Kate Zambreno on writing the impossible book



February 28, 2017 - Kate Zambreno is the author of three previous books—*Green Girl, O Fallen Angel,* and *Heroines*. Her new book, *Book of Mutter*, is a meditation on memory and grief. Composed over the course of 13 years, the book examines the death of the author's mother, adopting elements of memoir, essay, poetry and criticism. It's a book that Zambreno doubted might ever be published... or even finished. It is being published by Semiotext(e)'s Native Agents.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1978 words.

Tags: Writing, Anxiety, Process, Inspiration.

The idea of working on a single creative project for 13 years is hard to imagine. What sustained you during those years?

I would say *Book of Mutter* has been a sort of love affair and also represents the agony of my trying to be a writer. It's also not like I worked on it *exclusively* for 13 years—I was working on other books as well, and all of these ended up informing each other. A book is like a tremendous site of yearning for me. It's like an itch I have to work on until I've figured something out, or until I can get rid of it or try to publish it.

In the beginning, it didn't have a name and I wasn't sure what it even was. I began trying to write about my mother—and about trying to be a writer—when I was 25. Very soon after that, my mother died. It went through so many stages of trying for it to become a book. I think at any time during those 13 years, I could have published *Book of Mutter* and it would have been a different thing. It was a book of vast incarnations and multiplicity for me. There are other times I could've published it, but it would have been a *vastly* different book.

At times, it was much more unpublishable, whatever that means. I don't know if that means it was better or worse aesthetically, but there were times it was just a mess. As for what sustained me to keep going with it, I think it was just that itch—to not only figure out *why* I wanted to write about my mother, but also why I *couldn't*. The shame of it, the guilt of it, and the impossible nature of it was ultimately what the book *is*. It was trying to figure that out, and also dealing with the constant failure of it. What remains now is the actual book that people will read, but what the book is to me is something very different.

The terms "unclassifiable" and "genre-defying" get thrown around a lot lately, but it's an apt description for the book.

I really love books that are kind of thin, but sort of heavy. Thin but incredibly intense. Books that seem like they took 10 years to write, but are almost like the notes for a book that is actually impossible. *Book of Mutter* is not very dense. I do reference a lot of other artists—Henry Darger, Louise Bourgeois, Barbara Loden—but the language is very simple. I wanted it to be able to be read easily. That's something I thought about a lot over the countless times I rewrote it. I really wanted it to have a tonal feel, like it was being performed. Like you could kind of hear the voice in a room. I wanted there to be a sense of stillness to it.

The book plays with different styles and genres. How did you approach writing it?

One of the ways I worked on this book was to sit and read it over and over and over again. It was a process of trying to winnow it and winnow it and winnow it. It was pieced together from endless piles of notebooks and papers and bits of research, all of which would expand and contract over the years. Sometimes I just couldn't

access it at all because it was way too heavy. Sometimes I had to step away from it and work on other things. One of the reasons I worried about publishing it—and I think why it got rejected so much, it was routinely and roundly rejected for *years*—is that there's something very heavy and almost unfashionable about it.

I never thought about who would publish it or what would happen. Writing the book wasn't about that. As far as I'm concerned, no book should be about that.

It's not very contemporary in a way. It's about an old-fashioned upbringing. It's about artists like Henry Darger, who's kind of old-fashioned too. Admittedly it's very heavy in terms of subject matter, but that's why I wanted a sort of lightness to it in terms of form—it's not a very long book, there isn't a lot of text on each page. My hope is that there's a pleasure in reading it and a pleasure in terms of going through it. I think of people actually reading it now, which is terrifying, and you wonder: *What is it like to read this book?* That seems like an important question for any writer to ask about their work. This book is not plot heavy or super narrative. Even though it's heavy, there's hopefully some beauty to the heaviness.

When you are working on something that's outside an established genre, do you feel a certain kind of liberation?

The work just becomes its own sort of animal. I don't mean this to sound pretentious, but the way this book was formed was basically a process of sedimentation that happened over many years. I don't always completely understand the construction of it. These are some of the pieces and parts that I've assembled over time. If I was going to write it now, it would not be the same book at all. I knew nothing when I started trying to write this book. I can't speak for other writers, but you can't let not knowing what you are doing stop you.

