On urgency



Writer Patrick Cottrell discusses the benefits of working quickly, not getting too wrapped up in the past, and the importance of acknowledging and celebrating your influences.

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As told to Mark Sussman, 2484 words.

Tags: Writing, Process.

Your novel *Sorry to Disrupt the Peace*, centers on its narrator—Helen Moran—and her investigation of the circumstances surrounding her adoptive brother's suicide. It takes place over three and a half, four days, and it feels like it was written almost at that speed. Does the pace of the novel reflect the pace in which it was written?

Definitely. I was working at this school in Los Angeles. It was five days a week, 8 o'clock to 4 o'clock. I was super busy, really stressed out. But I knew there was spring break coming up in March and I'd have two weeks off. So I wrote most of the book over that span of two weeks. I had five or six chapters that I'd started in New York in maybe 2015. I'm not really sure. I had a handful of chapters, and I just set it aside for a really long time because I moved across the country and started this new job. So I just didn't have time to look at it. But then when I had that break I was like, "I really want to go back to this book and just finish it." So I was very determined, and I think some of the propulsion of the book just comes from the fact that I had to write it really quickly. I had the time constraint. I knew if I didn't finish it, I was like, this is just gonna go on forever, because my job was so stressful and exhausting. I had to work really quickly.

What is your regular practice like, now that you don't have that time constraint?

I generally write [short stories] in one or two sittings, and then I set them aside for a number of months. Then I'll go back and look at them and maybe add a few things or just change things. I would say I write pretty quickly and not very often.

If you're not writing every day, how do you set goals for yourself? How do you figure out how to get the next thing done?

I have to feel a desire to write. I don't know if there's ever an end goal in mind. But I just have to feel like I really want to do it. I have to feel borderline desperate. And then I want to write. That's what motivates me. Going long periods without writing, where I'm just doing other things, helps create that feeling of wanting to write.

Where does the sense of urgency come from?

In terms of writing [*Sorry to Disrupt the Peace*], at least, the sense of urgency for me was noticing that a lot of contemporary novels aren't very good. I was motivated by that. I don't know if I felt like I could do better, but I was like, I just want to try. Most books that come out aren't very good, so why shouldn't I at least try?

My process just isn't very goal oriented. Maybe I'm not super ambitious. I don't know. I hate to admit that, but whatever happens, that's what happens. And that's just how life is. Of course I feel some urgency, like from my agent, to write another book. But I also feel like it can't really be dictated by outside pressures or else it's not going to be very good. I don't want to waste my time on something that's not very good. Some people outline all their books and they know what each scene is going to contain. That's just never how I've worked. I like to be surprised by what's happening. I don't like to know what's going to happen next.

What does it feel like to surprise yourself when you're writing?

It just feels like an ecstatic and magical thing. You didn't realize something could happen and then you make that happen. It feels clarifying in a way, because it's like something was there all along but you didn't know it. And then you're surprised by it. I think I've learned a lot about myself through writing.

I worked with Jesse Ball at the Art Institute of Chicago, and he really encouraged his students to work quickly because there's a sense that, if you take five years to write a book, of course that can be done, people have done that and it's fine, but in general, you're just such a different person over those years that the book can become rather muddled. And I feel like I'd rather write something quickly that's very reflective of who I am in a very specific moment.

Because people are always changing. I'm such a different person compared to who I was five years ago. I can't imagine sustaining a consistent level of thought throughout those five years. I feel like the book would be very muddled. It's really challenging to keep it consistent and clear.

Do you have extensive notes when you do sit down to write?

No, definitely not. I wouldn't say this book was easy to write, it was very challenging. But I knew the story, or I knew the outline of the story going into it. Scene to scene, I didn't know what was going to happen. But I had this anchor in the story. That was what allowed it to feel like I had space to be intuitive. But I could always come back to this question that I had.

What was the question?

I guess for me the question was trying to understand why someone would commit suicide. So: why? And then from there, how do you deal with that when someone [you know] has.

I've said before that writing for me isn't therapeutic. I didn't feel a sense of catharsis or anything like that. But I think I was very bothered by something. You know, this question, it was something I'd been thinking about for years. So it was something that was percolating in my mind. And I guess that's what drove me to do this.

Given the novel's sense of forward momentum, how did you deal with filling in the past?

At first, actually, I thought it was a real problem. The book, I felt, had this backwards movement. It kept receding into the past and I felt like that was actually a problem. I felt a little repulsed by it. People want to read forward-moving books, so they're leading somewhere. And this book was so interior and so [much about] remembering. But I think, in the end, the undercurrent of the investigation is what helped it move forward. I felt like that countered the backwards movement and, in a way, it kind of overrides it. It's a mystery. The mystery's going to be solved at the end, and you can be comfortable knowing that this is like a detective story.

The backwards movement in the book made me want to keep writing it in a way, even though I was repulsed. Everyone in the present is always thinking of something in the past. That's just the experience of being human. It's just being very aware of your thoughts.

What do you mean that you were "repulsed" by all of the material about the past?

Well, I guess, it just relates back to me personally. I tend to think about the past a lot, instead of focusing on the present or the future. I'm pretty past-focused. Which I think, actually, can cause problems in life. If you keep thinking about things, you can't let go of them. So in that way I felt repulsed.

