On establishing conditions of possibility



An interview with writer Barbara Browning

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As told to Mark Sussman, 2263 words.

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You've found success writing narrative, but that development is relatively recent in your career. How did you start writing novels?

For a long time, as a writer, I thought I did two things. I wrote poetry, which I've always done since I was very young. And poetry, as you know, is another sometimes depressing topic to take up. How many people are you speaking to and who's actually reading it and so on. And then I did my academic writing. And I thought I had these two capacities. One is to write nonfiction, cultural analysis, and the other thing is to write poetry, and I really don't write narrative. That's not my form. I think that was really true for a long time. Then September 11th happened. I could see on the horizon it was going to be a really depressing long haul. I could see this endless war situation spreading out on the horizon. I got really, really depressed, like a lot of people.

I had a very young son. My son was eight when that happened. He was developing into this amazing comic genius. He basically saved my life because he was so funny. I really wanted to document that. That was part of it. Also, I just wanted to write my way out of this situation. Writing fiction seems to be one way to go about that.

The first novel that I wrote [*Who Is Mr. Waxman?*] was never published as a book. It was just an audio novel. Then I got an agent and she was shopping it. Then when she consistently got the message that it was a little too quirky for a big press, she was not that interested in looking for a small press. For an agent, that's just not interesting. It sort of sunk, and I thought, "Well, I love the book. I want to do something with it." It's about sound art. This principle character was in part a sound artist. At the time, we were just beginning to use the term podcast. It wasn't a podcast. It was basically an audio novel, but we called it a podcast because it was like a story that was going to be in a little pod. That was kind of the idea. I did that, and to this day, I've no idea how many people have heard it, if anybody's accessed it. We just stuck it up there. It's free for download. That was the first novel, and that was the genesis of it.

Does fiction still have that, I don't want to say "therapeutic value," but does it still help you cope with the world?

Definitely. I hesitate to use the term "therapy" for the same reason that you hesitated, but it certainly has a psychoanalytic component for me. For some reason, a lot of the people that have reached out to me to talk about the book are people from the field of psychoanalysis. It helps me to understand a lot of things about myself. "Understand." Is that what psychoanalysis is really about? It's not necessarily understanding, but it helps me to work through and to think in complicated ways.

You had to rewrite *The Gift* because, as you say in the novel, someone had a problem with you including them in it. Was that a difficult process?

It was devastating. That's really the only word. I was looking for another one. It was devastating on a number of levels, but mostly because I had to confront the fact that I had hurt this person so much that they would say that to me. That was the devastating thing. The rewriting was … once again, I'm not sure if "therapeutic" is the word, but it did feel something like a penance.

How much of the conceptual work do you do in advance?

A lot. It comes up very early for me. I work from an outline. I know everything except for the very end of the book each time. I always know the structure. Obviously, I was thrown for a loop and I had to wait and find out what was going to happen in *The Gift* and suddenly things happened when I was in the middle of the book that I didn't expect, but I knew, for example, that there would be three sections. There's the red section and the blue section and the gold section.

The reason for that was before I even began that book, somebody said, "What's your next novel going to be about?" I hadn't yet thought of what it was going to be about. I impulsively said Poussin, the painter. I just had this in my head that it would be interesting to do something with those three because all of his paintings have a triangle of intense colors. They always have something intensely red, intensely blue, and intensely yellow. It's primary colors. It looks gold, but whatever.

Those three colors in a triangle and I thought, "I'm going to write a novel that looks like that." I knew that. Then once I had determined that, I decided that there would be three dances for each chapter, so it was like three triptychs. With *The Correspondence Artist*, I determined that there were going to be four fictional characters and then the organizing structure was like a sestina that within each section. First I would go one, two, three four. Then I would go four, one, three, two. The alternating voices were completely mapped out mathematically in terms of when they would enter, so there was nothing arbitrary about it. It was completely structured from the get go. The most chaotic structurally is *I'm Trying to Reach You*, but even with that, I knew basically the structure, but I wanted for it to kind of carom, to ping pong around more than the other ones. The other ones are super constructed in terms of the math of it.

Why do you think it's important for you to set up the structure in advance? What does it enable?

It is the condition of possibility of writing, for me. You may have noticed that a lot of the poetry that I write is formal. I write a lot of sonnets. That's the cup, and you fill it with the water. With my graduate students, I'm constantly having the same talk, which is they're about to start, and I say, "Write that line, then that line. Break it down." Write three pages a day. You just follow your outline and in three months, you're done, or whatever.

That's how I work, and none of them work that way. They all write stream of consciousness. They sit at a table. They type, type, type. They get 400 pages and then they drop it in my inbox, and I'm like, "Ahhhhhhh!" Then they cut and they cut and they cut. For me, people who work that way, it looks so painful to me. I can't imagine.

