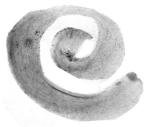
On the perception of authenticity



Writer Gabriel Smith discusses rule-based writing, parasocial reading, and surprise.

October 31, 2024 -

As told to Shy Watson, 2418 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Success, Inspiration, Beginnings.

How or when did you realize that you would become a writer?

So both my parents are writers as in the book and my grandmother, and the family, like Jane Austen is my sixth something aunt. So I really didn't want to do it, as strange as that might sound. I thought it was lame and stupid, like the way you hate your parents, I guess, until I think I must have read maybe a Marie Calloway piece in *Vice* or a Clancy Martin piece in *Vice*, and then I just read around from that because that stuff was electrifying, and all the stuff that Giancarlo [DiTrapano] was putting out. And I was like, "Oh, maybe books can be actually cool." Like they sounded like they were written by my friend's older siblings. It just felt like it didn't belong to my parents. And I didn't really try writing until I was about 24, but something just broke in my brain and I decided I wanted to have a go.

Was *Brat* your first go of it?

It was the first story I sent anywhere. *New York Tyrant* published it as a story. I'd been sending Clancy Martin fan mail for ages, so I sent it to him and I was like, "Clancy, I wrote this story." And then he emailed back being like, "Yeah, I could spend a lot more time with these characters." And I was like, "Okay, well if Clancy says it, I've got to do it."

***Brat* is so very strange and atmospheric. On the physical level, there's the deteriorating house, the shedding skin, the creeping vines, etc., but then there's the psychological element too: the hallucinations, the shifting of texts. Do you think about atmosphere when you're writing, or do you have any tricks to make it so effective?**

I had horror movies on, on silent, all the time when I was working on *Brat*, because I think the images are so great. Music was also important—lots of vaporwave, lots of…I think you guys call it dubstep? When I say dubstep to Americans, that means something different than what it means over here, maybe like Burial, lots of post-garage stuff. Very funky but also just haunted. I try to get the rhythm of that in the words while staying as completely on the object as possible. There's a rule I used where the protagonist is only allowed to have any kind of self-reflection every 50 pages or so. He doesn't even have memories. The novel was very rule-based.

I love that and I love that you were able to get away with it because I know people with novels on submission, and they keep hearing, "Oh, I wish there was more interiority."

People don't think about themselves, do they? That's not my experience of reality.

I know. I'm like, "What is interiority? How am I supposed to put more of it? Do you mean memories, desires?"

I don’t sit around pondering stuff.

No.

That’s not how I live. I’m like, “Oh, I think I’ll go do this now.”

Mm-hmm.

I think that actually helped with the atmosphere, because in the first half of the book at least, there’s no one else he interacts with basically. Having to be so object-based I think helped with the physical space.

What, to you, makes a good novel?

I don’t like being talked down to. I want to be surprised all the time. It should feel like Forrest Gump’s box of chocolates, I guess. I just don’t want to know what’s coming next. That’s all. Whether that’s to do with voice or character or the words or the sounds they’re making, just do something that engages me and surprises me.

I hear the old adage all the time that if you’re not surprised when you’re writing, then the reader isn’t going to be surprised. Do you believe that? Were you surprised when you were writing?

Only structurally. I had to work really hard on the sentence level stuff. I didn’t think I was a very good sentence writer when I started this, which is probably expected given it’s a debut. So I had to do a lot of going back and making the sentences good. Like you know that great … You must know that great Garielle Lutz lecture?

“The Sentence is a Lonely Place.”

Yeah. There was one edit where I just turned that into a list of rules and I went through every sentence and I was like, “Well, does this do any of those things that it should do?” And if it didn’t, then I cut it. And then making it not feel forced to me after I’d sort of added all this clever, clever stuff, that was hard. So I never felt surprised on a sentence level. Structurally, I was surprised by some stuff that happened. I didn’t really know what the skin image meant going in. Lots of the images, I was just like, “I like that image,” and then it kind of turned, the way things do. It just turned into something.

I reread your story “The Complete” the other day, in which you wrote about trying to affect a nonlinear reading experience. You likened it to dozing then waking up in the back of the car. Were you going for that with *Brat*?

Definitely. All my favorite art has a drug that it is about. I want to say that in the least cool-guy type way I can, but it’s just true. I wanted *Brat* to be like a benzo novel, and if your readers have been into those heavy, that you slip in and out and it’s very object focused, so it matched the narration style. You don’t really have short-term memory when you do a lot of those. So that was one aspect with the way the structure works.

I also just didn’t want it to be boring with the way it jumps between passages. I didn’t want scenes to exist when nothing was happening. So that also gives it kind of a dreamlike quality. He’s just snapping between moments. I don’t know if I wanted that half-asleep thing in the same way I wanted it in that story. I think the effect is probably the same because I’m the same guy but, past that, I’m not sure.

I love the idea of a benzo horror novel.

It’s fun, right?

Yeah. Whenever a writer gives a narrator their own name, it risks giving the readers the impression that it’s about them. Were you wanting readers to read *Brat* as a work of autofiction?

Well, I wrote it in 2019 and, as you'll remember, it felt very difficult to see a way out of autofiction at that time. And authenticity is so highly valued just by audiences of pop culture generally. You've been following the Drake/Kendrick thing?

A little bit.

