

Mychal Denzel Smith on committing to difficult work



November 2, 2016 - Earlier this year, Mychal Denzel Smith published his first book, *Invisible Man, Got the Whole World Watching: A Young Black Man's Education*. He's a writer at the Nation and a Knobel Fellow at the Nation Institute. His work has appeared in the *Guardian*, *Ebony*, *The Root*, *The Huffington Post*, and *GOOD magazine*, among other publications. The *NY Times* has called him "The Intellectual in Air Jordans."

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2390 words.

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Do you see your book, *Invisible Man, Got the Whole World Watching*, as a memoir?

I never thought of it as a memoir. I draw from personal experience in the book, but for me that was always just an entry point for just a larger cultural criticism. The line was essentially: How much of myself is necessary to make the point that I want to make, to make it relatable and understandable for the audience, to engage with the ideas that I'm presenting here? That was my approach. It was never for me "Oh, I want to tell my life story." My life is not that exciting—and, at 29 years old, there's not a whole lot to tell.

The point for me was to use my life, and those stories, as a writing technique. I think the way people tell stories, and can see themselves in them, helps the understanding of some of these concepts. Some of which may be familiar, but I'm taking them in a different direction, or things that are unfamiliar to people hoping that what they get out of it. It could be presented in sort of a data-driven way. There could be sketches of other people's lives. For me, the way that I process it, and put ideas forth, is through personal storytelling.

That defines the way that I approach writing generally. Whether it be within this book, or other essays. There are more ideas that I want to explore. It's going to be about finding the right way to explore those ideas. Some of it may be more personal, some of it is not going to be. You have to decide: What's the right story telling method? What's the right approach for the idea that I want to express? That's really the overriding thing for me, in terms of technique.

Were you afraid of offending any of the people who show up in the book? Family, friends... Also, you're very honest about yourself, digging into internalized homophobia you didn't realize existed inside of you and discussing your depression, among other things.

A lot of the questions I've gotten about the book have been about my relationship with my Dad: Whether he's seen it, whether he's read it or not. I honestly don't know if he's read it, but nothing in the book appears that we haven't discussed between the two of us. The extent of which it was discussed varies by category, but there's nothing in there that I've not had a one-on-one conversation with him about.

When I'm telling my story people are like "bit" characters within that, and it's never about divulging secrets, or tell-all's about those people. It's about the lessons that I'm learning from them and drawing from that and then getting, again, outside of myself to be able to draw this larger cultural criticism and sketch the political dilemma that I'm interested in... as opposed to just telling everybody every detail of another person's life. I'm not interested in that.

It's not really about me, or even the people that populate the book. The crux of it are these ideas, and how best to relate those ideas. How best to tell stories that embody those ideas or allow for a space for challenging ideas. I try the best I can to get out of myself as much as possible.

The most personal chapter in the book, I think, was the one that deals with mental health. That was a deliberate choice, in that I don't think there are many Black men recounting that experience. I wanted to be able to lay that out there. But again, it's how much of myself is necessary, and I thought more me was necessary there than in other chapters. In a way, it was a self-interrogation.

If I'm going to do this work, I'm going to have to delve past the point of where I'm comfortable. For me, that's a big part of any sort of examination of systems of oppression, and privilege, and power. If you're comfortable with the conversation, then it's probably not very productive. It's not presenting any real challenge to you in your position and your identity markers if someone is trying to tell you about the ways in which parts of your identity lead to the denial of humanity to other people and that you are complicit in systems of oppression.

If you're comfortable with that conversation then it's things that you probably already know or things that are not doing the work of undoing those systems, or asking anything of you. They're not asking you to do anything, they're just acknowledging stuff. I want to get

past the point of acknowledging it, to the real nitty-gritty work of: What does it mean to understand your position, and then relinquish the power and privilege that those identity markers can and will bestow upon you? What does that process look like? How do you move forward?

And that's ugly, brutal work to do. Especially for folks who reach a point in their life where they feel content with themselves, or even reach a level of self-love in which they feel that they can walk through the world with a sense of confidence and a sense of pride. To then be told that some of the sources of that confidence and pride may be harmful to other people. It's a hard place to be in. It's a dilemma that people don't want to have to face.

You have a big following on Twitter, and I see you discussing these issues on there, too. How is a book different than social media?

I've been writing for the internet for years now. With the exception of maybe a few pieces, they don't have that long of a shelf life. People read them, they like them, and then they disappear off in the corners of the internet that aren't really mine too often. Every now and then a piece hits that everyone shares and that sort of becomes the perennial best, and this is an example of how to do this work.

But a book is forever. It's here. People have purchased it. It's a keepsake for people. They have it in their homes. They carry with them out in public. They're reading with people. They're doing book groups and things like that. The ideas therein are meant to be carried forth and have a longer life. People wrestle with them, and argue with them, and write responses to everything that lies in the book. So, I mean, it's different than that sort of ephemeral nature of social media in that a tweet can be really pointed and poignant. But who remembers that tweet past the life of it on social media, because so many tweets are being produced all the time?

