

# Grace Period



A Memoir in Pieces

**Kelly J. Baker**

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## **Grace Period: A Memoir in Pieces** Kelly J. Baker

How do you build a life after failed dreams and missed opportunities? Kelly J. Baker finished her PhD in religion and imagined that she would end up in the tenure-track job for which she trained. She had done everything right: written a provocative and well-researched book, given presentations at national conferences, published articles, and created and taught a number of popular classes. Doing everything right, however, doesn't guarantee anything if the career you trained for is no longer sustainable. The economic depression in 2008 gutted the job market for tenure-track jobs in the humanities, so she couldn't find her dream job and worked instead as an adjunct and later a full-time lecturer.

But after five years of job rejections and a new baby on the way, she decided to take a year off to figure out if the career she trained for was actually the life she wanted. *Grace Period: A Memoir in Pieces* are the essays that she wrote to make sense of how her life went off-track. Expanding on her popular *Chronicle Vitae* column of the same name, she documents her transition out of academia and the emotional turmoil of rebuilding a life beyond what she had prepared for. Instead of telling an easy story about her exit from the academy into a brand-new post-academic career, Baker resists smoothing over the hard reality of transitions, the importance of waiting and anticipation, and the realization that the lives we imagine for ourselves are tenuous at best and often are impossible to achieve.

## **Grace Period: A Memoir in Pieces Details**

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# From Reader Review *Grace Period: A Memoir in Pieces* for online ebook

## Katie says

Baker writes that 'Optimism is a hard habit to kick,' but in *GRACE PERIOD*, she shows readers how to move on from work that's done them wrong with thoughtfulness, and yes, with grace. A dynamic, meditative book for anyone who has changed careers or contemplated doing so.

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## Herb says

I'm not a fan of the assembled-blog book as a genre, but this one is interesting primarily because it really *is* a sequential, slow motion understanding of how one's career never develops. The least interesting essays are sort of a wallowing, a tell-don't-show exposition of "I'm so tired" or "I'm trying to have some gumption even when I don't feel like it." But the most interesting are about specific interactions with specific people over specific projects, in which we can see how dubious she's become about higher ed, and about the endless baiting of the trap that draws us back over and over. The paired chapters "How You End Up Leading a Contingency Task Force," and then eleven essays later, "How You End Up Leaving the Contingency Task Force," are marvels of the ways in which academics so easily dismiss the concerns of those of us outside, and the ways in which we so desperately want back in even knowing what we know.

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## Sarah says

I first became aware of Kelly's work in the wake of the Charlottesville riots, when everyone was clamoring to talk to her about her scholarly work on the 1920s Klan. So I missed these essays when they originally they came out, and thus reading the book I got the full arc of Kelly's transition story out of traditional academia. As the essays span four years of her life, you experience both the narrative arc of her transitions--and her frequent insights into the pains and pleasures of these liminal moments--but also witness her writing develop over time, her voice grow more sure and vivid and adept. Which is its own sort of story. And then there is a third story in what Kelly's personal arc reveals about the structural problems in highered.

My favorite essays were "The Manuscript Blues" (I have also been stalked by writing projects, though not on topics as fascinating as zombies) and "Waiting" (which while relevant to the three narratives of the book, also feels like an shrewd stand-alone statement on the meaning of life).

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## Richard Newton says

I hate the title "Quit Lit," and it's a misnomer for what this book is. *Grace Period*'s a travel narrative through the strange world of the academy and the even more haunting world of our own memories. Baker made the inspired choice to record her trip without having a sense of the destination and mind, and she's left the

junctures of the journey for us to come to appreciate just as she has done. When I think of the subtitle, I can't help but think of the shards of a mirror. Baker is by no means broken--if anything, you realize she's a badass. But the shards bear the reality of her journey and reflect a perspective that one might miss out were her tale told as a cohesive summary. I've come back to this book a few times as I've thought about my own career and what kind of writer I want to become. This is a carry-with-you book for anyone who's worked in academia.

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## **E.P. says**

I read many of Kelly Baker's essays about her transition away from academia on Vitae when they first came out, so of course I had to read them all when they were published as a collection. In "Grace Period," Baker chronicles her--frequently bitter, angry, and desperate--transition out of academia to the alt-ac world.

It's hard to explain academia, like war, to those who haven't experienced it. For those who've never been on the front lines or in the trenches, the intensity, the desperation, and the sheer, astonishing misery of the academic experience sound like ridiculous exaggeration or pathetic whining, and the normal response from those who haven't been there is to whip out some insulting, cowardly platitudes. Baker confronts that problem head-on in one of her earlier essays:

"After all, life is hard. People reach for this mantra when confronted with the suffering of others. 'Life is hard for everyone,' they say, 'why would academia be any different?' We suffer, so why should we be surprised that you suffer too?"

