On making challenging work



Author Eliza Clark discusses her obsession with being told stories by people who lie, our current culture of misinformation, and how to adapt work for other creative mediums.

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As told to Hannah Ewens, 2204 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Success, Business, Multi-tasking.

Both of your novels have featured unreliable narrators. What is it about this device that has kept you interested over two books?

I think it's something that is quite hard to pull off in other media. Novels are so reliant on the narrators in terms of who is presenting and telling you the story. I'm really interested in that power dynamic with the reader and that sense of who has control over the narrative, just the idea that people lie and make things up and we just take it for a given that something is going to be accurate and truthfully told even when it's in a fictional book. The double layer of making stuff up in that fictional space, I think, is really interesting. I'm interested in literary plagiarism: capers and instances of people making up content for nonfiction books. A particular point of influence for [my new novel] *Penance* was not so much Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, but the experience of finding out that a lot of *In Cold Blood* had been fabricated. It's a bit of a meta-textual power and control thing.

It reminds me of the plagiarist Johann Hari who was outed for copying others' work and then came back almost immediately with big non-fiction book deals and became more celebrated than ever. It made me think, do we actually care if something's made up or stolen if it's interesting enough and it fits the narrative that we want to believe about a given topic?

That's something I'm interested in as well, that feeling of getting to the end of something and finding out that it is plagiarized or made up or fabricated and thinking like, "Well, did it matter? How much did it matter?" I feel like the last 10 years politically have been proof that people actually really, really don't care about things being true. They just care about things that feel true to them. And I think that's an interesting thing to unpack just because so much about the media landscape has become about indulging people's feelings and anxieties and I'm talking particularly on the right wing. Everything's so geared toward soothing and reinforcing narratives that people find comforting and simple regardless of whether they're actually true or not.

I liked in *Penance* how you have the UK's Brexit narrative overlaid as almost its own unreliable narrator. That made me wonder if you're obsessing about fraudulent narration a lot in your personal and professional life…once you were down the rabbit hole and writing in this way, did you just start to see it everywhere in culture?

Yeah, I think so. I was getting quite into paranormal podcasts but I always found them a bit too prepared to present people's stories, things that people could quite honestly just be made up without doing any questioning. And I got quite into skeptical podcasts off the back of that. It is just interesting the way that we are prepared to listen to and accept stories if we like them. And that's everywhere from podcasts about ghosts to crime documentaries. How people feel about people who question narratives like this—it's this feeling that you are actively spoiling people's fun and that you're a spoilsport, rather than asking questions that actually should be asked.

I feel like there is no unbiased media. Everything is about presenting a narrative and whatever, however unbiased and however good the reporting is, it is always going to fit someone's narrative. I think sometimes journalists that operate in good faith can be really, really vulnerable to getting caught up in spin. In the *Capturing the Friedmans* documentary they end up being really naive and getting won over by a bunch of manipulative pedophiles because they are trying to be unbiased and trying to be skeptical and I guess being taken in by this completely wacky narrative just because it is more appealing to think some people have been wrongly accused of something than it is to think there are just some horrible, horrible people in the world that do terrible things. It's interesting: the power of whoever's narrating and telling a story but then also how that power is very reliant on the reader's willingness to believe it as well.

What enjoyment do you get out of writing fucked up characters? Is it just more fun to you? Do you feel like you are exorcizing extreme versions of your own human impulses?

I don't really want to read about ordinary people. I'm not really interested in normalcy. But then also I do think nobody's normal, everybody's quite strange. Quite normal people can easily slip into doing really shitty fucked up things in the right circumstances. So I suppose it's a sort of interest in how far people can go and how easy that can be for people to get there sometimes or how difficult it can be for people to get there as well.

I am just more interested in the extremes of human behavior and would struggle to write a contemporary novel that was about something a bit more grounded and a bit more normal. I would find that really exposing. I feel like that's how you would immediately get to people accusing you of writing something semi-autobiographical, which people were already doing with *Boy Parts* to an extent anyway. There are multiple layers to me finding that stuff a bit tedious. It's not really the kind of thing that I read. It's also not really the kind of thing that I'm interested in writing.

I was wondering about your jump from single narrator in your debut to many conflicting characters speaking in your second. Did you want to challenge yourself to do something quite different?

Because of the nature of book deals first time authors get in, I feel like you quite often end up with a second novel being this slightly pale limitation of the first novel or something that's very similar but not as good because the author just hasn't had as much time to work on it. And I really wanted to do something that was very different and very ambitious regardless of how much time I had to do it. And it was originally going to be out summer of last year on the Influx schedule and then I moved to Faber which bought me another year, which ended up being basically essential to the book not being a piece of shit. Just having the extra year to work on it made a night and day difference to the book. I think it's also just because I feel like people don't tend to take young women writers very seriously. I have actually avoided some of the slightly smug coverage that young debut women authors tend to get. And also, I just wanted to show off a bit, I suppose.