Someone in *I'm Trying to Reach You* says that dancers also make good graduate students.

Because of the choreographed writing. That's true. My students who are the most disciplined about the writing actually are the dancers.

Do you think that's where your discipline comes from?

I think it might be related, yeah. "Disciplined" is not necessarily complimentary. Whatever, it makes life easier.

Do you consult a physical version of your outline constantly, or do you internalize it?

Sometimes I have to consult it. This is going to make me sound really ridiculous, but I'm an extremely moderate

person. I wake up every morning, and I do yoga for 20 minutes before I have my coffee. Then I have my coffee. When I'm writing, I tell myself how many pages per day I'm going to write. It can be anywhere from three to eight.

That's a lot of pages.

Yeah. Is it a lot? Three doesn't seem to me a lot, but eight does. I think with *The Correspondence Artist*, it was eight pages a day.

Is that a struggle for you?

I love it. It's delicious. I love it. It's like my yoga. I love it, and I love being in the process of writing a novel. I really love it.

When you say in the process of writing a novel, do you find that it follows you around when you're not actually writing?

During the period when I'm writing. That's partly why I have to constrain it time-wise, because I would be unbearable, probably. I was on the governing board of the Society of Dance History Scholars. I went to the conference, and I'd be sitting there with the computer on the table as we're having a board meeting talking about budget of the organization and my skin was crawling, thinking, "I've just got to get out of this room, back to my hotel room, so that I can write three pages." Then as soon as there's was a break, [I would] quickly open the computer and get back on.

That almost seems undisciplined. Compulsive.

Yeah, but disciplined in the sense that I'm completely committed to doing that particular thing.

Do you think about your reader as someone who is personalized, and your books as a kind of personal correspondence with them? Or do you think of yourself as having "a readership"?

It's one reader at a time. It's definitely one reader at a time. It's so funny because people kept saying to me, "*The Gift*, it seems to be a success." I don't know. It got a fair amount of press, but the truth is my readership is tiny. It's tiny. Even *The Gift*, it's really tiny. There's something kind of nice about that. I have no way of knowing how many people have listened to *Who Is Mr. Waxman?* I've no idea. Realistically, it's probably like 25 people or something like that I think.

I think it's probably more than that.

Maybe. Really, there was never any press about it. There's no reason that anybody should encounter it. There's something that I love about that, and I love small presses for all of the obvious reasons. There's something that I cherish about the idea of a very, very small group of people. When it's that small, there is something very real about thinking about each person who reads it as an individual.

Probably because of the nature of the narrative, but a number of people did write me after they read the gift and asked for a ukulele cover or said, "Is it okay if I send you this experimental dance video that I made?" People really did enter into a dialogue with me, which was quite personal. It's not an email blast or something like that was a group email. It felt like a fairly close and constrained thing where I was going to actually be having a personal encounter with our readers, individual readers.

That's sort of true to my experience of how people have responded to it, and that's far preferable to me. Even as I say that, of course, there's part of me that wishes that more people would read that and would read *The Correspondence Artist*.

Most of your books involve engaging strangers in some kind of correspondence. And you sometimes begin random correspondences with people on the internet. Do you worry that you may open yourself up too much?

Because I do post on the internet videos of myself dancing naked, people would say, "Do you worry about these things like maybe something weird is going to happen?" Something weird did happen after I finished the manuscript of *The Gift*, but it's the kind of weird story that virtually everybody has about somebody who connected to them on the internet.

What [the narrator of *The Gift*] Barbara Anderson talks about as "inappropriate intimacy," it's pretty astonishing how much that turns out to be good or at least benign. Either people don't answer, don't engage, or they engage in a benign or sometimes extraordinarily generous and amazing way. The vast majority of the experiences that I've had have been really, really positive with this question of inappropriate intimacy. The one thing that it does complicate is the people who rightly consider that they ought to have a special hold on your intimacy. That's where it gets complicated. But at the same time, it's pretty important that people hold onto their ideas about what social relationship should be.

About a year ago, a student turned me on to Peter Dimock's novel, *George Anderson: Notes for a Love Song in Imperial Time*. It bears a resemblance to Harry Mathews's *The Journalist*, another book that simultaneously broke my heart and gave me hope. I seem to be making a list of books with possibly psychotic narrators. I've been trying for months now to get my best friend to read and discuss with me Bessie Head's amazing *A Question of Power*. This is a funny line of association, because I just recently got an email that made me laugh out loud, not at the sender, but at the implications about myself: "I'm a doctoral student," this person wrote, "at the University of xxxxxxxxx researching in the area of affective contagion and mental illness in contemporary women's autofiction, and as part of my thesis I am planning a chapter on your novel *The Gift*." Hm.

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Vocation
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