On being open to possibilities



An interview with writer Geoff Dyer

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As told to Gideon Jacobs, 2751 words.

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Throughout your career you've managed to jump back and forth from the sidelines to the field, from critic to writer, observer to player. Do you prefer digesting work or making work for others to digest?

Well, the first thing I'd like to get on the record is that I think this will be an unusual conversation because it's going to be so different from our normal mode.I really enjoy having conversations with my friends on stage because it's the only way I feel comfortable taking myself at all seriously. It would be awful to reply to the question you just asked in real life.

You mean, if we were playing ping-pong, and I was like, "Hey, Geoff. Tell me about your position in the literary world?"

Yeah, and I'd say, "The great thing about my work…" It would just be awful, wouldn't it? It would be the opposite of a conversation.

So you compartmentalize. Is that what you mean?

Yeah, but also, since living in LA, I'm conscious that for some people, social life is just an opportunity for having conversations such as the one we're about to embark on. But, okay, now I can reply to your original question: You've summed up what's going on, but to me, it's all just writing. As long as I'm writing something, I tend to be in a better mood than if I'm not doing anything. But I don't prioritize. I don't think, "Oh, there's my fiction, and then there's the other stuff." It's all just writing.

Well, when you're writing fiction, do you feel any different than when you're writing criticism or nonfiction? Fiction is less beholden to reality and truth, right? So in some sense, there are fewer or, at least, different rules that you're constrained by.

It's more just syntactically different, but in some ways it's really the same thing. I mean, the most difficult thing with fiction is that you're moving people around the room and all that kind of stuff. It's really quite a narrow thing I do in fiction. It's always the same. It's just a group of friends, a bit of boy-meets-girl. The setting has changed, but what's gone on has really been consistent. I think writing always brings you up against your limitations because you are exposed to the limits of your intelligence, and your verbal ability. But fiction brings you up against a less easy-to-define limit.

Do you like being somewhat hard to define in terms of genre and format?

I certainly didn't set out to be a troublemaker, to say, "Okay, I'm now going to smash down that wall separating this room from the next room. I'm going to go really open plan." Of course, that's every middle-class homeowner's first instinct, to knock a wall down. I really wasn't trying to make any point. I'm not a manifesto maker or signer. But I just felt like doing my thing, and that meant that I wasn't going to stay in the usual rooms, the little enclosures that many writers feel free to remain in. Obviously, that's generally considered a good way to proceed in terms of a career.

Being predictable would allow people to easily understand you.

Yeah. They'd know what to expect.

You just said that you felt like doing your thing. At what point in your career do you feel like you got a sense of what your "thing" is?

I'm still trying to find it.

It sounds like the driving force of your projects isn't concept, but something more like instinct—as if whatever comes out, comes out, and you'll try to make sense of it all retroactively.

I'm very interested in form and structure. I'm interested in it because I don't have a preexisting box. But part of the fun for me, and the challenge, is to find a form that's uniquely appropriate to the subject. That has really been an ongoing preoccupation for me. The exception to this would be the most recent book, the Winogrand book where there was this form—a picture on one page, text on the other—that I loved, but couldn't think what subject matter would do, and then somebody suggested Winogrand to me, and that was perfect. I just really aspired to do a book in that form.

Didn't the book happen because you expressed that sentiment in an interview?

Exactly. I said in *Aperture Magazine*, in an email exchange with Janet Malcolm, "I hope I don't go to my grave without having done a book like that." Then the publisher at the University of Texas reminded me that I'd said that. And he said, "How about Winogrand?" He'd already secured the rights to the pictures. It was just the most fantastic thing.

So, you know what you should do now? You should drop some really subtle hint as to what your next dream project is, and hope someone comes to you in a month with a proposal.

There's no current hankering I've got like that one, but I'm always open to suggestions. Like the aircraft carrier book. That was something that my friend set up by saying, "Is there anywhere you'd like to go and spend some time, and then write a book about it?" In a very casual way I said, "If you can get me on an American aircraft carrier, I'd love to do that." Six months later, he phones and says, "When do you want to fly to Bahrain?"