Showing off is as good a reason as any. You're adapting your debut novel which is basically a one-woman monologue for TV—how was making that transition to screenwriting?

The process of taking it out of the interior and into an exterior thing has actually been interesting because the idea of an unreliable narrator in television—you don't really get it much. I initially really wanted to do it without any voiceover or bringing over any of the narrative from the book because I think it's usually quite rubbish and makes a film or a TV series feel really feel really book-y if you can hear the book narration on screen.

I reread *Lolita* last year and it was off the back of listening to the Lolita Podcast that Jamie Loftus did. There's this whole episode about just different adaptations of *Lolita* and it's the most fascinating thing. She talked about that there is basically a five-hour un-produced Vladimir Nabokov script for *Lolita* where there are bits of narration and then being like, "Okay and now we're going to cut to a sunset." And then cutting to him describing what the camera should be doing while he's doing his monologue. I thought that was a device that I haven't seen on screen before, apart from in a crap Will Ferrell film in the 2000s—I can't even remember what it's called—about a man that suddenly starts hearing a narrator one day and even though the film's not great, it's

that idea had a real impact on me of questioning the role of a narrator on screen.

So it's been fun playing with the things that [the book's character] Irina is thinking on screen, the things that you can hear her thinking, not necessarily lining up with what you're actually seeing has been really interesting and pulling that round from something that's quite subtle in the first episode to escalating it gradually as the series goes on.

It's been quite frustrating as I think anybody who's adapted their own novel can attest because you are so attached to the material and also you've just spent so much time with it at this point. I've been working on *Boy Parts* in some capacity for five consecutive years, which for a novel which is actually pretty simple and not that complicated, it's a lot of time with a lot of very similar material.

How is it that you manage your time juggling these projects? Are you a goal driven person or do you run on vibes, working whenever you feel like it?

I'm entirely vibes based, right. I write full-time now. I left my part-time job in about August or September of last year. Not feeling like I need to work 9:00 to 5:00 every single day and just working on a particular project when I want to is very useful for moving between stuff because it's only really making myself work on something if there's a deadline coming. I haven't worked full-time very consistently. So I was full-time in 2019 and then I was basically struggling to balance writing with work, so I left that and went to a four day a week job. I should clarify that I was four days a week and then I went down to three days in early 2021. And I actually found that even working four days a week with the workload I had was just so stressful. It didn't help that a lot of this was lockdown as well, but I did really struggle. I was doing a lot of work on the weekends or in the evenings, which was starting to get quite exhausting.

And then when my workload increased after *Boy Parts* came out, then I found that I pretty quickly needed to go down to three days. It was basically being lucky enough to be in a position where I was okay to take the pay cut. It got to the point where my earnings from writing were outstripping my earnings from part-time work significantly enough that I felt like I didn't really need to have the part-time job as much, but when I was working it, I was just really, really struggling to balance my time and it felt like I was constantly doing everything a couple of days before the deadline and being entirely reliant on that panicked adrenaline feeling of the deadline coming. It's not a fun way to live.

To bring it back to narrators, are there any examples of a reliable narrator being executed well, if you consider it even an interesting thing to try to do?

I feel like sometimes there are just stories that don't necessarily call for that level of…fuckery with the text. I would assume if I was reading something in third person, particularly with that third person omniscient narrator voice, unless it's explicitly clear that the author is doing something with it, I would just assume that it was reliable. It's funny, I feel like I've worked in that in short stories and I haven't felt creatively unfulfilled by it, but I've started working on a third novel that does just have a standard third person narrator and in my head I've been like, "Okay, so what can we do to make this third person traditional narrator a bit *more*?" I actually think a really good example of somebody who does something interesting with a third person omniscient narrator is Terry Pratchett. I feel very much I am being spoken to by Terry about this story, which I think is really fun. That kind of willingness to bring in the authorial, the author's personality and voice is just a really nice and fun thing to do. But still I think the books that tend to connect with me the most will probably always be the books that are doing something funky with narration.

Eliza Clark Recommends:

The Six Stories series by Matt Wesolowkski (with a particular fondness for *Hydra* and *Deity*)

In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

The Lolita Podcast by Jamie Loftus

You Could Do Something Amazing With Your Life (You Are Raoul Moat) by Andrew Hankison

Savage Appetites by Rachel Monroe

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