Brit Bennett on the emotional complexity of fiction

November 10, 2016 - Brit Bennett's debut novel, *The Mothers*, published in October 2016, is one of the most talked-about and well-reviewed books of the year. She's written for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The Paris Review*. Her 2014 *Jezebel* essay, "I Don't Know What to Do With Good White People" has been read more than 1.6 million times. She's one of the National Book Foundation's 2016 5 Under 35 honorees. She's 26.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3221 words.

Tags: Writing, Success, Identity, Process.

When it was published on *Jezebel* in 2014, "I Don't Know What To Do With Good White People" got a big reaction. You were approached by an agent to write a book after she read it. Did you feel pressure to tailor the book to fit the political feeling of that essay? Or, because you already had a novel in the works, did it not feel like an issue?

At the point that I'd written that essay, I'd been working on the novel for a few years, and I very much considered myself a novelist. I didn't think I was an essayist. I didn't even really think I was that good at writing essays.

But my agent found me through that essay. She read it on her lunch break and reached out to me to see if I had an agent. She wanted me to write a collection of essays. I had a few people reach out and ask for the same thing. But I told her, "I have a novel I've been working on."

I don't think I necessarily felt pressure, because I always considered myself a novelist foremost. I still do. Although I enjoy writing nonfiction, I think it's a form that can do some different things than fiction, it's a form that I appreciate reading too, but I've always considered myself mostly a novelist.

I think I will continue to mostly write in that mode, even as I work on other nonfiction. There were some of those expectations, perhaps from readers, that that would be the direction I would go, because of that essay, and some of the other nonfiction I wrote. I'm so new to that form. I've been working on fiction a lot longer, and that's really where my heart is.

The essay was written two years ago—though it feels like it could have been written two days ago and be equally relevant. When you write a piece like that, is it something you reflect back on and think, "I wish that this wasn't needed anymore"?

It's strange to be writing in this moment. My career as a writer sort of began because of me writing about police violence, and the Black Lives Matter movement, and this moment we're in… It was a weird feeling because, on one hand, I was excited that people were reading my work, and that they liked it. I had agents reaching out to me and editors reaching out to me, and people wanted to interview me. It was exciting professionally, but it was also sad, personally. Not just because of what's going on in the world, but also thinking about the fact that my writing career was taking off because I was writing about these terrible things happening to my community.

I do wish that the essay wasn't relevant. I wish that we didn't have to continue writing about these topics, which seem to follow the same narrative, whether police shootings or extra-judicial killings of young unarmed Black people. I wish it wasn't still a relevant thing. I wish that the essay still didn't have that same relevance. It's a strange position to be in as a writer who is excited that people are paying attention to your work, but also really regrets the circumstances under which people started paying attention.

Speaking of essays that left a mark: Did you get any negative reactions to *your New Yorker piece* about Ta-Nehisi Coates's "Between The World and Me." In it, you bring up the lack of women represented in his book.

That was something I thought about when I was writing that essay, because that was a book I enjoyed, and that everybody seemed to enjoy. To be critical of it felt risky to me. Generally, I don't want to write about things that I don't like. I never want to be a writer who makes a career of taking down other people, and particularly not a writer who I admire and enjoy reading. I was concerned that would be what people would take away from that essay, and I was surprised to find that people were interested in engaging with the ideas I put forth.

People recognized that it wasn't a takedown piece. It was playing out an absence in the book, which I think Ta-Nehisi Coates has acknowledged himself. This absence in his ability to understand this issue, when it comes to gender and police violence in that way. The response was warm and supportive. Again, I would rather write about things I love than things that I hate. I never want to spend my time just taking down other people. I think this criticism engages with ideas and sometimes challenges them or pushes them further. That's what I hope to do.

Your debut novel, *The Mothers*, presents a complex representation of Black female voices. Is the novel you saying "This the book that I was hoping for"?

That wasn't something I was doing consciously. I was representing Black people who are like the people that I know. To me, it's weird to think of how narrow representation is, compared to just the breadth of humanity, of all the different types of Black people who exist in this world, let alone just in this country. So to me, I wanted to represent these characters who are complex and human and odd, and who exist in a place that people don't necessarily think of Black people living, as far as this coastal beach town in California. But it was a place where I grew up. I really was just reflecting the humanity of Black communities like the ones I've been a part of.

For you, what's been the difference between writing fiction and essays?

