# On putting your whole body into the research

## Writer Emma Copley Eisenberg discusses being a queer woman artist, generational shifts, and who gets to imagine

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As told to Shy Watson, 2368 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Money.

***Housemates* is told from the POV of a queer, omniscient, middle-aged narrator, but, for the most part, it reads as a traditional omniscient narrator, only bringing us back to the character-narrator on rare occasions. Why did you decide to use this framing device?**

It was never my intent to have some kind of exciting innovative narration; I didn't necessarily go into this being like, "I want to fuck with POV" or anything. I had started writing the book in a close third, and it was that way until about halfway through the process. But I felt as I was developing that draft in close third that there was something missing, some additional element that would gesture to the broader context of the book.

I wanted there to be some way for readers to understand that this isn't just about two young contemporary queers named Bernie and Leah, but also about the connection to a generation of queer artists that came before. I was working on a substantial revision of the third-person draft, but I was still very open to the process and what could happen. It was woo-woo, and I'm not that woo-woo of a person, but it was magical. I was working on the draft and this first-person voice just started talking, it was talking in an "I" grammar, it wasn't talking in a "she/they" grammar.

I was like, "What is this?" I was like, "Who are you?" But then I was like, "let me go with this first-person voice and see what happens." At first I thought maybe it was a beyond-the-grave moment, I thought maybe it was a dead ancestor, queer artist ancestor, and then the more I listened to it I was like, "No, I think she has a body and I think she has her own grief, her own partnership that she's trying to work out." I'm really interested in time and generational shifts, and how things have changed for queer folks, particularly queer women trying to be in relationships with each other from 50, 100 years ago to now.

This story also began with a historical inspiration, so maybe that's why. It just didn't feel like it did the book justice to stay only in the present, and the first person voice just kept getting more and more. Then when I showed drafts to early trusted readers, they were going, "I'm excited about her, I just want to know more. Why is she here?" So I just kept developing the sense that she was trying to work something out via watching Bernie and Leah. I feel like hopefully that also takes the reader's attention to the fact that watching them helps her find some, not closure exactly, but insight into why she feels so guilty about her own partnership and how it turned out.

**That's the effect that you had on me as a reader! You talked about having the historical influence, I know at least in part it was inspired by the relationship between photographer Berenice Abbott and writer/art critic Elizabeth McCausland. I'm curious how you came about them, finding them, and what inspired you to write something based on their story?**

I saw an exhibit of Berenice Abbott's photographs in Paris back in 2017, and it had a big impression on me. I found her work to be very modern, very surprising. I am from New York, but in her photographs the city looks so wildly different—so intimate, open and disorganized, like a small village. I was like, "This is not a city that I recognize." It made me see New York in a new way, and I was like, "Who is this?"

Then this huge biography came out in 2018 by Julia Van Haaften and I learned that Abbott met her longtime partner Elizabeth McCausland because they exchanged fan letters. McCausland was a critic and she wrote Berenice this flirty note basically that was like, "I like your work. Do you ever want to meet up?" Very gay, and I was like, "This is cute." There was a whole chapter in the book about a road trip that they went on in 1935, and it really changed the trajectories of both of their lives. They both left being single, confused about the kinds of art they wanted to make, and then they came back very much together and with a clear, shared artistic vision.

"What happened on that road trip?" I had to know, but I couldn't know, it wasn't really in the biography, though Van Haaften doesn't hide that their relationship was romantic. Then I started to learn more about their partnership, and it was clear that they were each very important to the other in actualizing their careers. We often have this idea that gay life is always getting more rich and more public, and in the past, things were bad and sad. But it seemed like they actually had a very unique and very fruitful partnership where art was at the center in a way that feels hard now. Or maybe just really different. I was just fascinated by this idea of "how do you figure out how to be a queer woman artist in a relationship with another queer woman artist?" I feel like that's a question that no time period really solved.

**Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York* was shot in 1929. The photos for your fictional *Changing Pennsylvania* were shot in 2019. Do you see a parallel between these time periods? Why this choice?**

Abbott took the photos for Changing New York from 1929-1940, before, during, and after the Great Depression, and that sense of being in the middle of things, being on the precipice of change and then documenting the change you'd sensed was coming fascinated me. For *Housemates*, I was thinking about 2018, 2019, of being right in the Trump years, about how I felt that in my little corner of Philadelphia, some promise of hope had started to open up before 2016 but then been shut down real quick. There was something very "in the middle" about 2018 too, a sense that we were afraid of what was coming but we did not yet know how much worse it was going to get.

I was really interested in the idea of putting Bernie and Leah on the road during this time where things were tough, there were obstacles, but it wasn't all completely broken, just smashed. In the novel, they experience America or Pennsylvania at this moment where things are in conflict, but alive.

**Your descriptions of large format photography are so detailed and so specific. How do you approach research for your writing?**

I'm a big believer in putting my body in the thing that's going to give me insight. I teach a class from time to time called "Reporting for Creative Writers" that tries to bridge this artificial gap between work that we call journalism or nonfiction and work that we call literary or creative. I talk about a few different kinds of research, and I think it's really important to pull from all of them, but in some ways the most important one is experiential research, because that's what helps you create scenes and have insight into the characters.