And that's not to take away the impact of social media. When you have hoards of, thousands and millions of people, tweeting around the same issue, bringing attention to things that go under-covered by traditional media outlets, it pushes a conversation in a different way. It exposes people to new ideas: different voices that otherwise would be shut out by the gatekeepers. It has its value. But there is a different value in the production of something like a book that is tangible and also that people tend to return to more. That practice of reading and rereading and re-engaging and planting those seeds, I think happens in a way that's not replicated in social media.

So they both have their own distinct roles to play, but my book is an outgrowth of my engagement with social media in that so many of these ideas I wouldn't have been confronted with had it not been for the exposure to those new voices; voices that I otherwise would not have had access to, or would have denied their existence. As we were talking about earlier, made me have to confront so much of my own bigotry. My own shortcomings in terms of an intellectual project of liberation. Being very centered on my own identity markers as opposed to a project of liberation that looks in ways of one's own complicity within systems of oppression. That's a byproduct of social media pushing and shaping consciousness.

So again, basically what I'm getting at is there's not an either or proposition here, in which we should all abandon social media and write books. But I do think that the lull that books play in their longevity and the way in which the ability to engage ideas in a deeper manner, in a more nuanced manner, allow for a level of critical thought that isn't always afforded to you on social media. I think that books are that platform.

Part of why your book has done so well, I think, is because it feels necessary. There have been so many police shootings of young Black men this past year. You start the book talking about Trayvon Martin, and how you can see yourself in him. Since his killing, there have been so many more murders of innocent Black people.

You know, I would love for my book to become irrelevant. I would love to be in that place where I didn't feel like what was being discussed in there is necessary. But you look at the ways in which it spans all of the different subject matter within the book. You can talk about continuing to see Black people being shot and killed by police on video. We can see things like the allegations resurfacing around Nate Parker and his rape case. You can see things like Kid Cudi and how he's checked himself into rehab for depression. All of these things are ever present because of the fact that we have not been honest and not had an honest reckoning with structure, with the way in which we have organized society.

And we keep coming back to really surface discussions around how to fix these problems. We keep coming back to reform. We keep coming back to ideas around personal responsibility, and it's not to say that those things don't have any impact whatsoever, but personal responsibility for one's mental health only goes so far in a world in which, very basic health care, specifically mental health care is out of reach for so many people. It's unaffordable. How many mental health professionals are able to speak to the experience of racism in the United States? How many people are versed in sexual trauma? All of those different elements.

But then... just the fact of what produces that. Think about the daily violence that one is exposed to within communities that are deprived of resources. And that's not like Donald Trump saying that people walk down the street and get shot. It's about the fact that there's still lead in the water in Flint. Right? That's actually poisoning people physically. But also think about the fact that you live in a place and you understand that your life has been devalued to the point that people don't care whether or not you have clean water. Think about living with that reality and what that does to your sense of self and your psyche. Think about living in Chicago where they keep laying off teachers and hiring more police officers. If you're seeing what happens to Laquan McDonald and then you see that there are many more people... they're hiring 1,000 more police officers. Just think about how violent that imagery is to you.

So it's continuing. I'm glad to have written this book in this time and be able to be a part of that conversation because I think that there are pieces missing that I hopefully can fill in. There are connections to be made that aren't normally made. There are critiques that come from a more radical position in which—when I say radical, looking at the root, looking at the structures of society, and like the way we organize ourselves. Our economy. Our government. All of those things that lead to these outcomes.

But at the same time the feeling that overwhelms is that you have to keep saying it. It doesn't go anywhere just because you said it one time. The art of repetition makes you feel as if what you're doing is hopeless in many ways. You get better and better at saying the same thing in new ways, hoping that different way will be the one that sparks the revolution that we need, but it doesn't come to fruition and you go back to the drawing board.

There's some peace to be had that the struggle will continue for the entirety of your lifetime because what you do then is know that you have to commit yourself to this work and that you yourself may not see the benefits of it. There's some peace to be had in knowing that, but the other side is knowing that so many people are going to suffer because we can't get it together. Because we don't have the will as a people to truly address it, to truly dismantle these systems.

But that just draws to another question: how committed to this work are you? I feel like if it's required of me to get up every day and find new ways to say the same thing and that's going to shift something—it's not to say that nothing has changed at all. It's to say that the shift in consciousness is very, very slow. But it happens, and we can see that happening in the ways in which movements are built. We can see it in the shift in the art and culture that's been produced. It's happening and committing yourself to that work, while it can be, and will continue to be, frustrating it is also in its own way liberating.

Mychal Denzel Smith recommends:

The Argonauts by Maggie Nelson

How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America by Kiese Laymon

Where the Line Bleeds by Jesmyn Ward

good kid, M.A.A.D. city by Kendrick Lamar

I Will Follow (written/directed by Ava DuVernay)

Name

Mychal Denzel Smith

Vocation

Writer

Fact

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