On remaining open to inspiration

Writer Claire Hopple discusses kindness, the problem with complaining about your creative work, and mental fireworks.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2314 words.

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Your novella and stories collection, *Echo Chamber* has moments that remind me of Garielle Lutz. Is she an inspiration of yours? When writing, do you focus most on singular sentences?

I have read some Garielle and enjoyed it immensely, but I don't know if I would say she's a primary inspiration. I feel like for this particular work, well, and for pretty much all of my writing, Amelia Gray is a huge influence. But you're right, I totally focus on standalone sentences and making every word count and don't have any superfluous description.

How do you manage to make sure that every word counts? What are your stipulations for whether or not a word remains on the page?

I think more than anything I start out sparse even before I've written anything down, and a lot of that probably comes from the fact that I assume knowledge of everyone. I think it's humility or false humility, I'm not sure which. But I think that if I know something, then somebody else clearly knows it, too. Even if it's a made-up story. And so it ends up requiring readers to fill in their own details based on the mood of whatever's happening.

I think you do a good job with the writerly telepathy. I laughed so much while reading your book. I'm sure you get that a lot. The wordplay and puns were constant, and I can't stop thinking about when the gashed boatman asks Gretchen if that mangled ball python can be cured, and she doesn't answer because she doesn't know whether he means made into meat or healed. There are so many similar moments throughout Echo Chamber. Is wordplay important to you? And if so, what effect do you hope it has on your work?

Wordplay is crucial, but that's really just my style and what I think is important. I have this inner middle-aged dad who loves puns and corny jokes and '70s music, and he tells me to add those. But I also think when you're growing up, you hear a lot of trite phrases and clichés and just general aphorisms, and you don't really parse out what they mean until later. You hear them all the time, almost in a sing-song way. And then when your brain develops and you grow up and you're on your own, you might remember those or hear those again and think, "Oh, so that's what that means." Or a song lyric even. I've always done that and I smirk at what lasts, which phrases stick and which don't. Then I deconstruct them in a sense. Playing with them is really fun for me.

Can you give an example?

I'm trying to think about *Echo Chamber* specifically. Sometimes I feel like writing is kind of just regurgitating, and then I move on and I don't always remember everything perfectly unless it's a recognition versus recall sort of thing. So I can't think of an example on the spot, but I probably could if I thought about it for a few minutes.

I've got one. I listened to Ottessa Moshfegh read "My Life is a Joke" by Sheila Heti the other day on *The New Yorker* Fiction Podcast. The protagonist is like, "The chicken crossed the road to get to the *other side*" as into kill itself, like, the other side being death. And the narrator of "My Life is a Joke" asks herself whether everybody already knew this, that that was the meaning behind the punchline of the joke. But I've certainly never thought of it that way. I've always just thought, *well, duh, to get on the other side of the road*.

That's a perfect example.

How do you edit your own work? What happens after you finish a first draft?

I have a notebook filled with bullet points of ideas, and I'm constantly working from that until I feel like I have too many. And then I take that and put them on index cards, move them around, and decide an order and general plot from those. Whether it's a story or a chapter, that's how I work. And I might have reminders for myself if it's a novella or, because I'm working on a novel right now, just to keep everything straight. But I take that and I handwrite a first draft. And as I'm typing it up later, usually the next day, I am editing as I go. If I have to stop writing before I'm finished, sometimes I edit in the handwriting process.

Then I have my first and only reader, my husband, read it. And if it makes sense to him, then I know I'm okay because he is not a literary person. He reads books, but not very often and completely different books than fiction. So I know if he can understand it, then I'm on the right track because I want everyone to understand. Then I might have to make a few edits after that, but that's basically the process.

So convenient that you have a live-in first reader who's, like, the perfect demographic for you to test on.

And he feeds me. He used to be a chef.

Incredible. So, I noticed that you experiment with uncommon points of view. In "Let's See That Again," the story's told from the collective we, the two parents who hired investigators on the case of their missing son. And then in "You Can Renew Your Vows at Chuck E. Cheese Anytime You Like," it's told from the point of view of a collective where the narrator often writes things like, "One of us did ____." What motivates you to experiment with these points of view, and how does it affect your writing process?

I'm so glad you asked this question. I think that perspective is indicative of our culture, and that's one way I really like to experiment.I think the second person perspective was really popular several years ago; I saw it everywhere. And, I might be wrong about this, but this is my theory: it was a response to marketing language, just seeing advertisements everywhere and people trying to make it about "you" and grab your attention in that sense. And so I like the idea of society returning to a collective experience and thinking about more than ourselves. Writing from a collective point of view is one way for me to emphasize that and see what it might look like in real life.

I feel like it was especially effective in the one with the parents because there was this one line that was like, "I didn't have to ask or something. I knew he was thinking the same thing." And they're both involved in this highly emotional situation where of course they're feeling and experiencing the same thing… their son is missing! And what do we want out of a situation like that but collaboration and comfort in a shared experience, you know?