For *Housemates* I did a fair amount of in-my-chair research, just trying to get the basics of the history of large format and the foundational practitioners in the field, photographers who show up in the novel, but I'm not a technical person. When I hear camera words I'm like, "I don't understand." I don't understand how it works, I don't know what an f stop is, I don't know how light interacts with a surface.

So at some point I got frustrated, and I reached out to this really amazing large format photographer named Jade Doskow who was teaching at the International Center of Photography (ICP). She is the photographer in residence at Freshkills, the park in Staten Island that was once a landfill. I basically said, "Can I shadow you?" and offered to pay her to teach me one on one. She wouldn't take my money, but was like, "Sure, come along." So she let me follow her a bunch as she worked with her camera. I took a lot of the mechanics of the photography scenes from those trips. Watching Jade helped me answer questions like, "with that much equipment, what do you take out of

the car when? Where do you put it? How do you touch it? How does the body interact with a big camera like that?" Without that experiential research, the scenes of Bernie and her professor Daniel Dunn would never have been possible.

**You're also a phenomenal short story writer. How did it feel different to write a whole novel instead of a short story?**

It felt so different. I think a short story is like a mood or a question. It has its own momentum, and I'm not an outliner. I don't outline, I don't plan, I'm just really a fan of the sentence by sentence. I write the first sentence first and I write the last sentence last. I could do that to some extent with the novel, but there were so many more choices to be made. I feel like with a novel you write until you lose your way, and then you backtrack and go back to the last place where you felt like you knew what you were talking about, or the last place that you felt confident.

So there was a lot of moving forward and then backtracking, and then moving forward and then backtracking. That was a new feeling, I felt very lost and unmoored in many places. In stories, I usually know the voice and what the parameters of the idea are, but this didn't feel like that. There were a lot of changes. I thought it was going to be Bernie's story mainly, and then it was really Leah's.

**You explore class with Bernie and Leah. What interests you about this dynamic?**

I think you have to talk about class if you're going to talk about art, because making art is not rewarded under capitalism, so how do you then function and survive and persist in doing that work? It's something that I'm very interested in as a human, and as a writer. Bernie's a scrapper and doesn't have a family to fall back on, and Leah does. I think there's a fundamental difference in how you're allowed to live and imagine when you have student debt, and when you don't have a safety net.

I wanted to show that in any book that's going to talk about art deeply, which I hope this book does, you have to talk about money because it's an integral part. If what you make isn't helping you live, where does that support come from? Where does that ability to imagine yourself as an artist come from?

You need someone to help you imagine that, and then you need someone to pay for it. Bernie's ability to imagine herself came from this strange wild coincidence of getting to study with this genius who was also a tough force in her life, and that maybe without that encounter with her professor she might not have decided to become a photographer. She was going to study graphic design. I think that, for folks who come from backgrounds where you have to work to survive, being an artist makes no sense. Leah provides Bernie money at a crucial point, and I wanted to say, "It's not always morally bankrupt to be someone's patron or to pay for things in a way that feels unequal." It can create a certain kind of equality. I think it's important that Leah's willing to bankroll Bernie's work in some way.

**Bernie's original desire to be a graphic designer makes perfect sense, because that is what someone with artistic inclinations, who feels like they have to make money, would do. It's like artistic marketing.**

Exactly. I know a lot of people in spaces that I've moved in that are like, "Oh, I would have loved to be an artist, but I couldn't do that. That makes no sense." Bernie comes from that kind of family.

**There's a moment when the narrator sees Bernie on the porch and is so taken, so struck by her, that Leah disappears, and it's alluded to throughout the book that this is the effect Bernie has on people, an effect that Leah does not have. What do you think makes Bernie more appealing to these other characters in the world of the novel?**

One of the things that I kept coming back to was that someone told me: Bernice Abbott was quiet, but not shy, and Elizabeth McCausland was shy, but not quiet.

There’s something very appealing to many people about someone who doesn’t give it all away up front. Bernie keeps it close to the vest, she’s a little emotionally withholding, at least at the beginning. Maybe that’s her journey, but Leah is someone who tries hard and just wants to connect with people. She gives it all away up front.

As a culture, we value withholding. We want to crack the nut of tough personalities, and Leah doesn’t need to be cracked. I think that’s why a lot of people gravitate towards Bernie more. Bernie has a lot to say, but she doesn’t say it right away. There is a satisfaction to hearing her say it over the course of the book, I hope. But I also have a soft spot in my heart for Leah, because I like to just give it away on my sleeve too.

**Emma Copley Eisnberg recommends:**

ice cream, fullest fat possible

*The Collected Stories of Grace Paley*. She taught George Saunders how to be wise

This Alanis Morrisette documentary. It’s my medicine that I embibe every two months

The Fu Wah grilled pork hoagie. IYKYK

*Blue Crush*, the fine film

Name
Emma Copley Eisenberg

Vocation
author

Kenzi Crash