

Jacqueline Novak on giving a voice to your depression



March 16, 2017 - Jacqueline Novak is a stand-up comedian based in New York City. She released a comedy album, *Quality Notions*, in 2014 and in 2016 she published her first book, *How to Weep in Public: Feeble Offerings On Depression From One Who Knows*.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1704 words.

Tags: [Comedy](#), [Writing](#), [Anxiety](#), [Process](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

Before I wrote *How to Weep In Public*, I mostly wrote personal essay-type stuff that was much more in the vein of "a person charmed by the poignant nature of life" with some vulnerable humor thrown in. I saw my strength as being the ability to find beauty in things that aren't inherently beautiful. It's sounds incredibly cheesy, but that is what I was good at. I was trying to write from that place, more or less, but at a certain point I became so depressed that I was no longer able to do that. So I made this very distinct decision—what if instead of trying to hide that voice in my head, a voice that I had chosen to see as having no value, a negative voice—what if instead I just give in to it and try to write as that voice instead?

The book was about giving voice to those depressed thoughts, literally, in the same way that me or friends have confided in each other—the kinds of thoughts we would have when depressed or the things we had written down in our journals. When I would try to speak as the depression itself, it could often be kind of hilarious when said out loud, so *that* become the voice of the book. Of course, that became a much harder thing to do over the course of an entire book. Also, this being my first book and the subject matter being so tricky, it was more challenging than I might have anticipated. I would have much preferred my first book be something more simple, or to have entered the marketplace with my breezy coming-of-age memoir or something more poignant, but that was not the case.

When I read the book now I find it jarring and a little confusing. I'm writing as a voice that is not totally me but is also coming from me and my own experience, so in the process of writing and going through edits, there were many moments when I felt like I didn't even know what it was anymore. By the time it was finished, it was like, "Does this feel cohesive to anyone?" It's very bizarre because it's not totally representative of my own voice because I'm purposely trying to air out the voice of something I argue is not the real me—the depression mindset.

So, the whole thing became like an exercise in trying to *not* write from your voice, which is a weird thing. So, I'm almost like, "How dare you people think that I am a negative person!" I am literally not. It's a weird nightmare where I see this book as being so distinct from the true me, but then it's like, "Holy shit, that is what is out there as *your* voice." It's kind of terrifying. I'll obviously have to write three very light, enchanting memoirs now to compensate for that.

The voice of the book was so confusing because there were all these weird factors, the concept intersecting with my real life and my real voice, but also the conceit of giving voice to my depression... all while trying, hopefully, to also be funny. You quickly learn that being funny on the page is much different than being funny in front of a room full of people. It's also complicated because you're also talking about real mental health issues and everybody's experience is different. I never tested any of the material out in my stand up and I didn't really share it with anyone other than my editor, I just thought of it as this message being beamed from inside my cocoon to inside someone else's. I was almost thinking of it like, "You're going to let me in because I'm a compadre in depression. You're going to let me in to your little cave since there's no one else here. If I'm even

mildly entertaining, it's better than nothing."

I've thought a lot about the exhaustion of having to perform for other people's benefit—"Oh my god, I'm so happy to see you! Your baby is so adorable!" Sometimes you're just like, "Well, I'm not going to go out in public because I do not have the energy to do that, but I know that the guilt will make me do it." So, a lot of getting myself to do things when I don't want to is to think about what I think I'm *expected* to do and then say, "Yes, I'm going to go to the party but I'm *not* going to feel the need to make other people feel good when they are talking to me." I'm not a monster. I'm still probably going to be polite or whatever, but if I'm feeling like I can't go do something because I'm picturing the exhaustion of killing it socially, whatever that looks like, I'll pre-forgive myself and go, "I'm going to go there. That's all." That's how I get on stage pretty much every time I do stand-up. Going on, I don't care about laughs. I allow myself to get no laughs. And then I have no excuse.

When I was waiting for notes to come back on the depression book, I was pretty jazzed about the idea of selling books in general and I ended up collaborating with my friend on a funny book about wedding planning. When the depression book was literally killing me on a thousand levels, it was such a pleasure to attack something that had a much simpler premise and made clearer sense.

I like to work on a few things at once because I think it keeps me from getting too crazy about the one thing and obsessing over it. This is a pitiful analogy, but it's kind of like if someone is dating someone new and they're too obsessed with this person who they've only gone on a couple of dates with. It might not be healthy, right? Maybe go on some dates with other people too, maybe spread out some of that fierce yearning. Spread it out into the world and you'll have a better chance with all of them because you're not dumping the entire contents of your soul into someone who you've only been out with two dates with, right?

I feel like that with creative projects it helps to have a few so that you can pivot away from one when you're looking at it too intensely. Also, there's always the promise that another creative project of yours is better and will be easier to finish. When I'm working on something I'll often feel like, "This has so many problems," while, meanwhile, "I could totally finish that other one in a day." Then you head over there and work on the other for a little while with renewed energy and then discover it has its own issues and then you head back to the first one with renewed energy. It's like a trick.

As an artist, I think you have to go for it and leave a trail of work that maybe you hate behind you because someone else might find value in it. So, that's the one thing I think about when I'm questioning anything about my work or thinking about the book. In the blind act of creating something and attempting to polish it and get it out there, what little piece of life or nourishment remained that had value to someone else? That's my main comfort.

Jacqueline Novak recommends:

Steve Martin's memoir, [Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life](#). It's great. I have a hard copy and then I also have an audiobook copy that I listened to during what I think of as my "guest spot" tour. A guest spot is basically when you're not booked on the show, you're not an emcee, you're not a feature, and you're not a headliner. Essentially someone is letting you show up and do five minutes for whatever reason. So I had this idea that I was going to become this road comic and I was going to get all these booking by doing little guest spots at all these clubs across the country. So my friend helped me book these spots at all these clubs across the Midwest and I took off, alone, in my parent's old car. I would show up and I would do my spot, but it wasn't totally effective. They weren't like, "We need you back next week!" But it was still good because you're on the road, you're alone, you're going to places, you're showing up, you're afraid, you don't really know where you are, you're just getting on stage and doing your thing. It could have been so terrible, but I would listen to Steve's audio book on these extremely long drives and it was so wonderful—like he was talking directly to me.

There was something so cozy about being in my car and listening to the many lessons in that book. One of the things he says—and I feel like I reference it constantly, but it is just so important to me—is something like, "If you're not bombing, you're not trying hard enough." That's a poignant code for me. It's like... you *must* bomb. How are you ever going to get better if you don't fail miserably at first? If everything you want to say comes out of your mouth perfectly the first time and people get it right away, how low are you shooting with what

you're trying to say? If something doesn't come out poorly the first time, it's probably because it's been said before. If it's easy to say it's because the path is already worn. I found that to be such a comforting idea. Also, you *need* those quotes sometimes. That's the thing with quotes from people you respect and admire, you can live by them. One goddamn quote from someone you respect can guide you for years.

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Vocation

Comedian, Writer

Fact

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