

On translating your experience into art



Writer Gretchen Felker-Martin discusses the erotics of composing gore, why third person is the best person, and adding your voice to the conversation.

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As told to Tina Horn, 3173 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Inspiration, Adversity, Success, Income.

How do you describe your work?

Sitting in my little lair surrounded by disgusting books, trying to make an even more disgusting book.

You've made some of the most disgusting books I've ever read and that's saying something. What do you see as the overlap between the craft of cultural criticism and the craft of fiction, which you often create in the same genres that you are engaged with as a critic?

They're both fundamentally an analytical pastime. You look at the culture around you, or you look at a specific piece of work, and you try to figure out how it's in conversation with reality as you observe it, with the history of work like it. If you're making your own work, you try to enter that conversation. Hopefully, you have something to add, sometimes you just want to have fun; I think that's a perfectly fine reason to write a book. Is *Jaws* really "about" anything? Eh, not really. But it still rules!

I was a critic before I had any kind of exposure as a writer. I was writing fiction, but I wasn't trying to get it published. Being a part of that conversation has made me a lot more self-critical, a lot more intentional about what I do and don't write. I'm thinking consciously: "What do I have to add to this? What do I have to say or show that other people aren't saying or showing?" Because film and books are so overwhelmingly cis and straight and every other piece of hegemonic identity, it turns out I have a lot to say that other people aren't saying because they aren't given a chance to say it.

There's a strong tendency that's really encouraged by industries like publishing that when you do give a marginalized person a chance to make art, they better make it safe and digestible and palatable to cis people. So you get a lot of "How I became queer."

I think you can do good work in that vein. But it's not for me. I think it's very limited. I really want to see trans people and queer people push into the parts of fiction that everyone else is allowed to play in. I want dirty, weird fiction by trans people. And in the words of the child soldier from *Starship Troopers*: "I'm doing my part!"

"Would you like to know more?" indeed! On the topic of Verhoven and also whether *Jaws* is "about" anything, what you think about the genre of the social thriller? Do you think a social thriller can be a form of allegorical memoir?

It's flattering to be grouped in the same conversation with James Tiptree and other writers who've done really

incredible work in these societally deconstructivist genre spaces. I've never been inclined toward autobiography. My books are a collection of translated experiences of my own, things I've observed, stories from people I know, and recombinations of things from fiction that I love. I really believe firmly that while it's more likely that someone with a personal connection will do a better job of interpreting these things and presenting them, anyone can do it.

Humans are fundamentally very similar to each other. There's no rule that says a cis person can't fundamentally understand trans people. Whenever I do an event, there will be 60 year old dads in the crowd. And they'll be like, "Wow, this really taught me so much. I've got a trans kid." I'm always like, you know we're the same species, right? We both wear pants, man. We're not that different. Well, I never wear pants, but you get it. They approach it from an identitarian or a consumerist point of view. "Is this what I should be buying to signal that I'm a good person? Is it appropriate for me to associate my identity with this signifier?"

It makes me think of archeology and pre-history and the concept of prestige goods; something that is valuable not because it has inherent value, but because it comes from somewhere else and marks you out as distinct, something you've traded for from a long distance away and you wear it so other people know what kind of person you are. That's that's how these people are approaching books. They're not reading *Manhunt* because they necessarily want to, they're reading it so that they can say, "Oh, I've read *Manhunt*." And I find this kind of a disappointing way to approach art. I think the joy of art is that you are stepping into someone's mind, or as close as we can get to that and experiencing the world through their eyes. Personally, I always try to be open to that. I try to have experiences that I haven't had in my life.

Tell us more about the process of infusing "recombinations" from fiction you love into your novels, as homage, reference, or revisionist.

Stephen King's *It* is clearly one of the two or three big inspirations for *Cuckoo*. I've always loved that book for all its flaws; the difficult unfortunate fatphobia is one of the big ones.

Early on in reading *Cuckoo*, I guessed correctly that you would deliberately not make the fat kid grow up thin.

I really hated it. Ben (from *It*), who is brilliant and sensitive and talented and knowledgeable, grows up. And the only thing that the story cares about is that he lost weight.

