On being open to chance



Writer and naturalist Lauren Cook discusses bouncing between genres, drawing inspiration from the Internet, and learning from the great outdoors.

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As told to Brittany Menjivar, 2158 words.

Tags: Writing, Inspiration, Multi-tasking.

I'll begin by reading a passage from your collection *Sex Goblin*. It's about the actual composition of the book. You say, "I write these down because they're all the things I want to tell myself. I'm putting them here because maybe someone else wants to read them. They're about me, though. I wrote them specifically about my life. I make stuff up, but it's a metaphor for my life or something."

On that note, I'd love to hear more about how the collection came together, and what inspired you to integrate fictional stories with explicitly personal writing.

A lot of it comes from how I started writing, which was 10 years ago on Tumblr, and the way [Tumblr pages] combine information at this non-hierarchical, "everything's-on-the-same-playing-field" level. And so much of it is playing with the development of this voice that is supposed to be me, but is also like a child. There's [something about] this voice that I feel is so Internet-y, too—saying, "Hey guys," or posing a question you could easily solve yourself.

The narrator often refers to YouTube videos as a source of wisdom or insight. What did the Internet look like to you growing up?

I've been on the Internet a really long time, which is the story of a lot of people at this point. Maybe 10 or 15 years ago, that was not what everyone would say, which makes sense. I would play Neopets a lot, and when I was emo or scene on Myspace, I talked to a lot of people [through the site]. And then I got into Tumblr during the net art Renaissance.

I feel less tapped into the avant-garde ways people are using [the Internet] now. But I still draw a lot of inspiration from whatever the cultural movements online are at the time, even if I don't relate to them at all.

The back cover of the book mentions autofiction. How exactly do you define this term? And when you're writing something that's loosely based on true events, how do you decide when to stick to the facts and when to take a leap into fantasy or absurdism?

As a baseline, I try hard not to talk about someone else how I wouldn't like to be talked about. Also, I like the idea of writing something where you can't tell what's embellished or not. A huge chunk of [*Sex Goblin*] is presented as autofiction, and it isn't. And parts of it that seem absurd are things that happened.

A lot of [*Sex Goblin*] came about from trying to record things that happened to me in a diary way—but also something really happened when I realized you can just make stuff up. I found that I liked combining [fictional stories] with whatever I was researching on the Internet while writing. The book incorporates a lot of references to Wikipedia rabbit holes and YouTube essays.

I would love to hear more about your editorial process. Do you attempt to keep the thoughts that you've recorded as raw as possible, or do you like to revisit them and rearrange them in some way?

It's hard not to be embarrassed about making things. A lot of times, I write things down and try not to think too much about them until a few months later. Then it feels like I never saw them to begin with and I can actually judge them.

Some of the pieces in the book immediately strike me as poems, while others seem more traditionally narrative. Do you think about genre when you sit down to write, or are you more so driven by the idea of telling a story and letting it take whatever shape it may?

I'm a big fan of stories—telling stories, hearing other people's stories. There's a style of writing that comes about from using the Internet, where you're taking something that happened to you and trying to condense it and regurgitate it so that other people can relate to it or connect to it. A lot of my writing comes from putting things through that filter. I also went to art school for a little bit. I didn't finish art school, but my work always had text in it.

For a long time, I self-identified as a poet. As time has gone on, I'm realizing maybe that's not what's always happening. A lot of times my "poems" are just one-liners, and that's how they become poems. I do like poetry as a broad term, though, to describe a certain type of gestalt behind writing.

A lot of the pieces don't have titles. I'm curious to hear about your reasoning behind that decision.

At different points in my life where I did use titles, it always felt like I was going back to write one as opposed to it happening naturally. I just don't think like that.

I get that. When you have to sit down and brainstorm, it can feel like you're phoning it in.

Totally. It does feel good, so good, when the title makes sense, especially when you're reading out loud. I think there's so much to gain from reading stuff out loud; I love reading out loud. When a title's right, it's the best thing in the world, but titles just don't come naturally to me.

I love all the ways you play with form in *Sex Goblin*, incorporating worksheets and lists. One of my favorite pieces reads, "Writing prompt #1: My nemesis is…" Do you find writing prompts to be useful? Do you ever work from them?

There was a period of time in which I was working off worksheets made for little kids who are developing creative writing skills. And I have fond memories of doing that as a kid—answering prompts like, "What I did over the weekend was…" I think a lot of that has to do with how fun it feels to sit down in front of a notebook and write as a kid, but a lot of it, too, is a response to the period of time in which I was grappling with the development of my own sexuality. I don't really like saying that because it sounds so serious—but that's [what it was]. And when you feel trapped, or that things are supposed to be done in a certain way, or that your thoughts are stuck in a loop, it's basically like you've been assigned a writing prompt.

