

Interview: Maggie Nelson



The writer and poet on giving advice, life/art bleed, being labelled a “genius,” and the hard work of finding a form.

December 29, 2016 - Maggie Nelson is the author of five books of nonfiction including *The Argonauts* (2015), *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (2011), *Bluets* (2009), *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial* (2007), and *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (2007). Her books of poetry include *Something Bright, Then Holes* (2007), *Jane: A Murder* (2005), *The Latest Winter* (2003), and *Shiner* (2001).

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1878 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#).

Your writing is connected closely to your life. Nowadays, lots of people on social media are making their lives their “work,” too. It’s obviously different, but has autobiography grown more complicated in the age of social media?

I don’t do social media. For somebody who might have a reputation as a “look, I’ll let it all hang out” writer, I’m actually not a “look, I’ll let it all hang out” person (or writer, for that matter). As I said in *The Argonauts*, it would be a nightmare, to me, to have that kind of steady, real-time drip. I’m into the aestheticized product. I guess I’m old fashioned that way. As much as I like certain manifestations of the avant-garde tradition of a life/art bleed, for me personally, I don’t think of what you’re describing—blogging or posting or tweeting all day or whatever—as an art practice. It can be for some people, but for me, it wouldn’t be. I’ve always been somebody really interested in the form of the book, what two covers do to seemingly raw expression.

I came out of a New York performance scene that had a very raw vibe, but things have really changed, in that people have taken some of that energy to mediums that I simply don’t interface with. So I guess I feel like as time goes on, instead of seeming more and more like a “let it all hang out” person, I might end up seeming more and more cultivated than I ever imagined would be the case. That’s cool.

Do people reach out to you with their thoughts on your writing—almost like comments on a website—because you’re giving so much of yourself in the books?

With the advent of internet access, all kinds of people reach out, from the fantastic to terrifying to the gamut in between. I’m probably not unusual on that account. I don’t know what it’s like for other people, because I don’t know what their mail or inbox looks like, but yes, I would say that the sense of intimacy that’s occasionally created in the books certainly does speak to people. People often say they feel like they know me, but I know they don’t—they’re just responding to an effect created by artifice. Which isn’t to say there isn’t real intimacy created—there is. It just means that they’re responding to a sort of “use artifice to strip artifice of artifice” loop. That’s the magic part.

You’re known for combining genres and approaches. How do you discover the form for a new book?

It’s kind of trial and error. I think usually there’s one thing that’s most interesting to me in my life of curiosities. I’ll then collect information or research it for a while, and strike out in the dark with words. But you know, it takes a lot of writing to figure out what mode I like best.

Sometimes the form makes itself clear quickly, and other times you have to shop for a long time by reading other books or looking at other things until something gives you an ah-ha moment, like, “Oh, numbered propositions!” or “Oh, the way Deleuze structured his book on Francis Bacon!” etc.

It takes a long time. It’s not really pleasurable, even though I think it’s probably the most experimental thing about my writing. I think people give a lot of spiritual credence to uncertainty, to not knowing. That’s exactly as it should be, but it doesn’t mean that not knowing is easy. It’s hard, because you don’t know if you’re ever going to find it. You can also make a lot of false starts with the form and not know what to do with that writing.

You won a MacArthur “Genius” Grant. If you’re used to writing a certain way, juggling your teaching or work or whatever, does the money from that somehow make it more complicated to create? Does it shift the way you’re used to doing it?

I’ve never had a life that could consist of only writing as a job, and given that the money hasn’t started coming in yet, nothing has changed, for the moment. Before having kids, I managed to write quite a bit, so I never really felt like, “Wow, if only I could be more productive.” I felt a little bit more like, “Wow, I wish I could give myself more rest.” But you know, things change, and now my schedule is so tight... so I am looking forward to having fewer pressures, a little more space. I do like having a place to show up at so that I don’t die and no one notices, but of course I don’t want a job that takes up all my intellectual and physical life. I do like teaching. I hope I teach throughout my life. I like sharing what I’ve found in my own intellectual life with others—it’s kind of like collecting a good hand of cards and then sharing it with other good souls. Plus, students clue you into cool shit you wouldn’t know about otherwise.

When you’re teaching, do people ask how you developed your style and developed your approach? I realize these things are impossible to teach, but people seem to be very curious about it. “Hey, how did you manage to come up with this particular style?,” etc.