As a sort of reaction against your own tendency to dwell on the past?

Yeah, exactly. I think that's why I was repulsed by it. Another person writing the book might not be repulsed, because they don't ever think about the past. I think it's very particular to who I am and just having a very obsessive personality. I mean, not very helpful for life. Writing a book, it can be a little helpful.

I think writing is an act of generosity and also selfishness at the same time. That's my understanding of it. It's selfish in a way of extracting material from your life and using that. For me, sometimes I think of it as a rather self-absorbed and selfish act, but the hope is that it could be seen as an act of generosity in the sense that maybe people will read the book and be moved by it or come to some kind of new understanding of something that they wouldn't have if they hadn't read the book. I think it's both of those things at the same time. Ambiguity is pretty important to me. I think that's what I'm attracted to in writing. A clear ambiguity.

There are a handful of endnotes in *Sorry to Disrupt the Peace* where you cite passages from other writers that you've incorporated into the novel. How were you thinking about the relationship between appropriation and influence when you were writing it?

I think that I wear my influences on my sleeve. They're very obvious. At least to me. And I wanted to give the writers credit. I'm not a plagiarist. So I felt it was necessary to note those. As I was writing, certain places would come into my head just from reading, like things I read in high school. I have a very good memory. I remember almost everything, I think.

I've talked about how it was really influenced by *Murder, She Wrote*, the television show. It's one of my favorite TV shows. First of all, because I love Angela Lansbury. She's just so good. At the same time, because of her good nature and her willingness to see the good in people, she's often misled. I think there's something funny about that. I can really relate to that, this almost naïve sense of how you perceive people and their motivations. And by the end of the episode, it's always up-ended in some way. It's subverted. She thought this person was trustworthy, but they're not. I was really influenced by that TV show.

I would love to see a series of Helen Moran mysteries where she goes around solving crimes or investigating things.

I thought about writing a sequel, but no. I'm not really interested in pursuing this character because I think that, in a way, it was a very negative book. That's just me being honest. It was very negative. It was fueled by a feeling of misunderstanding and anger and persecution. In that way, it felt like a heavy book to write, even though it was funny and I was laughing as I was writing it. It still felt heavy and uncomfortable. This book is very bleak. I guess I'm kind of a bleak person. Or events in my life have been rather bleak, beginning with being adopted. I think that can be a rather traumatic experience as you get older.

I'm very thankful, but I also find it to be extremely sad. I was talking with this other writer who's adopted and who's written a lot of novels, sometimes about adoption, and we were both just like, "Adoption is really sad. There's something very sad about it." And I think it's the separation from your biological family, sometimes not knowing who they are, not really belonging anywhere, feeling like you're just visiting. I think that's a feeling that carries throughout your life, that you're just visiting. And in that way, that "outsider" feeling influences how I feel about the world at times.

It's a book of despair, but it's trying to be funny, too.

Things are very bleak and bad, but people need to turn it into something at least a little bit more bearable and they do it through very macabre humor. We are all living in that moment right now.

Yeah, totally. I was thinking a lot about Robert Walser as well, who had a pretty bleak existence. He died, like on a Christmas day walk, face down in the snow. But his work, despite the bleak content at times, and the loneliness of his characters, there's something very cheerful about it as well. It feels very pure in a way. It's not really motivated by external things. It's just this very interior thing, and he can't help himself in terms of the cheerfulness.

It's a form of commitment. You're done resisting the bleakness and you just give into it, so you can almost enjoy it in a weird way.

Yeah, maybe it's the acceptance that makes it so cheerful. His characters are rather wretched. I'm really fascinated with people that write like that. I think Thomas Bernhard is someone else who does that very well. His books are so bleak, but they're very funny in terms of the repetitive nature of his sentences, how relentless they are. It's just very overwhelming, but really funny. Darkly funny. He's one of my favorite writers.

As you were writing, were you consciously thinking about the influence of all these things?

Oh, definitely. That was what motivated me to continue writing it. That's a really fun thing about writing, to just be creative in terms of where you find your influences and trying to make connections between them. Because, I mean, I see some overlap between *Murder, She Wrote* and Robert Walser. I don't know. That's just how my mind works. I mean, how would I describe that connection? It's something about the cheerfulness, you know? *Murder, She Wrote* is a very cheerful story, even though people are getting murdered.

She's surrounded by death all the time.

Seriously. But she's so good-natured, and I do see overlap between that and the writing of Robert Walser. I guess that's an exciting thing, for me. That's what motivates me, to just pull these different influences and see what comes out, you know what I mean? If I couldn't do that, I don't know if I would want to keep writing. I guess the parts of the year where I'm not writing, I'm just starting to think about what I'm influenced by at the moment and trying to make connections. That's more important to me than a plot or an outline.

Patrick Cottrell recommends:

The End of the Story, Lydia Davis: I read this book when I was 20 years old. Didn't understand it. Read it again when I was 34. Understood.

NBA fantasy league: a nice way to waste time and stay connected with what's going down in the NBA.

Red Apple Falls, Smog: a miniature, private world of ex-cons, robots, widows, and despair.

Swimming with manatees: if you can, do this.

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