John Keene on writing from the inside out



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As told to Mark Sussman, 1937 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Multi-tasking.

You're often exploring material that's distant from where you are, geographically, historically, and culturally. Is that distance something you're thinking about as you're writing? Or do you just absorb whatever you can and then let it come out in the writing as it will?

It's probably a little bit of the second. Characters, for me, are usually the way in. So, for example, [the story "A Letter on the Trials of the Counterreformation in New Lisbon"], one of the fundamental components of that story is that I don't want the reader to know [who the narrator is]. You don't find out until the very end.

So there what sustained me was the excitement of inhabiting that character, inhabiting that voice. And I think so often that has been the case for me, particularly with this collection, but in other things I've done, too. Just getting into character. When writing or reading, of course, you enter that character's head, you enter that virtual space, and it's spellbinding. That's the other thing I wanted to do, particularly with that story. Sometimes it's language, sometimes it's setting, sometimes it's atmosphere. But to have those moments where the story itself almost casts a spell and pulls you in so fully that you could feel it physically.

I always tell my students about this experience, and this has happened a number of times, but one of the ones I think of most vividly, and I taught the book a few years ago, was Cormac McCarthy's, *The Road*. The father goes down those stairs, and the little boy is at the top of the stairs, and the father looks down and it's dark. And McCarthy: elaborate prose, right? It's interesting when you read that moment, because he pulls that impulse to overdo the prose, he pulls it back and you get something a little bit clearer, but sort of strange and disorienting.

The power that fiction possesses to create those experiences, I feel like so often, writers sacrifice that because they want to be efficient, or they want to just tell the story, or whatever reason, they want to entertain in other kinds of ways. But, I'm interested in how fiction can do [what McCarthy did in that moment]. So that was one of the things that I tried to do in various ways, successfully or unsuccessfully, in *Counternarratives*, too. To get you so fully into that moment and that character that it's writing from the inside out. I just wanted to point to that.

You're also a translator, and when you talk about occupying someone else's position, it almost sounds like the work translators do.

It is a challenge but I also see it in certain ways being akin to being a fiction writer. If you're doing anything where you're getting into any kind of character that's even somewhat different from yourself—really truly stepping outside yourself into that character—that is what translation requires. So there's a sense in which, even if the translation itself doesn't work, that process of writing fiction, and particularly writing fiction that's not transparently about oneself, is a certain kind of training. That doesn't mean, again, that the translation's gonna work. But it does mean that on a certain level, you become that other person in that moment and you think from the inside out.

One of my teachers once said the text in the original language stays the same, but we always need updated translations. And we're always getting new translations of old texts. Why is that?

Because I think, with each new translation, you bring a different perspective to it. Often, of course, what happens with new translations is they re-situate the work for a new context. I think of a writer that's so beloved and has been translated by different people in so many different ways, like Rainer Rilke. Two people whose translations of Rilke I think are really great are William Gass and Steven Mitchell. I believe Gass's precedes Mitchell's. You know, William Gass was an extraordinary writer in English. But he was also a profoundly philosophical writer. And he, of course, spoke German. He had training in German. So his translations have a certain kind of philosophical sensibility, like he's capturing something in Rilke, I think, that most translators probably wouldn't.

With Steven Mitchell, you have a translator who has an extraordinary ear [and] an extraordinary eye and his desire is to give you a Rilke that, on the one hand is as approximate as possible, but also doesn't lose any of Rilke's strangeness. If you go back and forth between those two translations, and of course, many lesser translations, you really start to get a sense, if you don't speak German, of what Rilke might be like. And that, I think, can be really great.

But at times updated translations can just be terrible. If you're translating the work of a poet, particularly a poet who is also an extraordinary prose writer, you want to retain that poetry, so you want to err on the side of the lyrical that might not be as exact, as opposed to the exact that is not so lyrical, because [otherwise] you lose what is essential to that writer.

You write about contemporary politics a lot, mostly on your blog. How has that affected the way you think about your writing, given how historically embedded your work is?

I wanted to have this blog I thought was gonna be about art and letters, things that were of interest to me that I wasn't seeing on a lot of other blogs. Of course, it didn't take long for me to start periodically talking about politics because, how could you not talk about politics during the Bush years?

