

On the magic of making art



Writer and musician Margaret Killjoy discusses where inspiration comes from, why fiction is important even when the world is dying, and what “Stonewall was a riot” really means.

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As told to Margot Atwell, 2950 words.

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You work across a variety of different art forms: writing, performing with your band, Feminazgûl, hosting podcasts and more. What draws you to these different creative forms?

Part of it is that I have a brain that wants to do a million things at once and doesn't like doing only one thing. That is a big part of it. But the most wingnutty and nerdy answer is that I believe that the creative process is magic and it is a way of casting spells upon the world.

Different spells have different casting times and different types of impact. If you write a song, you are able to create an emotional effect upon a listener within only three minutes of that listener's life. And in some ways, visual art can be instantaneous in terms of its impact, whereas writing a short story takes longer to have an impact. And a novel is kind of the longest casting time, but also one of the most impactful forms of media.

For a while, I actually stopped writing long-form fiction to focus on music because the threat of fascism felt so present in my life that I didn't have a lot of faith that I would be around to have an impact. And that's not just because I was specifically being targeted, although I was. This is the period of my life where Nazis would send me pictures of my family and things like that. But just because of the way the world was going, I started feeling fairly apocalyptic and wanted to have a faster impact.

[It takes] a year to write [a novel], a year to find a publisher, a year to put out the book, another year for it to start getting read, and then, honestly, a generation or a lifetime before it really starts having an impact.

I think fiction helps us create our sense of what's possible and who we can be. And so it takes a very long time to have an effect.

How do the different forms you work in impact and influence each other?

I never really understood [writers who tell stories all set in the same universe] when I was first starting out because it felt like all my ideas were so disconnected. But the further I develop more and more of these ideas, the more I realize I'm going to be writing about certain themes no matter what I do. And then I realized that some of those themes take on sort of metaphorical forms.

For example, in *The Sapling Cage*, there is an order of outlaw knights who make up their own tenets. In a role-playing game that I'm one of the writers for called *Penumbra City*, there's an order of knights who are explicitly anarchist knights who take their own vows and write their own tenets.

Most of my jumps between mediums are not quite so direct, although another one is that I have created sort of a pantheon in my head of different gods that represent different concepts, and I work with them a lot.

I believe that art involves reaching into the sea of possibility, the void, and coming back with ideas in order to then build those ideas into things, so I'm going to use similar tools, similar building blocks, similar themes, regardless of the medium. As I come up with ideas, I have to figure out which format is best for those ideas.

Can you tell us more about the themes you find yourself returning to and what interests you about them?

The two things that I find myself most interested to write about are power and probably death. And the way I first realized I was writing about power was when I wrote a novella, *The Lamb Will Slaughter the Lion*, about a demon deer that's summoned by anarchist squatters to defend their town against anyone who would try to take power, so it's the personification of justice and violence. And of course, it goes badly. It was marketed as horror. And it took me a moment to realize why. Whenever I say this, people say, "Yes, the deer kills someone bloodily in the first couple of pages."

I didn't set out to write horror. I set out to write about power and magic. And I think when you set magic in the real world, if you're honest to the subject, you're mostly going to write horror because it's about power and playing with power. I'm interested in understanding how people shape power communally and collectively amongst each other.

The other thing I write about a lot is death. Less like, "Everyone you know will die, doom and gloom, horror, blood," and more about the cycles of life and the cycles of seasons. On some level, everything I write is about the fact that we are of the earth and we'll return to it, and I can't help it and I don't want to help it because I think that reading should connect us to something grounding whenever possible. And I think that there's actually nothing more grounding than realizing that we are dirt temporarily taking on a different form.

Where else you draw inspiration from?

I'm obviously thematically inspired by certain writers, and Tolkien and Le Guin are at the top of that list. I don't think I'm particularly working in the same style as either of them. I tend to try to write fairly simple prose whenever I can.