The similarity, I guess I'll say, is that diving into big questions and striving towards empathy are things I try to do in both fiction and nonfiction. I think that the difference is… one is just the time. I've written a lot online, which is such an immediate form; versus, writing a novel, which is something I worked on for seven or eight years. Then, the time between when I sold it, and when it actually came out, was a year and a half. That's such a long, steady process versus the *Jezebel* essay, which I wrote in an afternoon and emailed back and forth with my editor to edit it five or six times, and a week later it's online. Then, a few moments later, I'm hearing from people who have read it. There's an immediacy to nonfiction that I really enjoy, particularly online. I think that that's such an exciting form.

As a writer, there's a prestige that print still holds. Sometimes I'm still thinking, "Oh, I want to get into the print issue of this publication or that publication." But there's something so cool about online writing. I don't know any family members who subscribe to *The New Yorker*. I don't know people who go out and buy this lit magazine or that lit magazine, but they'll read *Jezebel*, or they'll read whatever website that's online that is publishing it. To me there is something that's so cool and accessible about that so I like writing nonfiction online in that sense.

That's one big difference. Also, in nonfiction, I've been pushed towards making my thinking clearer. With fiction, there are ways, sometimes, that you can be coy. But, with nonfiction, it really is the process of somebody else following your thinking. There are ways in which you have to show what you're thinking. With fiction, sometimes, I think that you can kind of fade away. But again, I'm still very new to nonfiction as a form. It's a form I want to grow in and get better at, because it's not where I feel at home, in the way that I feel at home with fiction.

When I was looking at reactions to *The Mothers* online, I noticed people making intense, heartfelt comments. People are having strong reactions. They're posting things online, and sharing their own experiences. In that way, it has the immediacy of online writing.

I'm now to the point where I think it's interesting to engage with readers. Writers are more accessible now than they've probably ever been—as far as people being able to hit you up on Twitter, or hit you up on Instagram, or whatever. I guess myself, particularly, I'm pretty connected to most social media. I'm hearing from readers who are telling me their reactions, or "I hated this character," or whatever, which is a really cool way of engaging people who are actually reading it. It has that real time feel that you're talking about, that exists in online writing.

I think there is a way which is facilitated by our connectivity, and of course there are pros and cons to that; but it's something that I've enjoyed, being on the other side of it for the first time, instead of being the person who's just following all of the writers that I love, and thinking about what they are tweeting and writing and everything like that. It's been cool to be on the other side and actually hear from people who have read the book.

What is it about the book that you managed to stick with it for so long? You kept working on it for a number of years in your early 20s, a time when a lot of people are jumping between different projects.

It's something that I still think to myself, like "Man, why didn't I just move on from this?" Because I did work on other things in between, I was working on short stories in grad school. I worked on a creative thesis that was about different characters, I worked on the novel. I dabbled in other stories, in other worlds and other characters, but for whatever reason, I just kept returning to this world and to these characters.

I don't know how much of it was this loyalty to these characters I've been with so long, and really wanting to see it through. I also always just believed that this book could be better than it was. In my head the book was so good, but on the page it was not. Part of that was me being motivated by this image I had in my head of this book, a book I thought was going to be really great, and really beautiful, and really compelling, but my skill level was just not up to that standard I'd set for myself. I think that part of it was just me trying to push myself to get my skill level to that point and to get the book to that point.

I'm really grateful that, in spite of the other things I worked on, that I stuck with this book; because I think there has been a way that this book was able to connect to readers that is perhaps unique compared to anything else I was working on at the time. Maybe I'll go back to those projects, and someday those books could be good, too. There's something about this book that I think has resonated with readers in a way that I don't know if I would have been able to reproduce with a different project.

Towards the beginning of the book, one of the main characters has an abortion. It's not an overly political novel, but in 2016, abortion still a hot-button topic. Have people reacted at all negatively to this part of the book? Has it become a talking point?

It's definitely become a talking point, but I haven't really had people respond to me negatively, which has been a little surprising. Sometimes, as I've done readings, I'll often read from that section in the abortion clinic; it's the beginning of the book, so it felt like a good place to read. There were moments where I was like "I don't know how people are going to respond to this as an audience, as I am reading this girl having her abortion."

Nobody has stormed out in outrage, or confronted me. I've had a bunch of people confide in me about their experiences with abortion, both men and women, which I wasn't necessarily expecting. It's happened in real life and it's also happened online. Again, I was not necessarily expecting that. I think that readers of fiction are unique in that they want to empathize with characters who are different from them, even if those characters make decisions that they may not personally want to make, or may not personally agree with. There's an appreciation of nuance, that I think would not have come if this had been some type of a nonfiction writing about abortion. There are ways in which I think a nonfiction readership might have responded differently than the readers of fiction.

