On taking language seriously



Writer Kelly Krumrie discusses a continuous process, the form reflecting the content, and her mathematics-based approach.

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As told to Sophie Golub, 2414 words.

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Where does your writing start?

This question made me laugh. It sent me into a philosophical spiral of what does it mean for the writing to start. I don't know if you did that on purpose to be sneaky.

I wanted it to be vague.

My first instinct is to say that it never starts because it is always running. I am always writing or thinking about it in some way. There is always some wheel running. Does it begin when I am out walking and thinking and looking around? Or when I am reading and make a note in a margin? Or when I start listing out ideas in a notebook? Or when I open the Word document? I feel like all of those happen simultaneously. Most often it starts with some glimmer of an idea that almost always comes in the form of a fact or a piece of information. I am a research-heavy writer and a learner and a curious person. I read a lot of nonfiction. As I am going about reading and being in the world, some things start to stick to that little wheel that is running in my brain.

As things start to accumulate in a pile, I start to think that I might have something, which usually translates to sketchy notes, which start to take the form of sentences, and then those sentences start to get shaped into a thing. But sometimes that gathering up will take a couple of years before something comes to the surface.

As you are starting to have these ideas, starting to write and sketch, when does form come into the process? Are you writing towards a specific form?

It happens right at the start, as soon as notes or parts of sentences come into play. Form is so integral to how the idea is shaping in my mind and how the idea begins shaping itself on the page. There is an oscillating momentum between the form and the content where what I am writing about will help dictate the shape that the thing ultimately turns out be. And the shape of the thing starts to influence what it is I am writing about or driving toward.

I am not a writer who plans out a plot in advance. I don't know what the end is, or even the middle. When you are hitting it in the right spot and you have an accumulation of these ideas gathered, little piles in your brain, it does feel almost like a transmission or that it is coming through magically. But I think I am able to create that because of this constantly running hamster wheel in my head. When I go to write, it is easy to click into that space.

How did this process look for your newest book, *Concentric Macroscope*?

I started trying to transcribe sound. I had a list of sentences that were transcriptions of sound. I was thinking

about metaphoric renditions of auditory experience and how they manifest in the body. As those sentences started to accumulate, I realized that if I keep the sentences visually separated by space, they became like vibrations or a series of echoes. I was curious enough to keep going. That form drove the plot forward.

Your literal words on the page reflect the story. The broken-up language mimicked both the protagonist's journey to identify an unknown language and the ladder-like electrical towers (pylons) that transmitted that unknown communication.

The narrator is going up and down constantly in different environments. She is on top of a hill; she is underground. This kind of back-and-forth movement of how time and space are working in the book allowed for the ladder-like gaps between sentences.

The actual parts of language—words, sentences, paragraphs—are just as important to you as what they are conveying. Can you talk about really taking language itself seriously?

I have always been really, really interested in language from when I was a kid. Grammar was my favorite subject in school. I minored in linguistics as an undergraduate. I loved studying syntax and different structures and forms that language takes. As I am writing, I am thinking about that. I know the parts of the sentence. I know the terms for different verb forms. As I am structuring a sentence and describing anything creatively, I am seeing those structures and thinking about how they are operating. It really gets down to being interested in and committed to the material with which I am working in the way that an artist might be interested in the chemistry of a particular paint or the mineral composition of clay and just knowing how those things work together.

Having a linguist as the protagonist was really fun for me because I was able to let her think about things that I think about all the time and study things that I wish I had studied or want to still study in the future. She was making explicit what I am implicitly putting into my work. What she says with regards to how language is operating is totally enacted in the sentences of the book and the form of the book as well.

Thinking more about the form, your writing has a minimalist sensibility. Paragraphs are often just one sentence. Those sentences are often just a few words. Because of this, the pages have a lot of blank space. Is that typical of your writing and why?

I have always written quite small. I have always been interested in brevity, in small moments, in simple things, and a really keen attention to language. Because I am often so hyper-focused on the sentence, the structure of the sentence, and the careful word choice, it can be exhausting for me and for a reader if I continue that for a 400-page book.

The book I am working on right now is shaping up to be quite long and much more dense—pages are filled in a way that these other ones are not. It is about an isolated commune and everybody is very close together and compacted and stuck. The sense of stuckness makes sense for having denser text. It is a little laborious for me to try to stretch something out.

You also have a visual attention to the book itself, including illustrated endpapers or chapter breaks.

I find pleasure in the way things look. I appreciate beauty. Something like a page layout, a cover, or a dimension of a book is important to me. I have been really lucky with publishers like Calamari Archive and Crop Circle Press who are interested in that too. They want to make a book object that speaks to that kind of attention.

As I was reading your new book, I was thinking about Agnes Martin, a painter who also resided in New Mexico. She paints these grids that almost hover and disappear into the canvas. They embody the sensation I have of your writing and your worldbuilding, while also sharing your interest in grids and measurement. You often write about visual artists or reference different art movements, like minimalism, color field painting, and abstract art. How does visual art play into your writing?