I take a lot of pride that a lot of readers who read my work have said to me, "Oh, I haven't been able to finish a book in several years and I was able to finish your books. And that helped bring me back to reading." I don't believe the places of friction for a reader should be in the prose. I believe they should be in the ideas that are being presented instead. That's not a moral claim. That's just my own artistic decision-making and interest.

I'm heavily inspired by everything I read, particularly by the current crop of progressive leftist and anarchist science-fiction and fantasy authors who are doing amazing things for the genre and kind of giving us a sort of new renaissance of it.

But I also think that there's a danger to primarily thinking about our influences being other books and even other creative projects. People I know, the lives that my friends lead, and the stories they tell me, their ways of talking, their ways of moving through the world, are at least as much an inspiration for me. So, every train hopper I've ever met has been an inspiration to me.

Are nature and the environment also sources of inspiration for you?

I think it's worth pointing out that while you were asking that, a large bee came near my head and my dog started chasing it. Yes.

Years ago, someone asked me why *Feminazgûl* was an Appalachian atmospheric black metal band rather than just a

regular atmospheric black metal band. We don't have specifically Appalachian instruments, we don't have banjos, or take a lot of inspiration from the musical culture of where I live. But I wrote that music while living in a field and a forest in North Carolina and I would walk out of the barn that I lived in and look down on the mists coming up from the field and look for deer moving through the mists. And that sense of serenity and magic were what I was drawing from. That was the well from which I drank.

Forests do have so many different things happening. And I think I do draw a lot of inspiration from watching plants grow, and from the deer that got hit by a car that walked up onto my property and died. For the past year and a half, I've been watching it decay as I do my rounds.

You write and speak very openly about the increasingly dark and precarious state of the U.S. and the world in your podcast, Live Like the World is Dying, and your newsletter, Birds Before the Storm. What can fiction do for us when the world is dying?

There's a quote by Le Guin: "Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape?" I think that story is incredibly good at mitigating suffering.

Overall, most people lead fairly hard lives with a lot of physical pain and emotional pain. And being able to step outside oneself every now and then I think is crucial for our mental health. I still read books, but I also doomscroll on social media. And I think overall, that is worse for your health than escaping into fantasy.

I think the human condition is knowing that you'll die. And I actually don't think that books have to be a way to avoid thinking about that. I think instead they can be a way to find peace with that. I think feeling that it's okay that this is going to happen is necessary for our well-being.

But when you imagine the full breadth of what's possible as a human being, I think you have to come back to an awareness of mortality and to seek out lives of meaning and beauty. And I think that fiction can be a really good way to give us ideas of how we can be in the world to try and accomplish those things.

Do you think of yourself as a pessimist or an optimist, and why?

I see myself as a strategic optimist, in that whether or not we're going to win, engaging in the fight is the worthwhile thing. I think we need to redefine what winning means. We need to try to win in an objective "smash the Nazis" way. But by fighting to win, we win.

In World War II, when the Nazis took over the Netherlands, there was an awful lot of resistance by the Dutch people to try to mitigate the horrors of the Nazi occupation.

During that fight, a group of people, most of whom were gay, from the art scene, burned Nazi records. One man named Willem Arondeus was caught, and they were going to kill him, and he told his lawyer: "Tell people that homosexuals are not cowards."

And I choke up thinking about it. He lived a beautiful and impactful life because he showed the world—at a time when homosexuals were considered effeminate and therefore weak—he broke that and he showed for all time that you can't say that homosexuals are cowards.

And the thing is, if they hadn't caught him, he'd be dead now anyway because he was born in 1894. I wish he had survived, and burned down more Nazi storehouses. But I am grateful, and I think he's probably happier that he died fighting instead of living acquiescing. And I think that he accomplished more with his life than he might have otherwise.

I am optimistic that we can be as brave as Arondeus. I think that we can live our best and [most] beautiful lives, and that we're never going to go on forever. We should try to make them go on as long as we can, but not at the expense of allowing fascism to take power.

What can we learn from history that might be useful to us now?

Everything. I think people think about history slightly wrong. It is useful to look at history and be like, "Oh, this pattern has happened before."