Right. And just getting outside of ourselves, of the me-mentality.

What does your curiosity look like? How do you explore things?

My curiosity looks like trying to notice everything when I'm traveling, whether it's looking out the window or people-watching or something like that. It also means if I'm in public, I'm probably eavesdropping on conversations without really even trying to, it just sort of happens. Or if there's a scrap of paper on the sidewalk, I want to know what's on it. I've always been that way, and it does mean that I have a lot of

inspiration to work from. But I think the best way to be inspired and be creative if you're wanting to write is just to read a bunch, as most people say. I very much agree with that, and giving yourself the space and the time.

Are there other ways that you nourish your creative side when you're not writing?

I think I'm always actively writing. It's a compulsion for me. I have tried to quit before and been unsuccessful in the quitting just because it's a time suck, and I could be doing other things like helping the poor or serving my neighbor somehow. I still try to do those things. Writing doesn't take up all my time, but it does feel silly at times. I can't help but think of ideas without trying to, and so I've kind of just accepted it as part of my life. But that makes it sound like I don't enjoy it. I really do enjoy it. I think it's problematic when people only complain about writing because nobody's asking that person to do it, you know?

Yeah.

You can stop. You can stop unless you can't, like me. I do love it, even if it can be frustrating at times.

What do you love most about it?

It's therapeutic. I think it helps me deal with having way too many emotions, and I just have a sincere love of words, and experimenting with those is always a good time.

Most of your publications are in cool indie lit mags. What has it been like to work with smaller, more boutique editors?

Overall, it's been a really great experience. I feel like I'm talking to a friend. I have gone with a different publisher each time just to see what I'm missing, see what it's like, because everybody does it a little bit differently. And I think that speaks to the curiosity we were just talking about. Everyone's so nice. That's probably been the best part. I don't know why I keep getting surprised by that, but whether I'm meeting people at a reading for the first time or talking to an editor, everyone is genuinely kind, and that's been refreshing.

I love that about writers. I feel like we kind of have a reputation for not being so sweet, but everyone I meet really is. Like New York. I feel like New York as a city has a reputation of being really hostile, but New Yorkers are some of the nicest people. If you're like, "Hey, how do I get somewhere?" they will stop in their tracks and give you thorough directions.

That was my experience, too. I mean, reading at KGB, it was so much fun. An editor from a journal was there listening, and she gave me branded stickers afterwards. And even in a place like New York where you might brace yourself for something a little bit on the rougher side, reading there was super encouraging.

I can't find anything online about your educational history. How did you learn to write? Did you teach yourself?

So I went to college, got a Psych degree with an English minor, and then I got my Master's in Counseling. I was always toggling between doing some kind of counseling or something with English and have always loved to write ever since I learned how to form words on a page. So in that sense, I think books have been the greatest teacher, but then I have had a handful of actual teachers, mostly from grade school and one from high school, that stand out to me as refining some of those tendencies.

What makes the high school teacher stand out to you?

I think maybe the basics, those writing basics that I had never heard before, like to say something old in a new way, avoiding those cliches. I took that really seriously. But I think that's also part of why I like to play with and deconstruct those cliches, because it's like, well, I don't want to use this, I want to kind of blow it up instead.

And it’s impossible to ban them from one’s mind. As a reader, what excites you when you’re reading fiction?

As you might imagine, based on how experimental I get, I like to see something experimental on the page that feels really honest and gets to those core emotions. And art is supposed to make us feel less alone and be relatable, so a lot of that. I can’t exactly describe what I like, but I can tell when it’s happening because I’m reading something and it’s like little fireworks are going off in my brain, and my eyes kind of bug out. And I have to put it somewhere or read it aloud to somebody or do something with it. I can’t even move on because it stunned me in a sense.

I know the feeling. Are there some writers who cause those fireworks more than others?

Definitely. I already mentioned Amelia Gray. Scott McClanahan sticks out. Sam Pink. Kathryn Scanlan. It’s always changing too, based on what I’m reading. I love all the Dorothy Project books. Renee Gladman, I would say she’s probably up there with Amelia as far as influences go. I’m just amazed at what she’s able to do.

Much of your collection reads like a dream. Do your stories operate on some form of internal logic, or do you just let them do as they please?

I totally let them do as they please. I’m constantly surprised by where something goes. It really does feel, and I know other authors have said this before, but it really does feel like something outside of myself. I’m just reaching some kind of touchpoint.

Claire Hopple Recommends:

Watch *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe* and *Gates of Heaven* together, in that order.

Read Chelsea Martin’s *Tell Me I’m an Artist*.

Eat King Arthur’s Super Fudge Brownie Single-Serve Mix topped with Trader Joe’s chocolate chips.

Listen to Little Richard’s country western album, *Southern Child*.

Drink Polar Vanilla Seltzer.

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