"They are right. Life is hard and fragile and fleeting. That brusque statement of fact, however, is not an excuse to ignore structural injustices wherever they may be. We can't use 'life is hard' to obscure the pain and suffering of others, inside or outside academia."

The issues that Baker deals with will be familiar to anyone who has read her columns or the columns of anyone else who has become disenchanted with academia, or who has just had any personal experience with the culture. An apparently promising young academic who did well in grad school and had multiple publications, including a book, Baker nevertheless struggled to find work, cobbling together multiple temporary and part-time jobs as she juggled her work with her growing family. Interview after interview led to rejection after rejection, and she felt increasingly underappreciated and over-stressed about her position, leading eventually to the decision to take a year off the market (for the non-academic: "the market" is a sort of virtual slave market in which aspiring professors submit their--very long, very torturously composed--applications each fall, a few lucky ones are trotted out like show ponies during the winter conferences, and then an even fewer number of extra-lucky ones are shipped in for campus interviews in the spring, culminating in one very, very special pony receiving a job offer. Failing on the market one year means waiting a whole year to try again, as academic hiring is an annual event and a single job takes a year to fill). While off the market, she found herself turning more and more to writing, eventually making a career of it.

Baker's story is worth reading for any academic, especially since she decided to leave academia behind and do something else, although there were plenty of bumps along the way. While she openly acknowledges that she lucked out, circumstance-wise, by having a spouse who was able to pick up the financial slack while she was struggling to find work and then changing careers, that she was able to do so at all is interesting and frankly rather uplifting, and she brings a number of insights into the academic process and the escape from it. "Grace Period" will no doubt resonate strongly with early-career academics, should maybe be required

reading for those who dismiss their struggles, and has plenty of poignant, touching moments for any reader.

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### **Melissa says**

A moving journey from the land of heartbreak and lost dreams to new beginnings. If you ever had to relinquish a dream from forces beyond your control, you'll find resonance, wisdom and grace in this book.

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### **Book Riot Community says**

Have you ever had a plan for your life not go the way you had hoped? Have you spent weeks or months or maybe a decade with a particular future in mind, only to have that future fail to happen, leaving you unmoored and lost and unsure what to do? Kelly J. Baker has. And even though I know it's painful (been there!), I can't help but see a big upside in her case: this lovely book. In a series of vivid and beautiful essays, Baker uses her changing relationship to academia to reflect on "grace periods," those moments (or strings of moments) when you leave one possible future behind without quite knowing what's next. Grace Period's form serves it especially well: Baker has been writing about her transition since 2013, and Grace Period collects those essays and reflections together into a whole both fragmentary and so, so whole. Each essay is dated and presented in chronological order, so you watch Baker grow—as a person, a thinker, a writer—without the book erasing her "missed turns" (in her phrase) in retrospect. That's how we all live our lives, unsure of what's to come, and I'm thrilled to see that experience explored so sensitively and so beautifully in Grace Period.

—Derek Attig

from The Best Books We Read In June 2017: <https://bookriot.com/2017/07/03/riot-...>

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### **Krista Park says**

Great memoir by a post-academic about that transition out of academia and reflections on the ridiculousness of some academic institutional economics. She moved to freelance writing, and there is a bit on thinking about one's social place in that field as a comparison. A nice, short, simple read for a fellow post-academic.

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### **Titus Hjelm says**

I was an admirer of Kelly's work when she was still in academia. Although acquaintances at best, her decision to leave made me see how privileged I happened to be. These essays trace that process of letting go ('grace period'), but also paint a vivid picture of the struggle of settling into a new life as a full time writer. It's a courageous thing to let go of something that you've not only invested time and money in, but that is something you love. It's an even more courageous thing to write about it. I remain a huge admirer of Kelly's work.

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**Shannon says**

Sometimes shows it's roots as a collection of blog posts but it's otherwise a good look into the post academic life

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**Mare says**

A wonderful memoir in which the author documents her journey from graduate student to academic job candidate, to contingent faculty, to independent scholar. So good I read it in one sitting

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**Margy Levine Young says****An emotionally no-holds-barred journey of Baker's changing narrative of her own life**

People talk a lot about how the stories of lives change from generation to generation. Here's an eloquent window into Baker's construction of a new narrative of herself independent of the received trajectory of the "successful" academic. But it's not just trading one tidy narrative for another. It's about abandoning a tidy narrative for the rich ambiguity and complexity of 21st century life. Sure, one could tell this story as a triumphant reinvention of the self, but that would miss the point. Baker pulls this off without being whiney through her beautiful writing. A must for anyone who's redefining their own life and wants an unvarnished look at how one person embraced ambiguity, not just a pat answer or a pep talk.

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