Where do you usually begin? Do you start with an opportunity? Or do you start with an idea?

It always begins where I've got some sort of place or situation, and then I have something I want to say about it, and start writing about it. Then it assumes its form. To go way back, I was living a certain life in Brixton in the 1980s, and I wanted to report on it. Then gradually, what was intended to be a very casual form of journalism became a sort of novel. Maybe *Paris Trance* was different, because I really went to Paris knowing I wanted to write a version of *Tender Is The Night*. Then, there's *Jeff in Venice, *Death in Varanasi*, when I went with Rebecca [Wilson] to the Biennale in Venice, and after we'd been there for about four days I said, "God, maybe I quite like the idea of doing a version of *Death In Venice* set during the Biennale." Then when we turned up in Varanasi, which reminded me so much of Venice, that's when I had the idea of, "Oh yeah, Venice and Varanasi combined."

So yeah, for fiction it tends to be just places and a situation that has some potential. With the non-fiction books, they're either about places, like *Yoga for People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It* and *White Sands*, or there's something I'm interested in, like jazz or photography, and the book is an opportunity to learn more about that subject. Books have been a way of sort of funding this project of continuing self-education. *The Ongoing Moment* happened because I thought, "I really want to learn a lot about photography, so I'll write a book about it."

Do you find writing difficult?

Yes, of course. It's incredibly difficult.

Painful?

Increasingly so. When you're young, it's self-expression. But increasingly, I really don't like the first draft, and more and more I just like the revising of it.

How do you push through when it's painful?

I always find some little thing that makes it less of a chore. Typically what I do is just write, not worrying about editing or quality. Just amassing material so that at least I've got something to work with. Although a lot of that will be rubbish, but at least there's something there.

And then you find revising to be more enjoyable?

Yeah. But now with computers, the distinction between the first draft and revisions is melting away all the time, because you're revising constantly as you go.

That makes me think about what I've heard some photographers say about the switch from film to digital. You're talking about the distance between writing and editing, right? Bruce Gilden once told me that the real difference between shooting film vs. digital is that with digital, you know what you've just shot, you know what you have just seconds after you click the shutter, and that changes your mentality entirely.

I've never thought of it, but you're right. It's a very similar thing, isn't it? That whole lovely, magical delay that there used to be between shooting and seeing what emerges in the darkroom, which is all part of the Winogrand adventure or tragedy.

Do you think something is lost in this evolution? Clearly, the switch from analog to digital is a whole different conversation, but I wonder if you think something is lost as the lines between first drafts and later drafts become blurrier?

D.H. Lawrence wrote several complete versions of *Sons And Lovers* and *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. I think that thing of having to begin again maybe enables you to reconceive things, completely reconceive, in a way that's more difficult now. Now it's just a kind of constant tampering.

Do you feel romantic about writing? Is it a job?

For me, it's a life. I think because of my class, I wouldn't have had any kind of life were it not for passing exams at school and then going to Oxford and becoming a writer. Writing, however much I might complain, has given me this amazing life, where I'm hanging out here talking to you. And one of the reasons I've enjoyed it so much is that I've been teaching these graduate students in their 20s, and I've found it so rejuvenating.

That period in your early 20s—between finishing your undergrad, and the period after that, when you're starting to find some sort of vocational identity, and you're absorbing so much culture—that's such a wonderful time. It was for me. That's when I was really wanting to become a writer. To be around people like that is a reminder to me of that whole great, romantic thing of wanting to be a writer. I've experienced that so powerfully. One of the first teaching gigs that I had was at Iowa, and all of these people were so full of ambition, in a good way, not the kind of New York way of big advances and success, but the real thing, of wanting to be writers.

Many writers who talk about writing will say things like, "You have to show up every day. You need to wake up at the same time, and write for the same number of hours." Are you regimented like that?

No. But if you were talking to me at a different phase in the book-writing cycle, then I might say yeah, because once I start enjoying it, then, although I might have had to force myself to do it, there comes a point when it's all I want to do.