But what *It* does beautifully is show you what it's like to be a child and to be totally at the mercy of any adult around you and at the mercy of other children. I was raised in a homophobic religion and I had a very difficult childhood and I was the only really visibly queer person in a small rural town in New England. Those things really resonated for me and I wanted to pull a religious element into it for *Cuckoo*. It was sort of a watershed moment for me in understanding what was happening in my own childhood. I wanted to pass that on to a new generation. The kids in *It* grew up in the 40s and 50s, and I wanted to do it for people like me who grew up in the 90s. In *It*, the kids are magically granted wealth as a way to keep them distracted and keep them invested in their lives post childhood trauma with Pennywise. That's certainly never been my experience of life. I did not get a reward to prevent me from going back to deal with my own difficult childhood. So I wanted to show people like me, broke people who are in constant panic over where rent is coming from, people who have been institutionalized, people who are just never done having a hard time. Life is not fair to them. But they still have to get out of bed and be adults and in this case deal with something that is literally earth shattering. So incorporating these references and building on these foundations, it's a thank you and a conversation.

Speaking of topics I'm sure that you get asked about all the time, I would love to talk about the craft of pronouns in *Cuckoo*. Early on, Shelby is introduced as she/her; not with the formality of a pronoun check-in, but baked into the third person omniscient narration. When people show up to take her to conversion camp, you're putting the reader in a position to identify with how it feels to be misgendered and dead-named by these violent antagonists. Another character, Lara, has a revelation of being trans, but the narration doesn't change shift pronoun or name until the flash forward. How intentional were you in using prose to reveal the inner lives of trans people in a transphobic world?

I took what was for me, a very simple and direct approach. I transliterated my own experiences. When I came out, I found it very awkward to shift pronouns. I went through a long "they /them" phase, which generates a lot of anxiety. You're so conscious of your own pronouns and whether or not you'll get them right, and trying to build this new self-image. When Lara comes out to herself, she's 15. She's an abused child. She has so much repressed trauma in her. And she's just not ready to make this kind of a radical shift, even if she was in a calm space, and she's not in a calm space. So she buries it until she's an adult. I wanted to be a woman from a very young age, and I did not express that until I was 25. It takes a while.

What's the process like of writing big ensembles with that third person omniscient narrative?

It was a lot of work to keep everything straight; who has which siblings, what hometown, and so on. I had a whole document full of hair and eye colors...

It wasn't the big chart on your wall with the sticky notes?

I'm just not a very analog person. But yeah, I love ensembles! Most of my favorite art revolves around large casts of characters. There are exceptions; *Perfume* and *Lolita* are very intimate personal experiences of one person's horrible fucking mind. Huge inspirations for me were the sort of almost hallucinatory like intimate thought process narration of books like *The Waves* or *Ulysses*. I'm not creating anything close to that level of complexity or a prose craft, but those ideas have stayed with me for years. I'm interested in thoughts. And third person, to me, is the best person. My big transitioning into an adult reader moment was when I picked up *A Song of Ice and Fire* as a 12-year-old. This was a huge, extremely complicated ensemble cast. It kept branching and branching and branching. And the style won me over. There was so much to keep track of. I have a very active mind. It was like a jungle gym for my thoughts. I like to keep busy when I write. I like to put a lot of work on the page.

Is there a particular state that you need to get into in order to write vivid gore?

I'm a child of King, of Cronenberg and Carpenter. I've always loved gore and body horror. Again, it's cathartic. I spent so long as a child lying awake at night praying for my body to change. And to see it actually happen through special effects or on the page is so moving to me and so exciting and beautiful, even when it's horrendous and upsetting. To me a good body horror scene is a sex scene. You're engaging in this kind of penetration of what's visible and what's invisible, what's fixed and what's mutable. These things start to dissolve and you enter the realm of pure fantasy. It's a really transformative experience. When I'm done writing a scene like that, I want a cigarette [laughs].

Now you're really singing my song. Where do body horror and sexuality meet?

Both presuppose that the body has needs. In one case, it's the need for sexual contact and in the other, it's this supernatural need to change form to become something else, whether it's imposed externally or an expression of some internal phenomenon. The Clive Barker story *Jacqueline Ess: Her Will and Testament* is a body horror story about sexual desire and body dysmorphia becoming concrete and literal. Her telekinetic powers, which are pulling her own body apart and which kill her partners and anyone she feels like killing, are an expression of her repressed desires. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the psychic phenomena are a manifestation of Nell's repressed lesbianism and self-loathing.

There's that really crushing anecdote about how, as a child, her house was pelted with rocks for hours on end. Of course this kid who was raised to hate herself and minimize herself into non-being tried to destroy herself, because she has a muscle she doesn't understand. That's sex to me. I feel like as soon as you have made community and lives with other queer people, you see these same things emerging. We're raised to hate our bodies, we're raised to hate the things that we feel deep need for. How could we not create these other expressions of those needs? How could we not imagine something as simple as, "What if I had a hole that it wasn't bad to get fisted in?" And Cronenberg is there to say, "I've got you, babe." I always talk about him as; "My biological father, David Cronenberg." In some ways, those directors were the parents I needed when my parents didn't know what to do or had been taught to do the wrong thing. I think that's a common experience for a lot of queer people. You get

raised by art.

