On leaning into the fun



Writer, editor, and publisher D.T. Robbins discusses finding his voice, the importance of joy, and the value of telling true stories

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As told to Kevin M. Kearney, 3476 words.

Tags: Writing, Education, Process, Identity, Family.

Where are we right now?

We are technically in Rancho Cucamonga, bordering on Fontana, California. This is the apartment complex from *Leasing*. That right there is the front office. That is where I worked.

Can you describe what we're looking at?

300 apartments on about 28 square miles or acres. Something like that. It's Cape Code style…I feel like I'm back in the leasing office talking like this [*laughs*]. It's not necessarily apartment buildings, it looks more like little houses split up into different apartments, which is very different from most apartments you'll see out here in Rancho and the Inland Empire. These were built back in the '80s, which is why it has this style. The people who built it didn't want it to be apartment buildings stacked on top of each other.

A little fun fact, I used to live right over here. When I worked here the first time—'cause I worked here twice—I lived with my family, my ex-wife and my kid, in that building right there. A little three-bedroom that, at the time, cost next to nothing. Who knows what it is now.

How did you wind up with this job in the first place?

So, kind of similar to the book, I was working at a Levi's store in the local mall. I was a manager there. That was right at the tail end of 2011. I had just gotten the job around Thanksgiving. Three weeks into the job, our district manager comes in and says they're closing the store down for financial reasons, blah blah blah. Economy, blah blah blah.

I was without a job for a few months. I was living with my in-laws at the time because otherwise we would've been on our asses. My ex was working at a church. Someone at the church knew the property manager here. I talked with him. They were looking for a leasing agent. I went in, did the interview, then met with the C.E.O. and C.F.O. to do another interview. A week later I was in the apartment complex, working.

You'd been in California for years at that point?

Yeah. Been here for good since 2000.

Were you writing this whole time?

Here and there. I don't think I'd found my voice yet. I mean, I don't know that I ever found my voice. Well, no, I

definitely think I've found my voice now.

I was writing, but not as seriously as I am now. And not the kind of stuff that I write now. I was doing a lot of science fiction, weird shit. I was into that. I fucked around with Bukowski-esque writing, though I'm not Bukowski style-wise or personality-wise.

That's good.

[*Laughs*] Hard to write about being a womanizer when you're not a womanizer. I really just wrote for fun at that point. It was all stories. I never touched poetry until 2020.

When did you start taking writing more seriously?

After my divorce, in 2018. I had always wanted to do it. I was in an MFA program, so I was already writing. My ex was never very supportive. I never had the expectation I was going to make a shit ton of money or that this was going to be my career or anything like that, but it was more like, "This is a part of who I am, this is where I get to be creative and have fun and do what I want to do." She's from a family of cops. Everything was very career-oriented. There's a reason we're divorced.

But a position like leasing agent…I can see why she'd be excited to link you up with the hiring manager.

Oh, yeah. She thought this was going to lead to something. I mean, it led to a book! [*Laughs*] I took writing seriously after the divorce because I could and I felt that freedom to do it. And I wasn't married to someone who was working at a church. I didn't have to pretend to be a Christian and all that shit. It was like, now I can do what I want to do. So I dove headfirst into it, reading all the old books I'd loved reading, dabbling with different writing styles. And here we are now.

Did you find the MFA helped you?

I don't want to say it wasn't helpful. But I don't think it's necessary. I have people ask me, "should I get an MFA?" No. Unless you want to teach, I don't think so. Unless you're going into a really good program. I loved my MFA, don't get me wrong. I loved my thesis mentor. She blurbed *Birds Aren't Real*, she's a fantastic writer. And she introduced me, literally, to the whole indie lit scene.

So, it can be helpful in the sense of meeting new people and meeting people who have been doing this for a long time, but so is Twitter. Or X. Or whatever the fuck it's called now.

An MFA is helpful to some people. I always wanted to get it because I wanted to teach. That's what I wanted to do and that's what I'm able to do because of it. I adjunct on the side of my other job. In that sense, it was helpful. Writing wise, it introduced me to a lot of new authors and different styles of writing. But as far as helping me as a writer? Like helping my own writing? I don't think that actually came until later.

Your thesis mentor who showed you indie lit writers…was that through a course or in working with her on your thesis?

It was in working with her on my thesis. I was working on a collection of short stories. I was asking her if she had suggestions for where I could submit for publication. She started listing off all kinds of different places. Two Dollar Radio, Soft Skull. And she introduced me to Kelly Link, McClanahan's stuff, Bennett Sims's *White Dialogues*.

I know you were reading genre fiction up to that point. Were you reading much contemporary writing?

Not at that point. In my MFA it wasn't really genre. I was reading, more like, speculative fiction. Kelly Link, Murakami, even Italo Calvino. But I wasn't reading contemporary until I was introduced to those presses. When I

joined Twitter, I found a number of online publications and that's when I found writers like Bud Smith, who was and is a huge influence. *Double Bird* is still one of my absolute favorite short story collections. Kevin Maloney and *Cult of Loretta*, which, in my opinion, is the best indie lit book. All the stuff on Maudlin House. All the shit Claire Hopple was writing. *Heck, Texas* by Tex Gresham—fucking love that book. That's one of the funniest books I've ever read. All of that stuff was eye-opening.