When you're in the phase when you're kind of obsessed, how many hours are you logging in a day?

Oh, once I'm really into it and I've got something there to revise, then I can put in quite long shifts.

Give me numbers.

I put in six hours maybe.

Are you crazed when in that zone, drinking coffee and popping amphetamines?

No, because I think it's much better to not binge. But I can put in a proper day's work. Whereas at the beginning, it's really difficult for me to concentrate for more than 15 minutes. Whether it's a 1,200 word piece or a 70,000 word book, the process is exactly the same. There is a lot of distraction and inability to concentrate at the beginning, and then gradually I become more and more involved in it, until I reach a certain point when I'm really into it.

So, it's a momentum thing? It's the difficulty of going from zero to one?

Yeah. But the problem with the Winogrand book, because it was 100 short pieces, it was 100 beginnings.

You had to go from zero to one 100 times.

Exactly. It was just endless false starts.

I kind of think the Winogrand book is uniquely suited for the way people read and consume these days in that it's serialized. This is such a terrible word, but it's "snackable."

You're right. You could read one a day for the next 100 days, if you wanted to. On the other hand, I'm struck by the difference between short stories and novels, when it comes to reading. Short stories are more snackable, but of course, when you've come to the end of a short story, it's quite unusual that you want to go straight on to the next one. Whereas you just immerse yourself in a novel. Even if you're sitting on a crowded subway, you're head can be in Gabriel Garcia Márquez's Colombia or whatever.

I've always thought of the short story as having this great advantage over longer work, because we're in this era of low attention span, high media metabolism. But maybe you're right—as much as people like short stuff, people like immersive stuff. Maybe I've had it wrong this whole time.

The other thing I'd want to say about the Winogrand book is, okay, it's in these little fragments which are self-contained, and there's not a huge amount of narrative continuity. Each bit is discrete. But no aspect of writing a book was more pleasing to me than learning how to build up a narrative sequence with the pictures. I think the sequencing, the photographic narrative, turns it into a page-turner, relatively speaking. Of course, it's not a thriller, but it gives it a slight page-turning dimension that maybe the writing doesn't.

I think you may be the happiest writer I know.

Well, one of the things that writing has got going for it is that I've been invited to very good parties.

So writing is a means to an end, and the end is invites to great parties.

Yes, but I would say it's both a gradual thing, and an up-and-down thing. Sometimes you feel like you're really doing something quite well. With the jazz book, when I was getting interested in jazz in the '80s, and I'd published one novel and one book about John Berger, I really wanted to write a book about jazz. Quite often when I was stoned and listening to jazz, I'd think, "I'm going to do it!" Then I'd wake up the next morning and say, "What was I thinking?"

Because you were intimidated by the subject?

Yeah. I don't know anything about music, and it's American. It's mainly African-American. Or I'd be in the bath and I'd have these fantasies about it. So when I did that and it worked out pretty well, I felt more confident that my particular take on the world might be of interest. I became confident about that, irrespective of the commercial viability.

Geoff Dyer recommends:

Burning Ghosts: a jazz quartet comprised of bass, drums, trumpet — okay, so far, so usual—and very heavy electric guitar. I can't wait to see them play again in LA.

Doughnut Plant doughnuts: I was back in New York recently and in spite of people telling me about this doughnut and that doughnut from some other manufacturer I can say with absolute confidence that the DP's basic vanilla bean doughnut is still the leader in the field.

Junior Kimbrough.

Black suede lace-up shoes: Why would a man wear anything else? Because, unfortunately, they're so hard to find.

Adam Zagajewski, *Slight Exaggeration*: Sort of essays, sort of journal entries. Heady stuff.

Down to Earth Session IPA made by 21st Amendment Brewery: America these days is awash with great IPAs but most of them are way too alcoholically strong. This beer is proof that fantastic taste does not mean you have to feel rat-arsed after a single glass. Also, they deserve an award for the funnest packaging: a monkey, in a space suit, reclining in a hammock.

Name
Geoff Dyer

Vocation
Writer