The easy answer is I love it, especially painting. I feel particularly drawn to painting and especially early- and mid-20th-century minimalist painting. I like reading about it. I like reading art criticism. I like reading artist statements about their work, especially stuff that is really spare. I am curious about what you can do with little. Agnes Martin's grid paintings are so simple and so clear but instantly become fuzzy and mystical. I find that contradiction really appealing.

Are there specific visual artists who inspire you?

At the time that I was working on *Concentric Macroscope*, I read a biography of Agnes Martin. I was reading a lot of Rosalind Krauss, Richard Shiff, John Elderfield, and Hanne Darboven and writing about mathematics and thinking about the representation of mathematical language in fiction and poetry. I'm curious about how artists play around with mathematical energy. James Elkins writes about precision, measurement, and the representation of the unrepresentable in abstract painting. The way that those critics and artists are thinking about their work speaks to me about how I am thinking about *my* work. I don't particularly like reading about writing, but I love reading about painting. It hits me different and I find it more useful.

They are both crafts, even if sometimes we might place a writer and a visual artist in such different lanes.

I recently started taking oil-painting classes. I now have a profound respect for still-life painting. I see depth differently. The way I look at the world is completely different after a year of taking painting classes. You start to see edges and light and color. Solidity and form suddenly appear new. My form of observation is shifting. And the magic of creating depth in a flat space is unbelievable to me.

How do you see that affecting your writing?

One thing that my teacher said (that I think a lot about when writing, too) is that you just have to believe. When you're putting the paint on, you have to believe that you're going back into the canvas, that you're reaching into it beyond. That is so much like fiction writing. I dream up a fantasy land in my brain and watch it play out like a movie. When I go to write, I have to believe that there is depth in the field, I have to believe that when I am making my marks on the paper that it is manifesting something that is not there.

I also took an abstract painting class, mostly because I liked the painters that the teacher had listed, like Joan Mitchell. On the first day, we showed up with our blank canvases and the instructor told us to start painting. I almost started to cry. It was horrifying to be faced with a blank canvas. I took the class multiple times. My paintings are awful and it was so hard. It gave me such a great appreciation for abstraction and the real genuine feeling that must come into it.

Abstraction is clearly of interest to you, and it is cool to hear you try to explore it in a painting class. I feel it in how you approach most aspects of your writing—plot, setting, and character—all of these elements are rendered with such specificity and also remain beyond reach.

I really liked how you said it in your question about painting and thinking about Agnes Martin: "These grids almost hover and disappear into the canvas." She's making a grid, which is a rule-based thing with perpendicular lines that are equidistant and appealing to a notion of measurement or precision or scientific accuracy to some extent. But they are hovering. They are disappearing. I got so close to one of her paintings the other day in the Albuquerque Museum. I always get yelled at for getting too close. But you could see her fingerprint smudges on the edge of the canvas. If I could say, what do I want to do with abstraction and fiction? Draw a pencil grid with fingerprint smudges.

We have been talking about the visual arts, which is my background, but you describe your writing as "the intersection of fiction, poetry, and visual art with mathematics and science." Can you talk about the math and science side of your writing? You have previously noted that you were not trained that way.

It really happened by accident. I was thrown into a situation where I had to teach math so I had to learn it. I

was teaching in a Montessori school where it is very materialized and there is a lot of visual representation. All the counting and mathematical things are done with beads and colors. I was able to access it and become excited about it through drawing and visual representations, like geometry, shapes, and color. When I learned math that way, it made total sense to me, whereas I had never understood it before. We also had a lot of math history embedded in the curriculum, and that was fascinating to me, too, because the language was beautiful and so strange. It is really poetic and confusing in its mystery and also freakishly clear, the contradiction between clarity and mystery. Those aspects got me excited. When I went back for a Ph.D., I was so curious about how I could play with those ideas and manifest mathematical language in a totally different space.

It's that same tension between clarity and mystery. Who are some writers who also work in this intersection?

The one that I got most excited was Gertrude Stein. She is famous for her repetition. There are some studies that try to count how many times she repeats a certain thing. I published an article on her use of counting and how she thinks about counting, which gets into the nitty-gritty of how numbers work and what happens when we put mathematical words or concepts into language. Stein writes about her kitchen and that is where a lot of the counting comes into play, as a kind of inventorying. There is a lot of punning and play that she does with her numbers.

That sounds less daunting than I assumed, thinking about where numbers already show up in our lives. Like counting, I forget that that itself is math.

With my earlier book, *No Measure*, I was thinking, how could I take this really complex mathematical idea of the sandpile model, but put it with sex or love? Can I use this highly technical language that is off-putting and difficult and manifest something erotic with it?

The mathematical and scientific explorations came out of teaching and curiosity and has pivoted into a dare for me to see if I can do something with it. It goes back to things like the body, like counting on fingers or stones or notches in bones. It becomes more fascinating when you pair it with something unexpected.

Kelly Krumrie recommends:

Birding, and keeping binoculars nearby

Old nature documentaries, like these

Traveling less, especially by plane

Writing by hand

NTS Radio

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writer