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As told to Kevin M. Kearney, 2422 words.

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On how to keep trying when the work changes shape

Writer Annie Liontas discusses widening the scope, exploring hybrid forms, and learning how to read a work's vital signs.

Now that the semester's done, are you finding that you've got more time to write? Or are you able to write while classes are going on?

I usually give myself the first six weeks of a semester to focus on teaching. If writing happens, great, but that's go-time in the semester. I usually use the breaks like this to write, but I did just submit a draft of a novel to my agent, so I'm taking a much needed break. Apart from a few small things, I probably won't be able to write much right now. And that's okay. It's the time to take a pause.

When you are in the midst of a school year, does that six week period ever go longer? Does teaching ever demand more attention?

For me, if you're in a certain outward facing mode, it's really hard to sink in and become immersed in the writing and the work. I guess that's literally the point of a residency, right? Sometimes the semesters are really busy and I find it's eight weeks or more. So, I really end up using the summers and the winters to try and get as much concentrated time as possible.

Does that ever feel like too much pressure? Or do you appreciate that block of time?

It doesn't feel like pressure. Initially I forced myself to write during the semesters and that was the pressure. I did it okay for a year, but the writing wasn't good. Now, I look forward to it. It's a way of having the time. It's quiet, on-the-page. And I'm still trying to enjoy life, to enjoy downtime, but I love having those blocks for the work.

When you're sitting down, what's a good, productive day look like?

It'll depend on the project and how I'm doing. Three or four hours, sitting, focused attention. In a novel, that's working through a chapter. If I can do a chapter in a day, either writing or heavy revision, then that's great. Maybe some light edits or reading as well.

You mention in the book that *Sex With a Brain Injury* originally started as a novel and that then you rewrote it until it was an informed memoir. What did that rewriting look like?

The novel was radically different. It was totally fictionalized. It wasn't necessarily mimicking my autobiography in almost any way. I was taking my psychic and physical experience and mapping it onto a character. It served its purpose, but it was not isolating or creating an accurate portrait of what it felt like to have a head injury.

Then I started looking around and realized what we mostly have are false narratives, fictional narratives, of head injury. I realized *this is not everything, this is not quite what I need to say about this*. So I started burning through mostly vignette-style pieces that built into this larger project.

So, you embraced the fragmentary stuff and started eventually seeing the whole?

Yeah, and I began feeling like, *I'm stuck in this experience and I can't articulate it*. Of course, that's the point of writing and language. I began to feel like I had to translate the experience, like the project was a work of translation. I wanted to say this thing about intimacy or relationships. Well,

that's one facet of this, but what about gender and disparity? What about the carceral system? All of these other lenses. These natural questions were arising and they kept demanding more pieces.

Was it hard to abandon the original concept or was it a relief?

I would say both. It's still in a drawer, it's a finished thing. But I also felt like it got to have a new life and maybe help people. The book feels like an activist work and what I hope it does is reach people who might feel a bit isolated in their experience. That feels like a very surprising result.

How do you determine when something's not working and that it's time to go in the other direction?

I think even if you're lying to yourself, you know when something's not alive. You keep banging against the wall. Sometimes you need to keep banging against the wall because a piece is in the early stage of production, but that's a very different feeling. It's a gut feeling. This thing is either breathing or it's not. The lesson I'm grateful for after working on that novel is that I think I'm more attuned to whether a thing is living or not. And I think I can carry that forward.

But with novels, as you know, you just won't know for a while if they're cooked or if there's something there. Sometimes the novel is beneath the novel and you have to keep digging for it. Still, I think it let's you know pretty quickly whether this thing is alive.

Was there hesitation to embrace nonfiction because of the exposure that the form brings?

I'm a very reluctant nonfiction writer. I was at Syracuse and they offered Creative Nonfiction with Mary Karr. I was like, "Well, I'm never going to write a memoir. Why would I take this class?" [Laughs.]

My heart is in fiction, where you can do a great deal of creative, elusive construction. There were also things I didn't want to write about, but they demanded to be written. I still don't know what it will be like to interface with the public around the project or to read my own life outloud. That part kind of psychs me out.

I love teaching nonfiction. I teach nonfiction workshops. The writing with the greatest stakes and the greatest heat on the page. It's almost always alive when people are telling their authentic stories.

I thought it was interesting the way you navigated the ethics of nonfiction, especially in the Q&As with your wife, which have certain personal details covered by large black boxes. Often times I was more intrigued because there were gaps. When I returned to it, I was seeing different things with each reading. How did you come to that idea and that agreement with your wife?

A lot of the book is about our relationship and marriage, so it felt inevitable that I needed to get her perspective. So much of this is also not just what you, as someone who's had this kind of injury, are dealing with, but what your loved ones and people closest to you are dealing with.

In terms of the actual conversation, I knew I wanted an interview. But it's a lot to say to your spouse "I'm going to write this whole book about us and interview you" and not give them any authority. So I told her, "we'll do the interview in as many rounds as you want and you can cross out whatever you want."

It took a few tries. We weren't always ready to have the conversation. It was a little trial-by-error. Halfway through, I thought, "Maybe this just isn't going to work." But we were lucky. My wife loves me. We just kept trying.

