On never feeling finished

Author Ariel Courage discusses hyper-individualism, MFAs, and writing as a social act.

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Bad Nature has a forward-driving action plot but also a backdrop of ecological devastation. There's deep ecological time, and then there's the, "I gotta get to California," timeline. How did you manage to strike a balance between the two?

Hester's journey across the country is obviously a very compressed timeline relative to the scale of ecological devastation. But it is somewhat extended in the sense that she could have just bought a first-class ticket and flown out to kill her dad within 24 hours. I wanted to make sure she would be up against a death sentence that would make it feel urgent and raise the question of mortality, while also giving her time to undermine herself and resist the fate she claims she actively wants.

The main way the climate element surfaces in the book is by driving through these sites of pollution, these Superfund sites. And those are on their own time scale of when that pollution happened and how long it's taking to recover those places from that pollution—some of them ultimately are not recoverable.

Did you take this cross-country Superfund roadtrip in real life, or did you figure it out through research?

Largely through research. I've considered doing portions of it, but I was never able to get the funds and time off needed to make that a reality.

I feel like most debut novels nowadays read like auto-fiction. _Bad Nature_ definitely does not. I know this is your debut, but is it the first book-length manuscript you've written?

I wrote one full-length book before this that had similar ecological themes, but I couldn't quite make it work. It featured a younger protagonist, and it was like, "nobody's going to know if this is YA or not." I ultimately wound up abandoning it.

How did you come up with the idea for _Bad Nature_?

It was a combination of reading a lot of terrible ecological headlines and existing during the pandemic. I wrote it in 2021, so COVID wasn't at peak badness, but I did still feel that closeness and scariness of death. And then there was some personal stuff going on at the time that also made me feel close to death. For some reason that closeness to death is what produced *Bad Nature*.

You earned your MFA at Brooklyn College. Were you working on this novel then?

No. I went to the MFA between 2016 and 2018, and I didn't start this until 2021, so there was a big gap. That gap is when I was working on that first abandoned novel project. After that died, there was another months-long gap before I began *Bad Nature*. When I was in the MFA, I was mostly working on short stories.

Looking back on going to the MFA, it was a strange decision—not because it didn't make sense for wanting to be a writer, just that I was unprepared. At the time, I didn't realize how unprepared I was. Now that I do, I can recognize how lucky I was to even get into a program.

In what ways were you unprepared?

I'd been working since I graduated college as a civil servant. I'd written in private, but I had absolutely no connection to or knowledge of ongoing literary trends or lit magazines beyond like *The New Yorker* or anything like that. I didn't know what the landscape of being a writer looked like. I don't think any of my friends or family realized I wanted to write because I never shared my work or talked about it. I just thought, I write and read a lot, and that alone should qualify me. I just didn't quite understand what I was about to get myself into. Maybe no one really does until they're in it.

Are you glad you did it?

Oh yeah. I feel like a lot of people hate MFAs and think MFAs all produce the same kind of writing, and that they're boring and professionalizing—and they are, at least in my case for sure, professionalizing. But I still think the people I met through the MFA and the entree that it gave me into this world were one hundred percent worth it. I had a great time during the program even though I was still working full-time during it and pretty sleep-deprived for the duration, and I'm still pretty close with a fair amount of my cohort. So I'm in the pro-MFA camp, if you can swing it.

What does your writing look like on the day-to-day? Can you walk us through your process?

Unfortunately it's really variable. I've never been the kind of person who has a great amount of day-to-day discipline. It varies depending on what else I have going on in my life at the moment. So with everything going on with this book, I have not really had time to substantially write for the past couple of months. But when I am working, it's the kind of thing where I will be pretty intense about it, and my weekends will just be dedicated to writing.

How do you edit your work?

I usually go through several drafts on my own first, and then I sit on it for a good long while, and then I'll come back to it. I'll repeat that a couple of times, though sometimes I'll send it to friends right after that first settling period if I feel pretty confident. I have a writing group and that's been very nice to share work with. I'll continue doing edits from there. Sometimes it takes several cycles of doing that before I feel like a piece is finished. Often even when a piece is technically "finished," I'll feel like there are still tweaks that could be made. I've sat on some stories for a long time, waiting for that feeling to go away.

Does that prevent you from publishing?

Sometimes I'll send it out anyway if I see an opportunity that seems to make sense for that specific piece, even if I don't think the piece is perfect. I also think that, knowing that I'm just never going to consider a piece to be one hundred percent perfect, sometimes I have to send it out regardless and just let somebody else decide if it is, in fact, done.

Someone with a timeline.

Yeah. At least when it comes to my short fiction, I am not particularly aggressive or organized about sending my stuff out. I will see an opportunity and if I think it makes sense, I'll pursue it. But otherwise, I'm content to let my work cook for a very, very long time. *Bad Nature* I probably would've sat on even longer had Anna Dorn not basically told me it was ready—without her encouragement I honestly don't think I would've recognized that.

Throughout the novel, there are italicized sections that signify the chatter of talk radio. How did this element

come to you? And how did you hope for it to function in the novel?