I had people who were outraged about the *Jezebel* essay who only read that headline. They never read the essay and were just like, "I cannot believe you said this." I'm like "Did you read the whole thing?" I think there's sometimes a knee-jerk reaction when we read online with nonfiction essays; sitting down with a 200 something page novel requires a little bit more work from you as a reader. Maybe as a result, people who come to it, come to it with more generosity and empathy, than if it were something posted online.

I think that to sit down with a novel, to go and attend a reading, it requires some effort on your part. Again, it's not something hidden about the book, her abortion happens early on. If you are the type of reader who would be turned away from that, then you have your exit presented to you very quickly. I'm sure there have been people who picked up the book and been like, "Not for me." And that's fine, but I haven't had any negative reaction like that yet.

I've had some really illuminating and interesting conversations with people of all genders about abortions. I think these conversations have been so much more complex than the conversations we have politically, which are often just very simplified. It's been an interesting experience—and very eye-opening for me.

I haven't actually been able to find a bad review of the book. Has the response to *The Mothers* exceeded your expectations?

Absolutely. It's a book I wrote about these Black kids growing up in this beach town that nobody really knows about. I just never thought it would receive such widespread enthusiasm or attention, or anything like that. Every step of the way has been surprising to me, that people responded to it so early and so warmly.

I think your biggest hope for your book is that anybody cares, besides you. That's really exciting for me for this to happen for my first book. That people are having real, emotional reactions to the book. Not just people who are saying, "Oh, I saw someone talking about it, so I bought it," but people who are telling me, "I cried when I read it." Or "I thought about this." Or "I got angry at this." Or "I was frustrated with this character." All those real human reactions. I think that's why we all write. That's been a really surprising thing to me, and also really gratifying.

Brit Bennett recommends:

Atlanta is my favorite new show this season, and this season has a lot of great new shows. It's funny, it's weird… I remember watching, and thinking, "These are regular Black characters dealing with regular problems, in this wry way." That feels like an unusual experience when watching television, where they're not super heroes, they're not extraordinary characters. They're very flawed, they're very messy, and that's been something I enjoy.

The book, *Another Brooklyn* by Jacqueline Woodson, was one of my favorite books this year. It's a meditative, poetic novel about these girls coming of age in Bushwick in the 1970s.

The movie *The Lobster*. It's super weird. There were two old ladies who got up and walked out when I saw it. It's often billed as a comedy, but it's extremely dark. It's one of these absurd movies that I just love talking to everyone about, even people who haven't seen it, because it's a great conversation starter about what animal you would be turned into in the event of your singleness, as in the world of the movie. Some people are just like "Oh, I really want to see that." Other people are just like, "This is really weird, I would never."

Black Mirror. I really liked the first two seasons. This season has been a little uneven, but I just saw "San Junipero," which is the standout episode of this season so far. It was such a great hour of television. I watched it, and was just, "I don't want to watch anything else after this. I want to end my night on this note." It's so colorful and so beautiful and moving, in a way that Black Mirror often is not. I usually don't feel buoyant as I'm watching it, but it gave me that experience. I couldn't remember the last time I saw an hour of television that made me feel that way.

The book *Playing Dead*, which is about death fraud. It's a nonfiction book about how people fake their deaths. The interesting conceit of the book is that people who have successfully done this, you don't know who they are. A sign that you have succeeded at faking your death, is that we don't know that you've done it. The author does a deep-dive into the idea of death fraud, and why somebody would want to do that. The idea of killing off your past self in order to create a new life. A lot of these are people doing it because they have financial troubles or they're trying to escape a marriage. It was really compelling to me, this idea of killing off who you were, and having to remain dead to the people who know you, in order to start over. It's such a human desire to like "I just want to start over, I just want to start over." But the amount of emotional detachment it takes to do that, and the effort, and just the ability… It's also a fantasy now in our digitized age of disappearing, because so much of our lives are online. There are also aspects in the book thinking about that. Like, what it would take to disappear from the internet, which is so difficult, because we leave these huge trails everywhere we go online. It's difficult to disappear, but whenever I talk to people about it, everyone feels very confident they could pull it off. It's a really fun book to read and a good thought experiment. It also kind of speaks to some existential questions about the idea of starting your life over again.

Name
Brit Bennett

Vocation
Writer

Fact

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