On navigating unexpected mainstream success



Author Henry Hoke discusses finding representation, balancing the work of publishing with creative life, and privilege

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As told to Giuliana Mayo, 2558 words.

Tags: Writing, Collaboration, Process, Money, Success.

You have had such a crazy year. So many fancy things have happened with your book *Open Throat*. I wonder how that has affected your work life?

It's been hard. I mean, I've been writing in the sense that I often write, which is that I slowly accumulate things I am excited about, whether it's ideas or characters or lines or whatever. Like the "phone notes" style of writing or the wake up in the middle of the night style. I mostly write in the middle of the night when I can't sleep, I just wake up and I have to get to it and do something. But that's completely not a practice I can healthily cultivate. So I have certainly been having a lot of sleeplessness and complications, and often it's about some kind of work obligation or adaptation, or, you know, like partnership or interview, or appearance.

The things that have been happening for me more often as sort of a full time job that aren't writing will wake me up. But then in the waking, I get restless, and I get back to my manuscript. A friend of mine, T Kira Madden, advises people to just touch their manuscript, if you're blocked or whatever. It's not like, get a certain word count a day, you know, pressure yourself in that way. And I'm very much not that kind of writer. But I will always open up my work and read it over and get back into it because even if I do one tweak, or maybe I write a new page or something, or I just do some notes in the voice, or around some lines of a story, it'll haunt me in the right way, when I maybe end up going back to sleep or get into my weird day or go off on a plane for hours.

That's been the core of how I've been able to cobble together a creative practice. But actually writing is incredibly hard right now, like sitting down to write. Because there's so much discussion of writing in the publicity arc I've been on…It's tough to sit down and think about writing. And as I write thinking about how I'll talk about that writing, at some point, if I get lucky in that way, again, with this [new] book. It's a new era of my practice the same way it's a new era of my career.

Do you have a partner? And if so how does this craziness affect them? The press of it all and the waking up in the middle of the night to write.

You know, we disrupt each other in all kinds of ways. But we also are there for each other on the other end of that disruption to celebrate and read the work and I think that's been amazing. My partner has written way more amazing things in the last year than I have so I've loved getting to see that new work and be celebrating.

Are they a first reader for you?

Yeah, my partner is my first reader. She's an amazing editor. Just very exacting and thoughtful and can see the whole of something in a way that I can't once I've created it. So I think that's become something really important

to my practice, since I don't really show my work to other people at all. I have a really closed loop on that… When I was in grad school I was sharing my work a lot, but I think even then I wasn't as interested in it. I don't know why. But, it's really good to have someone close that helps my work in every single way before it goes to my agents and editors.

From the outside world, it seems like you have a really supportive publisher and editor and agent. How did you put that all together?

One led to one led to another led to another. A really good friend of mine named Emma Rathbone, she's a terrific novelist, and also TV writer as a main gig right now, she thought when I was checking in about looking for a rep that her agent would be a good fit for me and would enjoy the kind of work I was doing. I hadn't had agents before, because I just published in the sort of poetry/independent sphere…

So I sent the work to him, and he was incredibly kind about it. Like, immediately and then it was just a long time until we moved forward with anything, because it was right at lockdown, which was a very weird time to start…and he hadn't represented new fiction in a while. So I was just patient because I had [also] gotten a contract to write my memoir. So instead of writing a whole other book, I wrote a whole book that came up before I'd been through it. It was a whole fun journey of being in the weeds on a new book. Not really thinking about this other weird novel with the mountain lion, so I could really be patient. And when he came back to me, it was like, "How's it going? Have you showed someone else?" I'm like, "Absolutely not. Are you interested?" We went forward with it.

He's very well respected in the publishing world, so everybody we sent it to was sort of excited to see what he was throwing at them. In that way, getting in the door with him got me into…Jackson Howard, my editor at FSG and MCD. …And so really, that was the intuition of my agent to go to that editor, and it's been so fun working with him. Hopefully, we'll all keep it going whenever I write a new book. It will be done. It will be fun.

You said that you sold your memoir before you got an agent—how did that work?

They have an open call for the Object Lessons series at Bloomsbury and I thought, "Oh, I have an idea for one" and started a conversation with the editor there, Chris Schaberg and we had a really great back and forth as I sort of developed the idea. The idea I had was already taken as an object, so I had to reshape it into *Sticker*, which it became.

When I try and describe that book, I say that it's just like 20 perfectly crafted essays. There's not a single errant word. It is such a beautiful, beautiful book.

Oh thank you. And that did exhaust me a lot because it was after I drafted *Open Throat*, I went into the weeds for about a year and a half into the pandemic pretty much one to one like from lockdowns to vaccination. You know, like reentering the world. I was in Brooklyn the whole time, it was very intense to be that densely populated in the pandemic. And that whole time I was working on *Sticker*. It's such both a labor of love and like, labor of responsibility. To my hometown, and the history of racism in my family and everywhere. So I think after that, I was like, well, I never want to write nonfiction again. So next thing will be a novel, but it just took me a while because immediately after I was touring *Sticker*, I sold *Open Throat*. So it really hasn't really stopped for me since the pandemic, either in a writing process on the contracts that they're paying me to do, or on the promotional side or editing side of everything. So I don't know. I am trying to find my space to just be in my lab again.