□ I feel like I’m just now in the past five years entering this age of life in which the ratio of my dispensing words that might be helpful to others has outweighed my need for the words of others that might be helpful to me. It’s key, though, to keep finding new things that inspire, and not just melting into some broken record of how things went for you.

I taught a class all on Peggy Ahwesh’s films this semester, and she just did a Skype visit with us the other day. It was so awesome. She’s one of the few artists who makes me really excited about making things, every time I hear her talk or see her work. That’s a precious thing.

I think as you grow older as a writer, a maker, your interest in other people’s shop talk probably goes down. But I try to remember that once it was important to me. Still, I truly don’t understand why at every Q and A, someone always asks, “Do you have a routine?” or “Do you write every morning?” Why those questions remain interesting, I really have no idea. But since no one’s putting a gun to their head to ask them, they must compel. They’re probably necessary on a symbolic level more than a literal one, as people cobble together an imagination of what a life devoted to “making” might be like.

I think people want a path to follow. They want a checklist so they can say, “Alright cool, so if I get up at six and I write for this long and I watch this film and I do that...”

It’s weird, because I might have wanted that, too. I used to dance in New York. My Lower East Side days. Modern dance, or whatever. One thing I learned as a dancer was that people learn combinations different ways. Some people, if they get the right side, they can also get the left side right off the top of their head. Some people need to be taught both right and left. Some people count, some people never count, you know? I noticed then that, for me, it was really watching the whole person dancing, trying to take in the whole combination at once, that helped me learn it. I think I’m the same way as a reader—I like to take in the whole book, not getting too specific about how they did it, but ride the bigger example.

I mean, at the end of the day, the answer to the question "How did you do it?" is right there, on the page. They're showing you how they did it, by doing it. Maybe it's different with art, when you don't know if someone had all their sculptures knitted or welded by elves somewhere, but with writing, the answer to the question "How do you write a book like this?" is usually, "Like this" [points to book].

One thing I've noticed is that musicians are into your work. We recently ran an interview with [Angel Olsen](#), where she mentioned *Bluets*, and I know George Clarke from *Deafheaven* is a fan, too, among others. Any idea what the connection is to music?

I like writing that puts the needle right into the vein. I don't think, when I'm writing, "Tell a good story" or "find a meaning." I'm thinking phrase by phrase, make it tight, make it good. Get the idea out in language I can bear. I think there's something musical about being impatient with boring sentences—it's not that I don't have boring sentences, God knows I do, but I'm impatient with them. Also I'm often bored by just plain old literary culture, and I've been lucky enough to teach at an art school for a decade, and to be around artists most all the time, not necessarily writers. I think I'm more prone to seeing writing as an art amongst other arts than as its own literary niche.

Maggie Nelson recommends:

- Peggy Ahwesh's 2001 video [She Puppet](#) repurposes Lara Croft. Excellent post-election viewing.
- R. H. Quaytman's show at MOCA LA, [Morning: Chapter 30](#) best show I've seen in I don't know how long.
- [GameLife](#) by Michael Clune, not at all what you'd think what you hear "video game memoir." Really fine writing.
- Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman in conversation at an event called ["The Black Outdoors"](#)
- [Hilton Als's](#) newsprint mailing series called "After Dark".

As far as the MacArthur, is it weird to suddenly be labeled a "Genius"?

You know, I get a feminist bravado when I think about the "genius" thing, which is to say that after many, many feminists have dismantled the term for decades as a mark of male power or whatever, and now that we've done all that work, I feel really happy taking the opposite tack, and totally embracing the term. [Laughs] Claudia Rankine has this little bit in her book, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* about talking with some guy who was saying Mahalia Jackson has genius but isn't a genius. I think that distinction has long persisted, as if women were able to be touched by something but not actually embody it... Like, was Virginia Woolf touched by genius when she wrote, *To the Lighthouse* in one sitting, or is Virginia Woolf just a fucking genius? What's the difference?

Gertrude Stein loved and used the term a lot, and I like that kind of bravado, so I'm not afraid of it. Whether or not I think I'm a genius, that's a "no comment." [Laughs] I'm just saying that I think it's cool. There's power in dismantling the term, and there's power in applying it to different people in different kinds of worlds.

Name

Maggie Nelson

Vocation

Author

Fact

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