I was into the funny, weird shit, and even Aaron Burch's stuff. I never got into the more serious side of things, like New York Tyrant, aside from [Scott McClanahan's] *The Sarah Book*.

It sounds like a lot of what you liked was outside of New York.

Yeah. I don't think I relate to a lot of New York literature. I've never even been to New York. I want to go, but I've rarely visited the East Coast. That New York scene, there's just a lot of it I don't relate to. I didn't get crazy in my 20s, do a bunch of drugs and shit. Cool for those writers; I was married and had a kid. My experience was very different, so the stuff I gravitated towards was the weirder shit.

You said you found all that stuff eye-opening. What did it show you?

The biggest thing I've taken away from a lot of contemporary literature I love is they're not trying to write the Great American Novel. You know what I mean? You go through high school and you read all these books. *Of Mice and Men*, *The Pearl*, Fitzgerald. All that shit. You get the impression that all these guys wanted to do is write the Great American Novel. I'm not interested in that.

These writers had *fun* writing. That's what I want to do. I have fun writing. Even the miserable shit. *The Sarah Book* is fucking miserable. It really is. It's about a dude absolutely losing his fucking mind going through a divorce. But at the same time, it's so funny.

And that's expressed on the page.

And you have fun with these characters. Another writer I love, who's much more serious, is Willy Vlautin. *Motel Life* is the first book I read from him. It's fucking brutal and sad. But at the same time it's nurturing. It's, in some ways, lighthearted.

You mentioned that it took you a long time to find your voice, even after you'd started reading all these writers who have very distinct voices. What do you think allowed you to find your voice? Do you remember a distinct moment where it clicked?

I'd published some stuff online. It was much more serious and "literary." And then I sat down one day and thought, "I'm just going to write whatever comes to mind, no matter how stupid it is." The first thing that came out was "Following Signs." It was weird and stupid, about a guy seeing his name on a beam. I showed it to Burch and he was like, "This is really cool. I like this. I'll publish it on HAD."

I had fun with it. And I thought, "I'm gonna do that again." And I kept doing that. And I kept doing that. And I kept doing that. And the more I did it, the more it became more natural. I know my style now, even when I have an unserious story, like "mtg minutes," where it's literally the meeting minutes of a Satanic cult in El Segundo. It's stupid! A fucking demon named Kevin comes out of the ground and eats people. But I had so much fun writing that story, you know?

And then you'll have more serious stories, like "I Turned Off the Christmas Lights" or "Novels," but they still have those elements: how I like to write, how I like to say certain things, form certain sentences. A lot of repetition. I'm not the first person to do that. I'm not at all innovative here. With time, I've just gotten pretty good at knowing what I like to do. How to structure certain stories and how to write my sentences, what works and what doesn't work.

Are you the type of person who has a specific process?

Fuck no [*laughs*]. I am flying by the seat of my pants. I have no fucking clue what I'm doing half the time. It's so funny when I see writers say, "I sit down every morning at 4 or 5 A.M., 6 A.M. I have my alarm. I write with my coffee for an hour and a half." Good for fucking you! Any time I can sit down to write or I'm in the mood to write…I know there is discipline that goes into it, but I definitely do not have a process and I think a lot of that is my life. My life is not chaos. My life is very peaceful, but my life is peaceful because I accept what my life is. I have three kids, I have one on the way, I'm married, I have two dogs, I work full-time, and I work part-time. I've got a lot of shit going on. And that's just my day-to-day. Then there's the *Rejection Letters* stuff on top of wanting to write. If this were a different universe where it were just me, then, yeah, maybe I'd have more of a process. Because I'd have that capability to have one.

I'm sure there are people in my position who still have that ability, like my buddy Drew Hawkins—wife, two kids, full-time job, and he still sits down every morning. It works for him. I'm also not a morning person. Most of these people wake up at the ass crack of dawn. Fuck that shit. I like my sleep.

Do you think that editing and publishing other people's work has influenced your own work at all?

Yeah, I mean, I think there's two sides to this. There's the lit mag. When I've done open calls, it's very gut-oriented. I read the first few lines and it either hits or it doesn't hit, you know? I don't like to do line edits for something that's going to be published online. So, you get a feel for following your gut. You know what I mean?

On the press side of things…I'm gonna praise Lexi Kent-Monning until the day I die. She's a fantastic writer and a fantastic human being in general. Working with her was awesome because that's where I got to see editing from a different side. It's seeing it from 30,000 feet—story edits, as opposed to line edits.

They've both been influential, just in different ways. The lit mag is teaching me to follow my gut, whereas the press is looking at things holistically.

A lot of your writing is first person and very intentionally using your own name. That's the case with *Leasing*. I'm sure there's a disclaimer in the beginning of the book; I know it's labeled as a novel and I'm sure people will refer to it as autofictional. But I've personally found that no matter what qualifiers exist, people are going to read into it if your name is attached. Are you at all concerned about the reaction when you put something like this out there?

