



The Creative Independent is a vast resource of emotional and practical guidance. We publish Guides, Focuses, Tips, Interviews, and more to help you thrive as a creative person. Explore our website to find wisdom that speaks to you and your practice..

June 7, 2024 -

As told to Lindsay Lerman, 2141 words.

Tags: Writing, Film, Focus, Inspiration.

On maintaining everyday momentum

Comic book artist and television writer Brad Neely discusses the excitement of the unknown, balancing long and short-term projects, and knowing when you need a coach and not a cheerleader.

At the start of 2024, you released the book, *You, Me, and Ulysses S. Grant*. I'll start with the obvious: why Ulysses S. Grant?

Well it started twenty years ago so it's an odd thing to consider. I wanted to do a project with a flawed narrator that could love an American hero too much and make the subject all about themselves. I wanted someone lesser known, yet consequential to American history. And I wanted someone who was a "good guy" with flaws. But honestly, I live for projects that are funny on the level of "Why did this person even decide to do this?" If it kinda glows for me and provides the practical needs for structure and theme, tone and setting, then I can't resist. Grant did all that initially. and then across the two decades he and the project became much more.

It's already in the past enough for me to start unfaithfully narrating it when recollecting. In order for me to share my past with you I must convert it into shareable forms. Memory fades. Memory is relative, memory morphs the more you mess with it. Imagine a photo being changed by your eye each time you look at it. That's memory. It's hard (or impossible?) to access the raw sense data without subjective alteration, consciously done or not.

I'm answering these questions so my past is going to be filtered toward that goal and not, say, the goal of talking to a therapist or to myself, or even as an aspect of the book we're discussing. I can try to be honest and objective but even that is an altering directive to memories if they are ambiguous or ambivalent. Objectivity itself can lead away from accuracy. Forgetfulness and loss happens to memory across time but we pretend it hasn't. We "predict the past." We feel good that we, in the present, are what we're supposed to be or even if we're the result of some bad things we can feel a false certitude from the narration we apply to the gaps of past times. We assume we are the cumulative effect of the past's causes, and this seems right. But when we look back and explain our past through present day contexts, we are the cause, and the past-facts get lined up in our created effect of a story.

We can't ever say exactly, nor completely, how it was. So we say how we feel about what we can talk about. We can only use what we can recall (or collect, and even then we must wonder about the accuracy of the process of whomever took down whatever from whichever POV, always subjective even if first hand). Put on top of that the demands of narrative structure, and publishing and reading norms, and the vast past gets reduced to childish simple chains of cause and effect based on storytelling sense, on present day sense. Our biographies might have correct facts but our presentations are subjective. Even if only editorial. Even if only in what we choose and choose not to include.

How can we really know what it was like to be there? How can we really recall what it was like to be ourselves 20 years ago when we have all these 20 years worth of other experience (including continuous accessing and altering the same memories, which mixes things up).

Biopics are my real bugbear. How dare we?! I love them and hate them. *Oppenheimer*. I've watched it a few times. Everyone is great. The movie is great. But come on. The poison apple controversy is just a perfect example of the needs of narrative overriding the ethics of historical objectivity. Both in *American Prometheus* and in the film *Oppenheimer*, an actual person, is depicted as a would-be murderer if he hadn't rushed to correct his own mistake. He is depicted as having injected his professor's apple with cyanide and left it on his desk overnight. It's compelling and thematically supports the narrative themes of doing without considering the consequences until it's too late. The Oppenheimer family refute this bit of history as it was based on some loose talk with considerable character repercussions if true. But here's

my problem: doesn't matter if it's true, from now on everyone will assume it is because it was told so convincingly via the powers of narrative.

That's what I tried to do on purpose with my book. It's one big poison apple.

I can see this even in The Professor Brothers! Thank you for taking it in this direction. You've got me thinking about how complex your book is, despite what you called it in the first email you sent (you called it "silly," maybe?) And you've got me thinking about how complex humor is, how complicated our relationship is to the truth right now, and the way the truth and a sense of humor interact. Like what does it even mean to be funny right now? Usually a quick shortcut to something being funny is bending the truth and playing with it, but like you say, it's a poison apple, and right now we're kind of being poisoned to death. So where do we go from here? Where do humor and the truth go from here?

I know a lot of funny people, professionally and not, and the funniest are as serious as they are silly. I like things to be balanced. I agree, it's possible to be drowning in distractions. My phone. My TV. Everyone is trying to make me laugh and it's easy to get sick of it. I won't pretend to have an answer for all that, but personally I like works of art that feel personal and balanced with all sorts of silly and serious, profundity and profanity, with anything in there that feels like it was urgent to the artist. There is a long list line of literary laughers. Voltaire. Rabelais. Etc. I'm a big admirer of the modernists as much as the postmodernists and I like the pastiche mixing pot approach. Perfect example are the Beatles—I like the silly stuff as much as the serious. It makes it feel human, alive and deep.