I wanted to bring in an element that reminded readers that Hester is in fact on a road trip, and the radio is one of the most salient parts of just driving around. In my younger years when I was in cars more often, the radio was always a big part of the experience. I wanted it to reinforce Hester's weird thing about art in all its forms: she hates her dad's visual art, she hates music. I wanted her to be listening to the radio chatter to help signify that, and then also to connect her to the milieu that she's driving through and the element that news brings into the American landscape, how it impacts how you feel about or interpret the space you're traveling through.

Brilliant. Hester changes a lot throughout these pages. How did you go about pacing and tracking her change?

I had some trouble in the early phases keeping track of how much time had been spent on the road. In early drafts it was significantly longer; in the final draft it was shortened to just two months. But Hester's whole thing is being consistent and sticking to a goal, to one particular way of being. I wanted to slowly, through these variably weird encounters, chip away at her rigidity. Every encounter she has is doing that a little bit more.

Obviously, by living 40 years before the novel picks up, she's had quite a long time to build up her defenses, so they're tough to dismantle. But I do think that by the end of the novel, she's begun to maybe see the light. I also think it was important to me to have it end the way it did— with something that's not in her control, and to have what is outside of her control be a symbol of hope.

As far as creative work is concerned, how do you define success and how do you define failure?

There's obviously an element of external validation that I would like to pretend does not matter to me, but it does, and that plays into my conception of success. I think it's also a little bit about being true to the goals of your specific projects, whatever those might be, whether or not other people recognize or appreciate those goals. Failure would be not meeting those goals, however vaguely I'm articulating that, right?

Betraying one's vision for what someone else thinks?

I think that's an element of it. I think it's about that consistency of vision and saying something you consider is worthwhile and sticking to your guns about that, even if other people come in with changes.

My definitions of success and failure are probably only going to get more complicated with time.

What's the most surprising thing you've learned along your creative path?

I was surprised that I am even capable of finishing a book—I mean not just completing a draft but also seeing it through to publication. When I was younger I often self-sabotaged in elaborately stupid ways and so it was a pleasant suprise to find that I could carry this through various obstacles, keep to deadlines, etc. I hope that lasts.

I'm also surprised by how social writing is, especially because, before doing the MFA, I was just writing off on my own and not connected to any community. I think that, plus this myth of the "solitary genius writer" or whatever, made me imagine things happened more in a vacuum. But nothing at all happens in a vacuum. It is an extremely social process. Any time you show your writing to somebody, that's social.

Do you mean "social" mostly in editing and collaborating? Or do you mean attending literary events and meeting other writers?

Both. The writing process is more collaborative than I imagined. Even to get an agent, you have to demonstrate that your work is speaking to an issue that people want to read about, or show that you have an audience to speak to. Every step of it is supporting other people's work, other people supporting you. You're offering edits on

people's work; they're editing your work.

Maybe once you reach a certain level, it's a little more isolated and independent and you can just go off into the woods alone to make your masterwork, but that's not my experience. It's been pleasant for me to find that writing is a mutually supportive experience.

In Alissa Nutting's *New York Times* review of *Bad Nature*, she notes a theme of American individualism and its harm to the collective good. Hester's father is a mercurial and selfish artist, a painter. And Hester, on the other hand, is so driven in her own way, albeit without creativity or even an appreciation for the arts. She's on the opposite end of the individualist spectrum by being an absolute girl boss. Was it intentional to have Hester and her dad both be individualists, just in opposite ways?

Yeah, that was definitely a deliberate choice. I wanted her rigidity and individualism to manifest in complete opposition to his; it's like a reaction against him, but she winds up being almost the exact same in terms of her total obsession with the self. I hoped *Bad Nature* would come across as a critique of that hyper individualistic approach.

And John, the environmentalist hitchhiker she picks up, is such an angel. He's so unconcerned with himself or even the comfort of living. He's totally just out there for the cause.

Hester considers him to be this alien almost, where she's like, "How are you even alive right now, given the way you go through the world?" She sees the world as this very vicious, dog-eat-dog place. She can't imagine somebody like John making it as far as he has with the trusting attitude that he's shown along their journey. He's like, too weird to live but too rare to die.

Nutting's review ends with this sentence: "Capitalism eventually destroys even those it seems to benefit most." Is this, in fact, a message in your work? And if so, could you speak more to it?

One of the things I was trying to get at about hyper-individualism is that terminal capitalist logic of "You pursue your desires, and your desires are all that matter." That is the ultimate form of self-fulfillment, the pursuit of those desires. I wanted to show that as being a hollow and rigid way to live, the way that Hester is hollow and rigid.

One of the ways her rigidity and control manifest is that she becomes extremely well paid and successful, and is confident that her money insulates her from outside influences and the vicissitudes of fate. She is the master of her own destiny *because* she has money—and in this case that is not a good thing.

I don't have a clear conception of what a better alternative is, but I think that's where a lot of us are right now—in an all-consuming system we don't know how to escape, but would like to be able to.

Ariel Courage recommends:

Playing hooky to go on long directionless walks

This book by Borislav Pekić

This song by Curtis King

This scene from American Movie

This graphic novel by Anna Meyer

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Vocation
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