Not really. There's a lot of shit in *Leasing* that actually happened in real life. There's also a lot of shit that *didn't* happen in real life. I don't really care what people think is true or what isn't true. The only thing I can really attest to being not true, if people even care, is the relationship dynamic in the book wasn't anything that was actually happening at that time because I was married with children. That aspect is left completely out of the novel out of respect for my and my ex's privacy. Not that there's any bad blood, 'cause there's really not. We have a great relationship. I left that out because it wasn't anything I wanted to share and, if I'm being honest, it wasn't very interesting. It wasn't anything worth writing about, you know what I mean? I'd work in the office over there, by the pool, then I'd walk back home into that building, right over there. And then I'd walk back. That was my day. I'd take care of my kids, we'd play on that playground, and that was it. There was nothing exciting happening in my personal world.

You mention your kids and wanting to respect your relationship with your ex-wife and your family's privacy. But you're creating this body of work that they'll eventually be able to explore on their own. Are they familiar with your writing?

I don't really know if my ex is. I would be surprised if she were. I mean, she knows I write, she knows I've been published, she knows I've got books, blah blah blah. I would be fucking shocked if I found out she'd ever read anything. But who knows.

My wife reads everything I write. And I think I read everything I write to her before I ever submit it for publication. I read *Leasing* to her, literally, chapter-by-chapter, after I wrote it, just to see the reaction.

My kids know I write. They've seen my books on the shelf. And I tell them, "Not 'til you're 18 [*laughs*]. You're not touching this shit 'til you're 18 years old." Some of it's okay. Some of it's not. I did read something to my oldest daughter last week, a piece I had published in No Contact a few weeks ago. I wrote it about my son, but I wrote it for my kids, all of them, 'cause the sentiment's true. It was funny because I'm trying to not get choked up as I'm reading it to my tween daughter and she could not fucking care less at this point [*laughs*]. She's like, "Are you crying?" I'm like, "Shut up! You're grounded!"

Some things I don't mind reading to them. And obviously I don't drop all the f-bombs and shit like that in front of them. Not that they haven't heard me before. I'll say "Goddamn it" and my daughter will be upstairs, like, "I heard that!" "Fuck!" "I heard that, too!"

What remains untouched in your writing? What do you hope to eventually work through? Or is it like your process, where you're just flying on inspiration?

There are things I want to try. I've always wanted to write a horror novel or something bordering on horror. Knowing me, it'd probably be a dark comedy horror. I don't know if I could ever write a full-on horror novel. I love horror movies, I fucking love them. I love horror literature. But I feel like it's one of those things where… I know I'm a funny writer, but I was also told for a long time that I wasn't funny, so I thought, "whatever, I guess I'm not a funny guy." I learned later I guess that's not true [*laughs*].

I say that because I think horror is a lot like writing comedy. When you're trying to be funny, it's not funny. Trying to be scary isn't scary. If I ever do get to sit down and write a horror novel, or anything even resembling that and it isn't rooted in something comedic, it will literally have to be something that's scary to me. Obviously we can write about existential terror and the fear of death and all that shit, but how deep are you really going to go down that rabbit hole?

The other thing I've always wanted to do is a little bit more openly non-fiction. I wrote that short last year, "Novels," about my brother. I got a lot of really wonderful responses from that. I think there's a lot of unexplored territory around my upbringing and my familial relationships, a lot of which I don't have and some of which I do. So, maybe turning that into something.

Does the latter scare you at all? I mean, using the term "non-fiction" and tying yourself to a different set of expectations?

I'll have to cross that bridge when I get there. Do I want this to be fully non-fiction? Or am I just going to make it autofiction? I don't know. I have no idea what it'll look like or what I'll do with that. There's a lot I want to write about because I know how cathartic it was, how much of a release that was. And not that you're doing it for the responses…I mean, it sounds cheesy and whatever, but, like, it's inspiring to see how comforting it was for others who say "I've gone through that, too" or "I'm going through this right now." That was one of the only times I've ever written anything where people felt like it helped them. You know what I mean? If I have to dig around in myself with a knife a little bit…okay. I can face that fear. I can take that pain.

D.T. Robbins recommends:

Caddis glasses: I bought a pair a few months ago and they might be the coolest glasses I've ever worn. Heavy, sturdy, look good.

Not being pretentious: If you drink your coffee black, awesome. If someone else wants to pour half a pint of whatever terrible cream they want into the coffee they're drinking, everyone needs to shut up and enjoy their coffee. If you like trash TV or Marvel movies or cheap wine from Target, enjoy it as much as you want. Life's too short to be a snob about anything.

***The Cult of Loretta* by Kevin Maloney:** I love Kevin. I love Kevin's book even more. Read this book. It's quick,

batshit insane, and funny as all hell.

Morning walks: I've been taking these more frequently, and I love them. It's a good way to get my mood straight for the day.

Turning off the internet: Whatever that means for you. Take a break.

***The Horizon Just Laughed* by Damien Jurado**: This album has a special place in my heart. That's all.

Hell House LLC: This might just be my favorite horror film of all time.

Thigh tattoos: The world needs more of these.

Name
D.T. Robbins

Vocation
writer, editor