Do you find yourself making a lot of creative choices where necessity is the mother of invention in terms of surviving and thriving in a capitalist society?

Manhunt is the first commercial thing that I wrote. Everything that I wrote before that was very inaccessible, miserable, putrid, and maximalist.

***Manhunt* is pretty putrid.**

Thank you! When I had the idea for *Manhunt*, I thought, "someone might actually buy that." And it turned out that they did. So in a way, *Manhunt* is a compromise book, but I didn't feel creatively compromised making it.

I think many readers will find the idea of that being your "pandering" book hilarious.

As close as I'm gonna get. I'm not made of stone. I've made decisions for money before. Three years before I published *Manhunt*, I was a survival sex worker lying awake at night, every night, panicking about where I was going to come up with rent. I was stealing from supermarkets to eat. I'm not going to get all pressed about whether or not I'm making an edit because it'll make the book more palatable. My stuff is already way out on the edge and I'm very happy with that. I'll make a few compromises.

Would you ever write a book like Barker's The Thief of Always, that would be appropriate for 11 year olds?

I'm gonna say something problematic. I hope 11 year olds read *Cuckoo*. I read books that were quote unquote too old for me. Those were the books that helped me understand myself and unpick things that were happening to me in real life. Childhood is a process of repeated transgressions to find out where the lines are.

What influences the monster allegories you create in your novels, like the abomination at the center of *Cuckoo*?

When I was growing up, I spent a fair amount of time at religious summer camps. There is this very particular, dead-eyed, bottomlessly hateful sadism that gets hidden behind relentlessly positive religiosity. You wind up with children being willingly given into the care of people whose entire life is just a performance of niceness to conceal fucking dumb, unfeeling hatred. And I wanted to give that thing behind the fucking endless smiles and hymns...

... and acoustic guitars...

Oh, God. So much acoustic guitar. I wanted to give that a face. I wanted to say: I see you. You can't hide from me. I see you for the fucking ugly freak you are. You're the one who's out here desperate to control children's sexuality. It's all you fucking think about. So the *Cuckoo* is me holding up a portrait of these monsters who are still very much at work in our world today.

The process of creating a monster is a process of sublimation. It's cathartic. You're taking something diffuse and impossible to really holistically confront or uproot. And you're saying, "Okay, that's a wolfman now and I'm gonna fucking kill it." It's a fantasy I permit myself because I don't indulge in a ton of them in my work; the fantasy that you can, in limited small ways, eradicate something evil from the world.

It's interesting that you've already mentioned Nabokov and Joyce, because I did want to talk to you about puns. A cuckoo is a body snatcher but also something we call "crazy" people; the "egg" on the cover could refer to the term for a trans person who has not come to terms with their transness yet. So, where are you on puns?

I think of me and my father as just being in a continuous state of doing the Jeb Bush meme where he's in front of the map for puns. I love puns. We have always punned back and forth at dinner. My great grandfather was big into them too, my grandfather. It's something that when I came to it in modernist literature really resonated with me.

When he was writing *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce called his editor and made a last minute change during the printing process because he found a pun he could make based off an Inuit word and he was so enthused. I think he probably took it a little bit too far in *Finnegan's Wake*, even he said that. But I still love it. Language is fun. Language is joyous to me. I love to play around with it, to leave little funny tidbits for people to pick up on. The main character of *Manhunt* is named Fran Fine. Gabe Horn's name is a close cognate to gay porn. Why else would you write, except to make your little jokes?

Your prose style has a lot of maximalist humor, like "the world's biggest mouth that had sucked on a lemon" and "a cat in heat being fed backside first into a blender." Do you set out to create a comic relief to the intensity of horror?

What I really wanna emulate is *The Sopranos*, this world in which everyone is very funny, but not on purpose. They're ridiculous human beings and watching them navigate the world straight-faced is very funny, even though they're monsters. An animating element of horror is that sometimes it's funny to watch Dracula try to get a cab. It's not funny because he's mugging. It's funny because he's Dracula.

Is there anything you're reflecting on as you're hatch the egg of Cuckoo?

It's a tough industry and a tough job and you'll hear a lot of different things about how to write a book. I only have one piece of advice for people looking to build that practice. If you write 100 words a day, in a few years you'll have a book. And if you don't write a hundred words a day, you won't.

Gretchen Felker-Martin recommends:

Max Graves' [What Happens Next?](#)

Evan Dahm's [Vattu](#)

Hilary Mantel's [Beyond Black](#)

[Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth](#), Lee Jackson

[Laird Barron's "Tiptoe"](#)

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