a walk at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area at Fort Mason overlooking the spectacular San Francisco Bay. But Jenny Odell actually wants us to focus on time, just in a new way.

She met us recently at the Long Now Foundation, a nonprofit aimed at fostering longer-term thinking, to talk about her new book, "Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock."

Jenny Odell:

There's obvious the sense of not having enough time, always rushing against the clock. There's also, I think, the feeling of being worried about the climate.

So, there's a sense of kind of impending doom, this longer historical timeline. And I was trying to find a different way of thinking about time or a different relationship to time that didn't feel so painful.

Jeffrey Brown:

Then there was the pandemic, the period when she was writing when time and place took on a new strangeness.

Odell, 36, is an Oakland-based artist and writer who's taken her work into some unusual places, including a Bay Area dump, where she examined and displayed the history or the past life of a given piece of trash, from how and when it was made to now.

Jenny Odell:

I'm really obsessed with seeing something new that was right in front of you the whole time. That's kind of like my favorite thing, and so sort of an odd angle on the familiar, the every day.

Jeffrey Brown:

That's kind of what you're telling us we should do?

Jenny Odell:

Yes, with time, exactly. Yes. It's like what could be more commonplace than time?

Jeffrey Brown:

Her first book, "How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy," challenged a social media-obsessed culture to refocus and pay attention to life around us, including the natural world.

It struck a chord and became a surprise bestseller during the pandemic, when activities like gardening and bird-watching took on new popularity. But she says there was a problem.

Jenny Odell:

A lot of people who read that or heard me talk about it agreed with the concepts, but had a kind of objection about time, which was that they didn't know — they couldn't imagine having the time to do the things that I was talking about.

Jenny Odell:

Yes. So — and so and I thought...

Jeffrey Brown:

And that is the issue, right, is how...

Jenny Odell:

That is the issue, yes.

Jeffrey Brown:

Odell knows many people don't have the privilege of controlling their own time. But she does believe that understanding the relatively recent history of, say, time is money — think of the shelves of productivity guides — can help both individuals and society.

Her book takes the reader to the Oakland Port to examine the industrial model of time and into the woods to consider nature's time, as on her own walks on local trails.

Jenny Odell:

There's a type of flower that grows there called the Douglas iris that comes up. It's one of the earlier flowers.

And one year, I saw it a little bit what I thought was early, and then I just — I had this moment of realizing that the Douglas iris does not know what February is.

Jeffrey Brown:

A more prosaic example of individuals making more of their own time:

Jenny Odell:

I interviewed someone who was an admin for a working moms Facebook group, and she had the insight that it would probably make a lot of sense for her to get six other moms together, and each one of them would make dinner for the other people in the group one night a week.

Like, if they do these things together, everyone will have more time.

Jeffrey Brown:

While we all want to save time, Odell is focused more on saving the meaning of time itself.

Still, I couldn't help but notice something.

I see you're wearing a watch. I'm wearing a watch.

Jenny Odell:

Yes. Yes.

(LAUGHTER)

Jeffrey Brown:

So, we're both on the clock in that sense.

Jenny Odell:

Yes, we are. Yes. Yes.

Jeffrey Brown:

I mean, do you advise us to take it off?

Jenny Odell:

No. I mean, I always say like — someone recently asked me, should we — should we smash all the clocks? And I said, no, we should just put them in their place, right?

Like, no, you — it's a tool. But I — my hope is that it's not the primary way that you think about time.

Jeffrey Brown:

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown in San Francisco.

By – **Jeffrey Brown**

In his more than 30-year career with the NewsHour, Brown has served as co-anchor, studio moderator, and field reporter on a wide range of national and international issues, with work taking him around the country and to many parts of the globe. As arts correspondent he has profiled many of the world's leading writers, musicians, actors and other artists. Among his signature works at the NewsHour: a multi-year series, "Culture at Risk," about threatened cultural heritage in the United States and abroad; the creation of the NewsHour's online "Art Beat"; and hosting the monthly book club, "Now Read This," a collaboration with The New York Times.

By – **Lena I. Jackson**