How did you decide to turn your toxic, persistent thoughts about sexuality into this recurring character of the Sex Goblin?

A lot of it comes from realizing that there is always a child inside of me trying to grapple with things, and having a newer understanding of how that has shaped my world. Also, I just literally think it's funny, you know what I mean?

A lot of it is also about interpretation of information. A lot of the violence or the intense erotica is about how, growing up, I didn't know too many people whose bad experiences hadn't alchemized inside of them in the same way that they had inside me. And as an adult, I found that to be so mind-blowing. The section about people

kissing their cousins… That was me realizing, “There are so many ways to alchemize this information,” to the point where I genuinely felt such a childlike wonder. Like, “I can’t believe something could happen to me and happen to you, and it’s not processed the same way.”

I immediately took photos of that section and sent them to my best friend, because we’ve had so many conversations about how people will tell you unprompted that they’ve kissed their cousins. It’s something people are eager to share.

Like I say in the book, my main point was that I would never tell somebody if I kissed my cousin. It’s not even about whether or not I would kiss my cousin. I didn’t kiss any of my cousins, I will say that. But what shocked me the most about those interactions was that I would never ever tell anyone if I kissed my cousin. But that’s what [the book is about]—alchemizing these things so that they don’t lie in the depths of intense shame.

That really happened a lot in that summer. There were so many people who for some reason kept being like, “Oh, you never kissed your cousin? That’s who I learned how to kiss with.” And I was like, “Oh, that’s actually really cool that you’re telling me. We’re so European right now.” [*laughs*] But genuinely, learning about that really made me be like, “Oh my god.” It does make you feel like a child to be like, “Oh, people can have such different ways of going about things.”

Your bio mentions that you’re a naturalist, and a lot of the writing in *Sex Goblin* deals in some way with the animal kingdom. I’d love to hear more about how your work in this area influences you creatively.

I went to school for biology and ecology and grew up on a farm and can identify plants when I see them. It’s a big part of my life and it always has been—both during my upbringing and then as an adult separately. During COVID, I taught an Intro to Plant Systematics class on Zoom for free. And I used to have a Substack where I was constantly sharing information about plants and mushrooms and foraging.

There’s this meme about plant or biology people. There’s a curious guy [at one end of a bell curve], and then there’s a guy crying [in the middle of the bell curve], and then there’s [an enlightened] guy in a cloak [at the other end of the bell curve]. There’s something about understanding all of these things that fills you with so much hope for a little bit—and then you feel like too much about certain things. And obviously that speaks to humans’ relationship to the natural world and how fragmented that is.

Humans’ ways of thinking, or Western ways of thinking, are so taxonomical and so rigid. The Western way is to say, “Something is always like this” or “Something is always like that.” And that’s just not true in our natural world. It’s just not. And it’s not true of the universe at all, and it’s not intrinsic to anything. And that provides so much comfort. It informs a lot of my work, and informs so much of my understanding of how humans behave, and what our lives are like, and the absurdity of it, and also the humor. Also, in *Sex Goblin*, references to animal behavior are used as a tool to compare parallel experiences. I always find those [comparisons] comforting. Not even in a woo-woo way at all—I’m not really woo-woo—but we’re part of something so large, that is so serendipitous, and it’s crazy that we’ve gotten to this point where we have even words to say, “You kissed your cousin” or something.

I used to have a lot more research-based work, and I think that explains the connection to Wikipedia rabbit holes. I don’t do a whole lot of field work anymore. I do forage still sometimes for people; it’s mostly just being able to go somewhere and know what a plant is related to if you see it. It’s kind of like when you learn how to cook, and you can just make anything because you know the baseline of the different cuisines. It’s this base knowledge that informs so much of both my decision making and my opinions of things, which are not necessarily aligned with the consensus on what things are, just because we have such a schism between us and the natural world because of capitalism and the specific type of British colonialism that created lawns and other really literal things that were invented by European people. And a lot of times [this background] shows up; it’s always going to be where I lead from, in some way.

One last question: one of the pieces in *Sex Goblin* features the question, “What’s your ideal party situation?” I would love to hear what your ideal party situation is like.

I don’t always love going out; I don’t really drink, so that’s a big reason why. But my ideal party situation is probably outside somewhere, with good music you can dance to, a lot of water, and people that I’m happy to be dancing with. People who are good at connecting through dancing. It’s fun to dance with people who can connect that way.

Lauren Cook recommends:

Zinc oxide sunscreen

The 2007 RuPaul film titled “Starrbooty” directed by Mike Ruiz

When Anger Hurts: Quieting the Storm Within by Peter D. Rogers PhD, Matthew McKay PhD, and Judith McKay RN

Dennis Cooper’s blog

Yesfolk Kombucha

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