It was a period of amazing naïveté, where I knew no one in publishing. I didn't really meet another novelist or writer until I was in my late twenties. I knew nothing about genre or forms. When I first started writing *Book of Mutter*, I didn't really have other works I was looking towards. I had no frame of reference. I found those over time. I never thought about who would publish it or what would happen. Writing the book wasn't about that. As far as I'm concerned, no book should be about that.

There are an increasing number of books being published that resist genre. Still, at some point you have to try and describe it to other people. A publisher has to try and figure out how to sell it.

All of that is so troubling. I think that *Mutter* is a weird book, because it's not memoir. It's not an essay. It doesn't have a coherent narrative of the self. It's not poetry. The book was going to be published by a poetry press at one point, which I was so excited by. It was a press that had to have approval by editorial board, and the big complaint was, "This is not poetry." Ornery person that I am, I pulled it. I was like, "Fuck it. I don't care if it's poetry!" One of the great heartbreaks of my life is that I love poetry and I identify as a poet, but I'm not a poet. Still I think of *Mutter* as, in a way, poetry.

I think the word "hybrid" and idea of being "between genre" has become really academified and really institutionalized. Still, the works I generally love are mysterious and tricky. I think that's because they're written because of a real internal impulse and the form just finds its way through during the process. There's some more private thing going on for the writer; it's not something that's meant to be only for the reader.

It took a while for this book—for all of my books—to find the right home. I went through a period where I thought, "I'm never going to publish again. I never *want* to publish again." My feeling was something like: I want to write. I want to write in my notebook. I want to write projects, but this life of being rejected is not for me. I can't handle it and I don't want it to distort my sense of the project of literature, in both reading and writing, which is this love of my life.

So much has been said about how to deal with rejection as a creative person, but it's so hard not to take it personally.

Yes, it feels really regressive to me. I feel like I regress back to being a kid or something. Because it's a form of love, right? To be read is to be recognized. That's a form of love. I see that when I teach writing, just how intensely personal it is. It's weird. I think when you are writing you have to have that wound. At least for the kind of writing that I love, it comes from this woundedness. But for this business you have to also be detached enough to regard yourself objectively, right? To think of the whole thing—the whole process—as a kind of narrative that you are simply a part of.

I love the world of books and the experience of reading and the experience of writing and how private both those experiences are. I like having conversations with people about writing, even if those are in public, but the expectations now of an author seem really kind of the opposite of what I think about when I think about writing. I don't know what advice I'd have for writers on how to best protect yourself other than to just focus on your project. Think about why you feel compelled to write it.

What did you learn from writing this book? And how does putting an end to this long-term creative endeavor influence what you do next?

I'm still figuring that out. Whenever someone writes to tell me that they've read the book, I go back and reread it, which is not very productive. I have this compulsion to go back and look at the work as a way of answering the question, "What are other people reading when they read this book?" Sometimes I read it and I think, "Oh, this is good." Other times I read it and I think, "Oh, the second half is still too long." Sometimes I'll feel like, "Oh, I shouldn't have published this at all. I should have worked on this more. It could have been *this* book. It could have been a totally different book and *that* would have been much better. *That* would have been a great book."

I think there was something I accomplished with *Book of Mutter*. A sort of tonal quality that I like and that I want to do more of. There are some writers who are really confident and know *exactly* what they're doing—they know their project and they can kind of proceed forward. My work is often an experience of intense doubt and exploration. My next book is kind of a diary and kind of a novel and I am way past due on my deadline for it, which of course is a big source of anxiety. I was talking about this to my dear friend, Suzanne Scanlon, who is a writer that I love quite a lot. She said to me, "You know, I was thinking about how all books have their own deadline. Sometimes you have to kind of let the work proceed by its own pace." It made me realize that all of the thinking, the *not* writing, the obsessive note taking—that's all a part of the work.

Recommended by Kate Zambreno:

Five of my favorite elegies/hauntings…

Moyra Davey, "Notes on Blue"

Roland Barthes, Mourning Diary

Sofia Samatar, "Meet Me in Iram"

Hervé Guibert, To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life

Peter Handke, A Sorrow Beyond Dreams

Name
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Vocation
Writer

Fact

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