

On struggling with criticism



Writer Honor Levy discusses curiosity, using AI, and being careful about what you parody.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2451 words.

Tags: Writing, Creative anxiety, Success, Beginnings, Focus.

When are you struck by a book or an author?

I'm trying to restore my attention span, but you know when you're a kid and you're reading and it doesn't even feel like you're reading, it's just like you're watching a movie? I like it when I forget that I'm even reading. When I black out.

That's a great standard, to black out. Your prose has a lot of repetition, especially with the first phrases or clauses of any given sentence. It created this really nice rhythm. Do you have a poetry background?

I have a playwriting background, but I feel like I should have the opposite. I shouldn't be repeating. When I'm writing, I do have a lot of repetition and then I go through and I delete a bunch. I guess there's still some in there...I read everything aloud, and I just like the way repetition sounds. I'd love to study poetry, but I have not.

Is playwriting what you did at Bennington?

Sort of. I did theater theory playwriting there. In high school I did a lot of playwriting.

Did you ever act?

Yeah, but I'm really bad. Not that I'm naturally good at writing, but I'm naturally okay at writing. Things that I'm actually bad at, like math or skateboarding, I could never do. But with acting I'm so bad that I can have fun with it.

Are you just not convincing? Are you bad at accents? What makes you so bad at acting?

Everything. All of the above.

Oh, no.

But it's so fun. I love improv and stuff.

Have you done it?

Uh-huh.

That's so brave.

Have you?

No, I've never done improv. I preferred memorizing monologues.

Nice. Like Shakespeare. We did a Shakespeare play in high school. I had so much fun. I was so bad.

Who were you?

I played the villain in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Don Juan. Something like that.

Did you wear a mustache?

Yes. And then my mustache fell off halfway through the play. I made my friend who was playing my henchman be like, "Oh, master! Thou hath shaven!"

Oh my god.

She was like, "I'm not saying that." I was like, "You have to because people are going to be wondering."

Good save.

The acting classes I did were filled with child actors, kids who took it so seriously. Their whole family was riding on it. They had to be good.

Were you a child at the time?

Yeah. But it's LA. You go to an actual class and kids, they got to make the money for their family, and they're also passionate about it. It was cool being around professionals.

Were you ever in a movie or a show or anything?

No. Not yet.

TBD.

Yeah, TBD. My big break is coming.

What do you do when you're creatively stuck?

Adderall, but I'm trying not to do that anymore. That's what I did. But now, and this feels disingenuous because I've only done this three times instead of Adderall, but I put whatever I'm trying to write in ChatGPT. And then I'm like "Rewrite this like it was written by Barthes." Or, "Rewrite this like Brady Sinellis wrote it." Or, "Write this like RuPaul said it." And then it spits out a parody. It's just the same story, but in a different voice. I don't know if it works creatively, but it gets me going again.

[My] book keeps being marketed as a Zoomer book or whatever, and I'm like, "I'm not even." Then I got this Zoomer translator on ChatGPT, and I'm like, "Put in as much Zoomer jargon as possible." Or "Explain this like you're explaining it to a Zoomer," and it's really fun.

The first story in your collection, "Love Story" was very much like that. When I read the first page, I was like, "Oh, the whole book is going to be like this." Then it wasn't.

I feel like that first story is hazing or something. If you can get through that, you can go to the normal stories.

It's very gripping though. People are going to be like, "Whoa, I've never read anything like this." And that might make them want to keep going.

Yeah. Or not.

Only the real ones. Do you ever use ChatGPT in different ways?

I used to, for poetry. The book was written all before ChatGPT. I wish I'd had it. Would it be a better book then? No, actually no. When you sign contracts, you have to promise that you didn't use any. And I didn't. Except I changed verb tenses sometimes just when I was being lazy. Promise. But I used to use OpenAI Playground for poetry. There was this tweet I saw the other day asking the first OpenAI chat thing what its favorite animal was. And it was like, "I like crows with bells on their feet. I like lizards with the big eyes." And now you ask, and it's like, "I like dogs because they're loyal. I like octopi because they are smart." It's lost a lot of its magic.

It's like now it's a corporate adult, and it used to be a creative child. I haven't really figured out how to use it for poetry and fun things anymore. But it's really good at switching verb tenses if you need something to be in past tense instead of present or whatever.

When I noticed that your book was dedicated to [the late editor and publisher] Gian (DiTrapano), I almost cried. He meant a lot to me as well. How did you first get in contact?

I was a Tyrant Magazine fan in college. And I had read Firework in high school. I was at Powell's Books when I was 14, in Oregon. And I saw this wall. I was like, whoa, what are all these books? And then I read the backs of them. I was like, whoa, these are different. And then I was a fan and I read the magazine online. And then I tweeted. My friend got me a joke book that you could order of someone's tweets. It had all my tweets in it.

And then I tweeted, "Thank you *Tyrant Books* for publishing my book." And Gian was like, "What is this?" He was like, "I didn't publish this, but what is this?" And then he's like, "Do you have a real book?" And then I met Kaitlin Phillips in New York, and she was like, "What's your dream internship?" Because at Bennington you have to have internships. And I was like, "Tyrant Books." She said, "Damn, that's crazy. I know the guy." Then we got connected.

And then in senior year of college, Kate published and Jordan (Castro) edited two stories of mine for the site. And then after that we were like, "Let's do two books." I didn't even want to be a writer or have a book. I wanted to be a playwright. Mad embarrassing, but I just wanted to have a Tyrant book. I wrote a lot of the stories in *My First Book* when I put something together for Gian. He was great.