So for my book—which for me is an avenue of self expression whereas my TV work is more of a sport with rules for general audience approval—I tried to bury a bunch of heavy themes under a bunch of layers of silly so it would work for lots of different moods. It's a comedy for sure, but the best comedies have sound philosophy and psychology underneath. We might be underwater with all this comedy coming at us 24/7 but I don't think funny is dead; just because we're forever drowning doesn't mean we don't need a drink now and then.

Definitely agree with you that underneath humor is always something serious, something weighty. You mention literary laughers—do you have favorites who are still alive and writing today?

Who writes funny lit now? Well, since Richard Rorty died, the obvious answer is Pynchon, natch. Hahaha. Admittedly I'm still catching up to the living, and don't have a lot of contemporary names on hand, but Percival Everett is obviously great, and Beatty's The Sellout was fun. But Pynchon is the Jordan/LeBron of our time. Those works are dear to me. He connects to the past and future. American yet a citizen of the world. Deep and funny. Wide and varied. He's earned the hype.

I'd add Ellmann's Ducks, Newburyport to that short sample of funny lit. It's such a funny idea, but a big idea. and it cooks. Just such a fun and deep and surprising work. Way beyond the 1000p sentence but also totally living up to it in a way that made it easy to forget.

I haven't read it! I have been extra careful with my reading time these past few years because it's so rare to have free time. Do you have a writing routine? How was it with writing this book? Was there a point when it really took on a life of its own and just started writing itself?

This book took twenty years. I wrote a version in 2004-5 ish after initial research, but it was not good. Then I fell backwards into cartoon work, which was never a plan. I am a book person. So this Grant book was one of many spinning plates that I like to keep warm. As I go about my day doing whatever I've promised myself and others, I collect epiphanies and jokes, insights and facts for a variety of projects. I jot them down and throw them into neat little files, which swell until something is feeling lived-in and as well known as I might achieve. I've got quite a few books pretty near completion, some ten year projects, some more, some less. When I felt like finally this Grant book was ready, I relied on the high-pressure story-making process from TV writing. I love a good outline. Often I'll linger on an outline for years, just throwing details into the spots as they come to me. But for the Grant book it went fast: outline, sentence focus, revisions, revisions, revisions. Themes and Passes are big for me; going over the whole, or section by section with one thing in mind, then another, then another. I do Punch 'N' Scrunch which is a kind of punch up and slim down pass. I did the audiobook for this so I wanted to make sure it was sound in the sound. I whispered it out loud, catching bad music, moving little things for the words to feel like a match to the content. But this being based on a real life of facts, I worked between the marks of the timeline. I had to stay close to the real events, just play with the presentation and interpretation of everything.

When you're stuck and you aren't sure where to go next with a project, what do you do? What helps? What doesn't help?

I don't usually have the problem of not knowing where to go with a project. If there are unknown aspects to a project those are exciting areas that I get to push into. I never see the missing parts as a problem, more of the reason to do this. The unexplored unknown that will become something real.

My problem is the opposite: too many options. I get option paralysis. Analysis paralysis is a real thing if you have a deadline sooner than 20 years. I usually am fast and sound with the concept, with the outline, with the plan. TV writing was like boot camp for this kind of thing. Working on a series of stories at a time on a schedule with a room full of writers is a no BS zone. I'm thankful for the experiences there. What gets me is when you've got all the big blocks sketched in on the canvas: the composition works. But it's not enough to just work. It's gotta sing. So, that's when things start getting

spooky.

I can start doubting the choices. And often there is positive negativity here. I'm open to that. Destruction can be useful. Negativity is great. Sometimes you don't need a cheerleader, you need a coach to tell you the hard destructive truths that something isn't as great as it needs to be. It can freak people out when you start taking apart a car that can go. In my mind I'm always wondering if it can go better, faster, farther, and into places that people might be excited to see for the first time. It's not enough to just work.

When I'm stuck? I have to tell myself to stop mulling and testing variations. That realization comes from embarrassment. It's like, oh I've taken too long. Time to actually prove to myself that this wasn't a waste of time. When it's time to really draft it out then I put on a very different persona: scheduled berserker.

"Scheduled berserker feels" right to me too. Like you're in some kind of trance, but with a heightened awareness of time.

I make a schedule of daily quotas and I work through it bit by bit. Schedules and reasonable expectations get me across the finish line. I use a big physical calendar with post-its. It's not for anyone else but for me, to be a good worker and to rise above hobbyist or amateur or tinkerer.

Brad Neely recommends:

Glenn Gould's Goldberg Variations (both)

Cherry Flavoring

Gargantua and Pantagruel

Virginia Tufte's Artful Sentences

Cy Twombly

Name

Brad Neely

Vocation

comic book artist, television writer

Fact

Related to Comic book artist and television writer Brad Neely on maintaining everyday momentum:

■ [Comic artist Johnny Damm on forging your own path](#)

■ [Comics artist Brian Pulido on being willing to do the work](#)

■ [Writer and historian David Wondrich on inventing your own job](#)

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



1