I was interested in your literary journal phase with Enter>text, and the collaborative nature of it, because I think so many people associate writing as very solo. Can you talk about how that fills your cup? Or why that was important?

Enter>text really came about because I went to Cal Arts and Cal Arts was a wonderfully wide ranging creative space. I had friends in all different disciplines. Even just in the writing program, none of us were tracked into fiction or poetry or whatever. So you know, some friends were novelists, some were poets, some were completely

experimental conceptual artists who were doing like a textual element to their larger art.

As I understand it, that's by design, right? Disney wanted cross pollination at CalArts…

Oh, of course. From Disney on, it was the idea that you could just sort of traverse the space and there's music drifting through the halls and you're running into like, a critique of an art show that's just been put up on the walls. So just having that community and it was about, you know, 2011-2012 when we conceived and executed our first Enter>texts. My friends…got a warehouse and built it into a live/work space that also had a gallery so it was sort of a home and a gallery. So I thought, well, why don't we take this whole thing over and do a happening where we can post readers in all the different rooms and different areas and create something immersive and offbeat, where we are honoring the fact that most of us don't just have a solitary writing practice and want to get behind the podium and read in a monotone. Let's dynamize this, let's serve all the fun things we do…It was such a joy to do that and I think it was just to honor my community that I had access to via Cal Arts in LA at the time.

You were teaching, is that how you are kind of financing your writing?

Financing my writing?

Yeah, so many writers I know are also professors or something like that, they have to find a balance. Not everyone is a *New York Times* bestseller…

No, it's so true…*now* I have some *New York Times* bestseller friends that I'm proud of. But you know, I never thought that would be my world. I always love teaching and I've taught in various places. And that was, yeah, that was a way to make money. I also like, it doesn't matter, but I have some family wealth that I invest with. So I have passive income. So it does give me space that I know not everyone has. So that has been good. It doesn't mean I'm like, great at writing with that space I'm given but that's helped me also just write what I want to. I owe a lot to my family and how they supported me to write and do what I want, artistically and not have to shape it to kind of get something that might be a bestseller.

I think you're one of the only people I know who has been honest about that.

I think it's important to be honest…Because I live in New York and LA, most people have supplemental subsidized help from their family or other income and stuff. It's tough to live here. Or it's really, you know, day-to-day.

I mean, in my case, I have a partner who helps out a lot, but yeah.

Right, I know, that is incredibly helpful. And, you know, my partner and I help each other in a million ways. But, I think honestly, with financial things it's important, because I don't want to stand in front of people, especially now, I don't want to talk to students, and be like: "Well, you can do what I do," I mean, it would be dishonest. I'm privileged in a lot of ways.

I did teaching out of love and excitement. I taught at CalArts, sort of giving back and sort of continuing to build. Actually the two places I mostly taught were Cal Arts and at the University of Virginia summer program they have for high school students. I went to both of those programs as a student. So in a way I understood what they cultivated and lit a fire in me, and how to sort of pass it on and keep cultivating it. And I think that's just so important: institutional knowledge and legacy and just sort of paying it forward to younger people and now a whole different generation of people.

Okay, and so lastly, given this publishing whirlwind you're in, has it redefined what creative success means to you?

Yeah, I'm so grateful because this has been—it was, it wasn't really my dream—but it is a dream and it's a dream come true. I didn't set out to even work with a big five publisher. I didn't think that was my world because of

what I do and how I do it and who I looked up to.

But so, yeah, I guess the idea is, going to CalArts, being into indie presses, being a fan of and meeting and working with people like Maggie Nelson, Eileen Myles, and Matthias Wagner… And they were doing this thing that I thought was closest to what I believed, and I wanted to create. The world has caught up in a lot of ways and I think that's what's exciting. It's just to be truthful and authentic. So connecting with people through art is creative success to me, and it was what I did with Enter>text when it was 100 people every couple months in weird rooms and it's what I believe in now.

I can't wait to talk to more authors and connect more and dynamize my work with performance, media stuff, and just build more. I think that's it for me, because the other stuff is very nice, but it is exhausting. And like I said in the beginning, it's hard to balance with my own practice. But this part of the human connection, the reminder that we all have a lot to share, even though we can really easily dissect ourselves and get in conflict online and I don't know, different head spaces. I think that that's what really serves me as an artist and as a friend and a member of the world.

Henry Hoke recommends:

"Can't Let it Go (featuring Lil B)" by ILOVEMAKONNEN. Listening to this uplifting masterpiece is my daily meditation and it should be yours too.

Beautyland by Marie-Helene Bertino. The whole time I spent with MHB's stellar latest I wanted to read passages out loud to my signif, but didn't want to spoil anything. Now my signif is reading all those same passages out loud to me.

Hidetaka Miyazaki. Video games by this man are my comfort food right now, and in comfort I crave constant punishment. Bloodborne, Elden Ring, and Demon's Souls are my top three. Before bed every night I log on and help someone somewhere on Earth beat Maliketh, the Black Blade. My character is named Donna Tartt.

Nixie Black Cherry Lime. A friend told me that when you see "natural flavors" on a drink it could be an extract from the anal glands of beavers. Anyway, I can't get enough of this particular beaver butt juice.

"Only One" by Cassandra Jenkins. Cassandra has dropped another album of the year.

Name
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Vocation
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