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

I love going down a rabbit hole online and finding myself three hours later on some random website just having clicked and clicked. The best trait I can hope to have is to be curious.

Your book taught me things. You spelled out CAPTCHA and PATRIOT Act, which blew my mind. I just never even thought of them as being acronyms.

Sometimes I'm watching a movie and I'm like, oh, the director learned something they thought was cool. And they're like, "Yo, let me put that in the movie." In *Donnie Darko*, the "cellar door" thing. You just know they were like, "Let me put that in something." I used to think it was really cringe when I would see that sort of thing, but now I love it. You can just write a story or a book out of a bunch of cool things you learned.

Or when someone has to do a bunch of research into a vocation, like a story about a beekeeper or something. And you're just like, what? That's how it works? They do that in their hives?

Then we learn a bunch of really specific facts. Then the metaphors come really easily. I just saw the new Jason Statham movie, *The Beekeeper*, speaking of beekeepers.

Like one of the speakers in your stories, you've definitely been called an edgelord. I found your writing to be surprisingly very sincere. Do you perceive any kind of rift between how people view you and how you view yourself?

You're the second interviewer to say I'm surprisingly sincere.

Sorry.

I mean, I love surprises. But no, I think online everything's performance. Even writing, when I'm writing, a lot of the stories that I wrote in college, I wrote them just as an alter ego of my evil self or my most cringe self. You know, when you're sitting down and you're writing in first person and you don't have a super defined character.

For Gian, I would write these fictionalized personal essays. And that's what I was really interested in writing, fake personal essays filled with fake historical things, with characters very similar to myself. But yeah, I think there is a rift.

Somebody asked me the other day, "So what do you think about the 'Literary It Girl'?" And I was like, "I have nothing to say." Online, I'm going to be silly. And then when I'm writing, I'm going to be sincerely silly. Let me think of a better response. That is a good question that I have thought about too, I swear.

I wonder what the reaction is going to be to your book. Are you interested in its reception? Are you worried or excited?

I say "I can take it," but, at the same time, I can't. I can't take the heat. I mean it's like, if you don't want to get burned, don't play with fire. But I played with fire and now I'm like, ow, ow, ow. I think I'm very bad at metabolizing any sort of criticism. People get excited by reactions to their work sometimes. I used to, but now I'm like, oh my god...

I feel like everyone I know who's read your work loves it. I think it'll be good.

Thanks. Any publicity is good publicity or whatever, but I don't want to be hated. I think there's so much in the book that invites hate or invites anger, and I think it's a good tactic to sell things. But I don't know. I'm not a girl boss, so I don't really care about that.

In a way, you've broken through. You got published by a major press, even though you said things that were "not supposed to" say. What advice do you have for writers who are scared of getting canceled?

I don't know. Don't be evil. Not me quoting myself but, a hot take won't keep you warm at night. Also, don't worry about breaking through the mainstream. Eventually, they can't stop us all. Mainstream will break through us, bruh. So cringe. Yeah, I think basically the tides are changing. We are the tides. I have no idea what I'm saying.

How do you approach digital spaces? What is your relationship with social media, email, that kind of stuff? Though you seem so internet-adjacent, you don't actually post much.

I have posting block. I don't know... the instant nostalgia and adding to the digital mess. I'm having trouble with

that. I already feel like it's so obscene to have a book. I don't want to be seen this much. I have a lot of trouble posting. And I think there's less and less that I understand about the internet, but I think it's basically the same as when I left it.

I used to love to post. It used to be like breathing, I wouldn't even think about it. But now, I think maybe from editing the book, I think about everything. That sounds really stupid. But yeah, I would love to post, but now everything just feels like a photocopy of a photocopy. Now we have AI and all these crazy neutrals to help us post even crazier memes, but I haven't made a great meme in a couple of years.

When you said since you left, did you make a conscious decision? Are you like, "I am not going to be online anymore"?

No, it wasn't a conscious decision. It was slow and accidental, and then I was like, okay, whatever. I should commit to the bit and just not be here as much.

I feel like a lot of people found out about you through your podcast, Wet Brain, and also your blog. How did those outlets help or hinder your creativity?

I don't know. I think podcasts are really bad for writers and for people to do. And the podcast was very performative. It was like playing a character. They say, "be careful what you parody, because then you just become it." It was an exercise, a mistake in that.

But it is crazy though. If you have a podcast, you can just interview whoever. Basically, people just want to talk to you. People just want to be heard. But I don't know. I don't remember any of it. I'm like *Malcolm in the Middle*. That guy, he doesn't remember filming Malcolm in the Middle. Or Stephen King doesn't remember writing *Cujo*. It's sort of like that. It's cool making something and putting it out, and it teaches you that you can. And maybe that's good for writing, but for me, I don't think it was very good.

I was wondering, because you've been on a hiatus with both the podcast and your blog for I guess almost three years now.

Wow. That's crazy. That's like a whole ass person. That's like a talking child.

Did you take a break to focus on your writing, or were you just like, "These things have run their course"?

No, I was like, "This is busted. It's over."

Honor Levy recommends:

[A Book of Surrealist Games](#)

[Bernadette Mayer's Writing Experiments/Journal Ideas](#)

88 Constellations for Wittgenstein (to be played with the Left Hand) By David Clark

[@theislandgame](#) on TikTok

Parlor/party games

Name

Honor Levy

Vocation

writer

□

Olivia Parker and Parker Hao