It's just about who has the best gossip. That parasocial element was at the time and probably still is super important to audiences. So part of that decision was cynical. I wanted to do something fun and genre-y and haunted house-y, and I didn't think it would really fly with audiences at all if it didn't have something else going for it.

Also, because it's a Russian doll novel, because the structures are nested within each other, I wanted the narrative to be concentric circles inwards, but for that also to move out of the book into reality as well. So the character has my name. The mother's manuscript is literally just one of my mother's books, is straight plagiarized. There's a bunch of stuff there that if people want to go digging, they can go digging down the parasocial path. I think that's fun and interesting and I'm excited with whatever I do next to take that further.

From what I've seen on social media, I've gathered that your next manuscript is about MKUltra or something?

Currently, I can't tell whether I'm joking when I say it, but it's meant to be a history of fascism over the last 500 or 1,000 years. It's like a big dreamlike systems novel.

Do you use the name Gabriel there too?

Yeah. There is probably a thread that is my life in that, I think. I'm not sure. The way I'm thinking about it is if *Brat* is a Gabriel character who reads stuff—because I was constantly having to have him go and then sit down and read this thing—how can I write a novel where it's not like that, where I can just jump into something that's completely different? Like, "Hey, we're in 1990s Russia now," and you don't have to have the character be like, "Oh, I'm sitting down and reading this thing." I want that, but for it to still flow for the reader and feel like one thing. That's what I'm trying to achieve with the next one.

I'm excited.

Don't be. It's trash.

Doubtful. What's something that you wish someone told you when you began to write? Or, since you grew up around writers, what's something you wish they *hadn't* told you?

I kind of wish they'd told me less. No, not really. The problem is doing this publicity stuff is nice and very exciting and it's great if more people read the work, but it sucks that I already know that you just don't make any money. I wish no one had told me that so I could be more excited about the whole thing, but that's probably for the best as well.

Do you have any writing habits or creative tics that you have to fight against? Do you notice yourself doing the same thing over and over?

Yeah, I had a big problem with the word "but" for a long time. It's such a cheap way to surprise. Starting a sentence with but and you're like, "Damn, I'm smart." But it's a cheap trick.

How do you fight it? You just hit Control+F and replace?

I tried doing that. Just getting stronger on a sentence level has helped, being able to do that, getting my sonics half decent. Just working more and being able to think of more ways to outmaneuver the reader has helped.

But also, the last couple of years I've stopped fighting stuff like that. I can't be bothered. You just sound like how you sound and that's it.

What does your work entail on the day to day? What's your process look like?

Straight up in the morning, 500 words because it's what Graham Greene did. And then stop at 500, knowing the sentence you're going to start with the next day and not writing it down. You start the next day and are supposed to read it back in the evening. I don't usually, just because I don't really want to get in the work zone again. I'm not one of these smash-3,000-words-out-in-the-evening type people. I can't do that. It makes me tired. It drains me too quickly.

But you get quite a lot down just chugging away, and I like the morning because I feel like my brain fills up with words through the day. By the end of the day, by now, it's really buzzy in there. In the morning, you've just woken up, it's clean. That's the thing I'm always trying to carry and get on the page. Lots of white space.

If you don't read it back every night, do you reread in the morning, or do you just keep going and not read until you have a full draft?

I'm obsessive enough that it is in my head and then, after 15 or 30 days, I won't remember the voice I was using or whatever from 15-plus days ago and I'll start making inconsistencies. But over the length of a longer project, it feels like you can iron those out afterwards. I'm much happier editing than writing.

Interesting.

I don't really like writing. When I edit, I love it.

What's your editing process?

I print every draft out even if it's like seven things I want to change and then I type it all back into the computer sentence by sentence so that every single one is good and I'll mumble them to myself as I'm doing that to make sure they sound okay. But I've permanently fucked up my hand. When I was editing *Brat*, it was twice the size of my other hand. I don't know what it is, like repetitive strain injury, but it's just permanently fucked now.

Wow.

I know. It's turned into a baby hand.

Have you tried a laptop stand?

I've tried everything, yeah, but I feel too stupid. I want to be the most ergonomic writer, and I simply cannot.

You live in London. I don't know much about the UK literary scene, but I'm curious if you've noticed any differences between the UK and the US with publishing and/or literary scenes?

Well, New York's the center of the world obviously. Actually, until today, I'd never had anything in a British magazine, so I guess they're fucking idiots as far as I'm concerned.

Recently there's been more of a scene here. Like the one Paul Jonathan throws is pretty good. Soho Reading Series is pretty good. But before that, there was nothing here. It was dead. I know far more New York people than I do London people. So that's a crucial difference.

And even the publishers here… the subtitle here for the novel is *A Ghost Story* and in the US it's *A Novel*.

Americans are just more open to literary fiction generally. I guess you've got a better tradition of it. You've got a better small magazine tradition than we have here. I don't know if that's a function of there just being more readers overall or big college towns, which we only have a couple of. I've been much more welcomed by Americans than British readers so far, which is fine. I think a lot more interesting writers are coming up there.

Gabriel Smith recommends:

The Idea of North

Me or the Devil?

Not aligning your art with former cops / career politicians by calling them "Brat"

Alice Coltrane - "Keshava Murahara"

Bowie doing "Heroes" on Dutch TV

Name
Gabriel Smith

Vocation
Author

Sarah Salmean