I realized even in the posts before that, that weren't directly about politics, that I was thinking about politics. It struck me, it wasn't planned, but that *Counternarratives* is about the past but also about the present. So much that it dramatizes, has direct parallels with today. I write slowly. But when I was younger, one of the things that I struggled with, one of the reasons it took me so long to get *Annotations* out was, before *Annotations*, I was actually trying to write about the AIDS crisis. I had some poems that I published and I think maybe a story or two, but it was like, because it was so overwhelming that I felt like I just could not get my… it wasn't that I couldn't get my mind around it, I couldn't get my art around it, particularly in a fictional form, because it was just there. It was pressing and the totality of it. I think now that I'm older, I have a better sense of how to incorporate things, or how to work with things. But, even still, it's like, you come to realize you don't always have to write about something directly.

What is your daily practice like? Between your university duties and blogging, how do you get words down for your fiction and poetry?

In the past, before I became chair and acting chair [of African American and African Studies at Rutgers], I had more time to let my mind work through things sometimes in a very straightforward way on the blog. And I try not to edit it. That was another thing I was always aiming for, to write shorter entries.

With my creative work, it's a little different now, because I find it harder to focus because there's always something else to think about. So, what I've tended to do, is have these periods where, even if it's just a few sentences a day, to get them down. And then, when I don't have to think about hiring or something like that, then I

can actually immerse myself. That was one of the ways I was able to get *Counternarratives* done. Because when I shifted from Northwestern to Rutgers, I had a full complement of classes and things, but I would have these down periods, and I would just seize on those to get as much writing done as possible, both during the semester and during the summer. And, as I said, the last few years, it's been a little bit more difficult. That's why I don't even blog as much, because so much mental energy has to go to the daily administrative demands.

I'm always amazed when people are able to write. They say, "I wrote 5,000 words today", or however many words they wrote. How do you write 10 pages?

I don't understand it either.

I'm always astonished by it. I think about during NaNoWriMo or National Poetry Month now, people who write a poem a day. I tried to do that where I tried to write a poem a day for a month. And you come to realize that a lot of the poems are really bad. But if you have 30 poems and let's say 25 are bad and you have five that are even semi-decent and one that's really good, you have one good poem for a month. There's something to be said for that.

Some poet just posted the other day, "Oh, my god, I wrote seven full poems last year." And people were like, "Oh, my god. I can't believe you wrote that many." These were not just teachers or administrators. So you come to realize, if you're gonna have a certain number of poems over a certain number of years, that you do have a collection of poems. And you have poems that you really love. You don't have to write 70 or 700 poems.

But, it is a challenge. And then with traveling, personal things, stuff like that, it becomes more difficult. I try to carve out little bits of time, and even if it's just a few sentences, those sentences are the way back into whatever it is that I'm doing. Words, notes, things like this.

Do you find carving out that time puts pressure on you to use it?

It's a relief. It's a huge relief. It's always a joy. It gets to the point sometimes, I don't know if you ever have this experience, where you're thinking about something you're working on and it's so potent that you wake up thinking about it, or at some point where your mind just goes into idle mode for a few minutes and then you're just in that other world, and you think, "Oh my god. I have to come back to reality." So even just thinking about it can be really exciting. Then just writing little things. Like I said, little notes and writing things down, just to keep myself going is key.

10 graphic novels or comics I have read and enjoyed over the last decade by John Keene:

Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie, *Aya: Love in Yop City* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2013)
Peter Bagge, *FIRE! The Zora Neale Hurston Story* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2017)
Thui Bui, *The Best We Could Do* (Abrams Comic Arts, 2017)
Gilbert Hernandez, *Julio's Day* (Fantagraphics, 2013)
A. David Lewis, Paul Beran and Anna Mudd, *Mugtatafat: A Comics Anthology Featuring Artists from the Middle East Region* (Ninth Art Press, 2015)
John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell, *March: Trilogy Set* (Top Shelf Productions, 2016)
Elisha Lim, *100 Crushes* (Koyama Press, 2014)
David Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* (Pantheon, 2009)
Raina Telgemeier, *Ghosts* (Scholastic, 2016)
Chris Ware, *Building Stories* (Pantheon, 2012)

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Vocation
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