When the Netherlands was taken by the Nazis, a different man whose name I don't remember memorized hundreds of contacts from the mailing list from the gay society that he was part of, then destroyed the lists and therefore saved hundreds of lives, and was able to put it back together after the Nazis left.

There are patterns that we can see and watch and be afraid of repeating. But when we think about that, we get too trapped in haruspicy, looking for omens. And looking for patterns and divining the future, it'll never not be that. And so, we can fall into that when we read about the past. We can say, "Well, this happened in the Netherlands and therefore it's going to happen now."

What I would argue is really useful about studying and understanding history is not just looking for these patterns as they repeat, but to look at trajectories. I'm not good at sports. I'm not very coordinated. That's how I ended up a writer. But if you want to hit a ball and you know where the ball is, that's useful. But unless you also know where the ball was, you can't tell where the ball is going. In order to understand trajectory, you need more than one point of reference. History provides us a second point of reference.

I admit, most of the patterns that I see as they relate to queerness and transness and things like that throughout history—the trajectories that I see are dangerous. They are reasons for us to keep our guard up.

There's this quote that lives in my head by Edward Murrow, "We are not descended from fearful men." Obviously, he's very gendered. We can look back at the history of queer and trans stuff and be like, "Oh, we were really repressed and oppressed and now we're looking like we're going to be again." And that's true.

But the other thing we can look back at is be like we were fierce. We took people to task for trying to hurt us. We organized collective defense and self-defense. The fact that Stonewall was a riot is not just a quip. It is a fundamental truth about where we come from and what built our movement. There had been decades of aboveboard, polite, acquiescent, homosexual organizations, and then some people were fucking tired of it and physically fought the police. And that actually catches fire. That actually catches people's attention.

And those are the people that we come from. We come from both, and I'm not embarrassed or mad at the people who tried to make us look polite. I understand why they did it. But yeah, what we can learn from history is that we have claws. Whether we win or lose the fight is not as important as that we fight it. But we can win.

One last question: what is your favorite part about launching a new thing into the world?

When people indicate to me that something in what I have written has been useful to them, and that they take something from what I've written and find their own ways of applying it and make it their own. So, it's not like when people quote me, but more when I can see that I have been a participant in the great art of shaping the world.

And when people leave me alone about how pretentious it is to talk about art.

Margaret Killjoy Recommends:

To listen: Lankum: *The Livelong Day*: We used to sit around in my black metal band and say "we want to be Lankum when we grow up." Lankum both draws from and reinvents Irish traditional music, all the while unabashedly political and using their current time in the spotlight to try how they can to make the world a better place. So yeah, I still want to be Lankum when I grow up. I just have to fix my hurdy gurdy, just you wait.

To read: *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson: It's possible that this book is more Important than it is Readable but that doesn't make it any less, well, important. Kim Stanley Robinson took a big picture view

of everything that is wrong with our climate and started asking real serious questions about what it would take for humanity to get through it. There's no other issue more pressing for everyone alive enough to read these words than climate change. Which is saying something, because we've also got a fascism problem—but they're not unrelated problems.

To read: *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* by Peter Matthiessen: Leonard Peltier is the longest-serving political prisoner in the US who is, as I write this, waiting for a verdict in what is likely his last chance at parole in this life. We always idealize wild rebels who refuse to bow to empire when we read about them in fantasy books, but some of those rebels are alive and imprisoned by the same people who draw their salaries from our taxes. This book tells the story of real life magic and resistance.

To listen: *It Could Happen Here* by Cool Zone Media: Look, they're my coworkers at Cool Zone Media, but this podcast covers current events like no other and I have probably collectively spent more hours listening to it than any other.

To read: *The Dawn of Everything* by David Graeber and David Wengrow: I have read no other book in the past ten years that has done more to shift the axioms of my thinking. This book of anthropology upends all of the assumptions about human history you find across the political spectrum, destroying simple and easy narratives and instead challenging us with all the beautiful complexity of human history.

Name

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Vocation

author, musician, and podcaster

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