The book has multiple modes: a collaborative chapter, lists, reportage. I was telling someone it was a memoir, but that felt a bit reductive. Then I started referring to it as a collection of essays and that felt a bit staid. It's really neither. I'm interested to hear why you turned away from a more classic memoir structure.

I'm really interested in hybrid forms as a way to puzzle through a question. Particularly with this book, it very quickly felt like the topic was much bigger than me. The cultural questions, public policy, people who are vulnerable and facing this kind of injury.

I did some research and stumbled on the research by Dr. Kim Gorgens, who has a great TED Talk on head injury and the criminal justice system. Her statistics suggest that people who are in prison are seven times more likely to have a head injury than people who haven't had that experience—before they get there. That struck me as this astounding fact that has no location in my personal experience, yet had to be confronted. [I wanted to talk about how] we incarcerate mental illness along with other cross-sections: gender and race and how black women are not listened to when they talk about pain at the doctors.

There were so many social and cultural intersections that were beyond the scope of my small life. Yeah, my pain is legitimate, everyone's is legitimate, but let's look at all of the ways this is impacting people. The knowledge sort of determined the form. Sometimes the book wants to be intimate and have those Q&As and talk about the arc of my marriage and whether or not we were going to make it. And sometimes I forget I'm even there.

Towards the end you reference neuroscientist Daniela Schiller, who argues that memory is a story we edit each time we return to it. Did you find your own memories shifting throughout these drafts and revisions?

I mean, that's a funny question to ask someone with memory issues [laughs].

When you write a memory down, it's closer to fabricating a story. You're creating fiction. It's not transcribing, it's rebuilding and reimagining a thing. I think it was on some level important to try and crystallize those memories because it's a way to reflect and record what it's actually like to go through this kind of thing.

But at the same time, you're still curating for the reader. It's still slippery. You're necessarily collapsing time on the page. Those things automatically fictionalize. It's a bit of a balance between an accurate portrayal and moving the camera in the way that's most necessary.

In those sections that are closer to reportage, did your writing process differ from what's typical for you?

It was a little like sailing the ship while building it. I'm not a journalist, I've never done work in journalism. I didn't have the exact tools to do it. I was not someone who ever thought I'd write a research-informed book. Maybe that was a kind of freedom to do the experimentation that you're talking about because I didn't have my own personal models for it other than reading Maggie Nelson or Leslie Jamison or Esme Weijun Wang.

When I wrote the collaborative piece, that was all new. How do you collaborate? Marchell [Taylor, my co-writer] relies more on oral narrative. How do you honor that and build it and move from Zoom conversations to a collaborative piece that's both reportage and has an emotional thread through? I grew a lot as a writer in those sections, because it was all new.

So, how'd you balance it all?

At first I tried to remove myself from it entirely. I thought, *this is a profile on Marchell, we'll understand the issue through him*. My friend, the writer Emma Eisenberg, who *does* have a background in this, read a part of the first draft and said, "You should give yourself more permission to put yourself in this."

So then I thought, *what is the function or role of myself in this story?* And I think it's to confront the questions we don't ask, especially if you're a white person in America: the disparities and the preferential treatment and how we envision suffering for people. I wanted that to be a philosophical underpinning.

Marchell and I also just naturally became friends. We had the same sense of humor, we have similar opinions of the world in parallel ways. So, I thought, *okay, that's got to go in there. That's true to the story, too.*

What feels like the heart of the book is the way the concussion makes you question whether or not you'll still be able to write. You call the experience of losing the ability to write like "losing your gift of sight," which really struck me. I'd like to go back, way earlier, and ask when you feel you discovered that "gift of sight."

I do talk in the book about that experience, one of my earliest memories. I was born in America, but my parents were in an arranged marriage, so I moved to Greece as a baby. I remember one of earliest memories were fictionalizing the world. All of my new family and cousins would be together and I'd walk around, tapping sticks against trees, making up stories for myself...you know, like writers do. I think it was always there in some way.

Another part of the book that I loved is the acceptance that there are many selves in each of us. So, moving forward, what do you hope to do with those many selves and with that gift of sight?

Keep writing. I don't have a static relationship to writing. Every now and then I wonder, *am I losing it again?* And of course some of that has to do with my own physical health.

I don't wish my injury on anybody, but going through something like this allows you to have different glimpse into the human experience. And what it gives you is this awareness that people suffer so much and often suffer much more than you...I knew that theoretically. I had the chaotic childhood of any writer. But I was hovering above that. It was abstract mostly. Now, I feel like I have a different relationship to vulnerability and other people's vulnerability. I've always made space for other people's vulnerability and stories, but now I feel like I'm in a different position to hear people.

I don't know if this is answering your question, but it does feel like this is a side of me that I get to explore and discover. You can go at any time. Your life can look radically different. Why not live the life you really want to live? I'm a little more awake, a little more aware, and I'm trying to move through the world in those ways.

Annie Liontas' things to live for:

the tops of trees against a winter sky

your best friend calling with good news

tacos, silly putty, LitFriends, when the perfect word hits you
an animal talking, the hoodie your wife begs you to throw away
your wife, the smell of a tomato plant, the art of Ursula von Rydingsvard, dancing

Name

Annie Liontas

Vocation

writer

Fact

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