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As told to Sophie Kemp, 1711 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Politics, Failure, Success.



On not being afraid to delete your drafts

Writer Jessi Jezewska Stevens discusses going deep on edits, exploring the irrational, and balancing fascination with limitation. You have a tendency in your fiction to center a narrative around a historical event. It makes your work feel like an artifact of the time period. Why is that quality important to you?

I write psychological fiction. I can write more claustrophobic characters. I think that's a question of balance. I mean, I like writing, I'm interested in interiority. I'm interested in psychology. I'm interested in how the world becomes very, very strange when you cleave to a particular point of view. But I think I like choosing a period in time as an entry point to a world that we share. It's more of a way of getting back at the world and more of a way of, "Oh, can I get back at a general mood or a general phenomenon or a general sense of paranoia or frustration through an individual story?" I think maybe unconsciously, if that goal is always there, then somehow having a well defined historical backdrop to it. Maybe it's a cue to myself, maybe it's a cue to the reader, right? It's an invitation to try to read beyond individual experience to broader residences.

In the *Visitors* you have Occupy, you have the Obama years. I think there's been an enormous amount of disappointment since with Occupy and what it achieved or, or didn't. And I think when I was writing—I revised this really heavily during the pandemic—I think that faith in expressing the public will, in order to change our political and economic environment was at a real low.

Within the world of the *Visitors*, which takes place at the start of the Occupy Wall Street protests, there is this attraction to maximalism within the absurdity of a systems collapse—like in the pandemic or during the fall out of the recession. That narrator hallucinates a giant gnome. She's broke. Her life is falling apart. Things are not good. It feels like the whole book is kind of written at 11, which I really appreciated. It's not subtle. Can you tell me about that?

This is one of those books where I actually knew how it was going to end the entire time. I knew what happened up to a very late point in the story. I always had an arrival point. But this one I had written the ending actually very early on. I always wanted it to be a funny book. Someone was asking me recently about the folks that were influences on this and Rachel Ingalls, *Mrs. Caliban*, for example, another relationship with a kind of not quite human character. I find that to be a very funny book and also very tragic. She very much writes from tragic blueprints. So yeah, that is to say I did have this kind of ending in mind, but I wanted it to be funny. I wanted to have fun writing it. I think that exaggerated circumstances combined with a character who refuses to afford those circumstances the appropriate weight is funny. There's always a kind of distance there between how we might expect someone to act when this visitor arrives and then how she chooses to act.

Which is basically pretty normal for most of the book. The narrator will be like, "Tell me about how the computers work." And the gnome will be like, "I got you."

I had also had this idea, because I knew how it would end because I knew that my main character would perish by the end of the book. I'd also thought about what happens when your main point of view disappears. And so I'd also thought about a kind of surrogate for the whole book and also kind of surrogate because she becomes increasingly detached from a kind of consensus reality that she really tries to assimilate into and can't make it work. Then I was interested in showing not just her failure to play by the rules of the economic system that she's in, but where does she retreat and how do you build in this other stranger world where she's admitting all of these kinds of fascinations and impulses that she doesn't feel comfortable admitting to, to other people.

Why psychological fiction? Does writing about something so heady help you understand your own opinions on the world?

There's always a balance between fascination and limitations, right? I really wanted to be a playwright once. I was writing these 10 minute plays and I realized this is just not going to work out unless I'm only going to write monologues. I just ended up drawn to interiority. It also isn't exactly interiority and psychology so much as I'm drawn to magic and uncanny experiences that we can't quite place and those moments where you feel the world is just tilted one to two degrees off of where it should be. It's still a

prerogative of fiction to explore the irrational in those sorts of ways.

Do you feel like you've recently experienced anything that's irrational or magical in your own life?

When I was a kid I got into a pretty terrible freak accident with a logging truck and a car. One minute I was in the car with my parents and then the next I woke up and everything was very different. And I spent a lot of time in the hospital and I wouldn't always know when I was getting a surgery. I would just wake up, just like really high, because I would've had anesthesia or there would be...You're drugged and you don't know what's going on.

I think that a lot of people have collected these experiences and we understand afterwards what happened, but there's something in the moment—and maybe this is where it applies to moments of cultural political breakdown or shifting—where you thought you were living in one world and then very suddenly everything seems a bit different and a bit off, and you haven't quite caught up with what the new rules are. And I think that those are experiences that really interest me.

Definitely really freaky when life feels like it takes on kind of a magical or absurdist sheen. We as humans want things to always make perfect sense, but they don't always do that.

I think that that's something that we still notice and experience and feel uncomfortable talking about. Then when I think about what is a good subject of fiction or what do I like to write about in this form, I guess I think about the things that can't so easily be captured in other discourses or other needs of communication.

How did the book change as you were writing it?

It changed a lot during the pandemic. I don't ever know how to say how many drafts I write of something because I'll reach a point where I'll just cut 150 pages and then just keep going. But I don't really understand when people say, "Oh, I wrote 10 drafts of this novel" or "I wrote 50 drafts of this novel." I'm just always working on the novel. And some days you delete a hundred pages. It's so painful. It's like breakups, you know? If you try to hold onto it and drag it out and like, "How can I save this?" It's so terrible. I feel like I have to be ruthless about those kinds of cuts, but that is something that happened. Right before the pandemic I decided to delete basically 60% of the book.

I can hardly even remember this draft now because I know I worked so much on rewriting the beginning and the arrival of the script took a lot of work. But I think the increasing pitch of disappointment and desperation and failure to take care of each other and the sense that average people who had tried to play by the rules of the American system, just finding themselves in total free fall. I think that, being a mark of the past decade and then reaching a certain pitch during the pandemic, I think that found its way into the book more.

You were just talking about failure. That's interesting to me. One of the things that I really liked about the book is you kind of expect that the narrator is going to succeed, and that everything is going to be ok but that absolutely does not happen. I think that idea of failures is super interesting and compelling to me because I do feel a lot of art right now asks for people to succeed or be prodigious.

I think that's how we relate to people in fiction, too. Like if someone has a special skill, right? We want to see people succeed. And I think that there is something American about being in a system where we say you're responsible for everything that happens to you, both your successes and your personal tragedies and your personal failures. You create a catch 22 and then throw everyone into it and say that they're utterly responsible for everything that happens to them. It can feel impossible to survive within the system. It creates this sense of failure. And I think it also is just gaslighting.

I think that is another reason why my fiction and maybe this book more than the last takes place in these frenzied psychological spaces. Because I feel everyone I see is responding to the world in terms of, "Well, I thought that these were all the things that I had to do and I've been trying to do them and yet everything is completely nuts. And it's my fault." From the outside we can look at that and see the potential for absurdity in it, right? But then of course, when it's your life and that's your experience, it's claustrophobic and terrifying.

Jessi Jezewska Stevens Recommends:

Five things that were on my mind while writing *The Visitors*

Fight Club

Mrs. Caliban by Rachel Ingalls

White Noise by Don DeLillo

My Slovenian grandparents immigrating to Ohio from the former Yugoslavia.

The insidious incoherence of Wall Street.

Name


Jessi Jezewska Stevens


Vocation

writer

Fact

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