On asking the hard questions



Writer Leslie Pietrzyk discusses writing about the things people don't want to talk about, the power of observation, and unreliable narrators.

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As told to Denise S. Robbins, 2990 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Politics.

Your latest short story collection, *Admit This To No One* centers around politics in Washington, DC, specifically an unnamed fictional male Speaker of the House. So tell me: Is your father the Speaker of the House? If not, what else inspired this collection?

I think I would have had better seats at the Kennedy Center if he were, so no, my father was not a Speaker of the House, nor was my mother. But I did live in Washington, DC for twenty-five years. I had never realized how much I learned about Washington just by living there, reading the *Washington Post* every day, listening to C-SPAN at night when I couldn't sleep, things like that. I couldn't believe how much I knew about the city just by absorbing unspoken things about Washington.

In my early years, I worked for a political grassroots organization. I worked in the periphery, observing. If you're a writer, you are used to observing and noticing and asking questions and letting people talk. You can learn a lot. Though that was in the 90s, I don't think people's personalities have changed all that much. And I think the nature of power hasn't changed all that much—maybe its manifestations, but not the core.

I also met a lot of people by going to receptions and events. People in Washington love to talk about themselves, and love when somebody asks them questions and treats them as if they're important. And I have a friend—who wishes to remain anonymous—who worked for the Speaker of the House (I'll not specify which one). This friend gave me a tour of the office. I followed them for an afternoon, and it's surprising what you can see as you stand there, quietly watching people. During that afternoon, I was allowed access to the Speaker's balcony, which overlooks the Mall and has a view of the White House. It was intoxicating. I could see why that feeling of power was something someone would dream of. I, who felt immune to such things, was like, "Maybe I should get into politics?"

Did you tell people you were doing research when you were asking them questions?

No. People would never tell you anything if you told them what you were doing. I may have had a couple of questions for my friend who worked for the Speaker, but I was not trying to write a journal of this Speaker's daily life—more to examine the personality of the kind of person who would end up in that position, someone who might actually wish they were in a different, better position. I could never get over this idea that the Speaker of the House is the third most powerful person in the government, and that that might not be enough for somebody like that. That they might want more, might feel cheated out of not being president.

Otherwise, in terms of research, when there's a topic that you're writing about, and if you read a lot of newspapers or magazines as I do, or go to online Google searches, it's amazing what the universe sends to you. *Washingtonian* magazine in DC would often have an article that was, say, day-in-the-life of an intern. So I would pick up some tiny detail about how women on the House floor had to wear closed toe shoes, for example. Details

like that from various sources were helpful. I don't know how I would have ever thought to think to ask those questions. That's why one of the best things about being a writer is learning to be observant and to care about details.

Did you ever go to Capitol Hill on your own to people watch?

My dentist's office is on Capitol Hill. I would take the Metro from Virginia and sit on the benches outside the Cannon House Building and watch people who worked on the Hill as they rushed to lunch and meetings and such. I'd watch how they walk, how they wear their badges, and I'd try and figure out the dynamics of little groups of people.

Do you remember anything specific that didn't make it into the book?

I was always fascinated by people's lapel pins, like who gets what pin, why you wear certain pins. But I didn't want to get that wrong. I don't know the etiquette of pins.

I was impressed by how you were able to inhabit characters with so many different attitudes and beliefs, often switching between perspectives within the same page. Do you find that there's something inside you that agrees with all of these characters, even while they disagree with one another? Did you have to find that part of you?

I always have to find something interesting about a point-of-view character. Often that manifests as something unexpected about them, something maybe uncomfortable about them. Sometimes there's a real-life person in my past with some connection to these characters. But I would have to admit that often I'm seeing those uncomfortable traits in myself.

Do you feel closer to certain characters than others, or do they all become equal while you're writing them?

My goal when I was writing these stories and putting the book together was to make the reader to feel uncomfortable. I wanted the characters to make uncomfortable decisions. At every point I would wonder, "What Lexi should do next?" And I'd answer, "What would be the most uncomfortable thing for her to do?" Then that's what I would write. I recognize that's not necessarily a big selling point for a book. Read this, you'll feel uncomfortable. But when you're writing about political things, it's easy to write something your side agrees with. It's more challenging to write something that asks hard questions. I've always believed, as a writer, you can ask hard questions without having to have the answer. Asking the questions is more than enough. You want people to feel uncomfortable so that they are pushed into looking at themselves and asking why they feel this way.

A lot of your stories are written in first person, even when you're bouncing between characters. So do you feel like that first person allows you to get closer to the characters?

First person is probably my favorite point of view, especially when writing about people who are hiding secrets, who are a little bit unreliable. The first person narrator is the best choice for the unreliable narrator because the character can say all kinds of things while the reader the truth underneath their words. I also turned to the second person and a variety of other distancing techniques, which helped me dive into those uncomfortable moments, offering some space and access to say truths that might not be stated directly.

Is this a theory of your fiction writing in general, to get uncomfortable?

On a craft or process side, one of my premises of writing is to think of the thing that not everybody will think of doing. Imagine you're setting up a story and it looks like a love triangle. The most obvious choice is that there's a married couple and someone else, and one member of the married couple falls in love with the other person. That's the most obvious love triangle storyline. But what's the most surprising thing?

For the purposes of this example, I'd brainstorm a list of all the things that could happen, even the silly ones,

like an alien spaceship invades and they all fall in love with the alien on that ship. I don't know if that would be a good story, but that's an example of trying to try to write beyond the first thing you think of. I tend to discard the first idea—whether it's description or plot—and push harder to come up with something interesting. If I thought of it first, everybody else will also think of it first.

When you write you have to create conflict. So any writing is naturally going to have some discomfort. Otherwise, it's happily ever after, which is good in real life, but not on the page. I like finding the things that people don't want to talk about or think about, that I don't want to talk about or think about, but that are part of our lives. To me, that feels like what art is for. It takes so long to write a book. It's so hard to publish a book. All of it is so hard. Why say something that's already been said? Why not try and push into those darker crevices?

I'm often impressed by all the *things* that happen during even your simple scenes. Like when two people are in an office, thinking very hard about a mysterious orange on someone's desk. Or two people are talking on a bridge and one of them begins wondering what it would be like to push the other person off. How do you choose the little moments that drive your scenes?

Some of it comes from observation, watching people and seeing how they react in moments of tension. I also do a lot of visualizing. If there are two people at dinner, I'll close my eyes and think, What are they doing as they talk? In this book, but also in life, so many conversations have layers of power and nuance that you can't think about as you're living them. Otherwise you'd be paralyzed. So I'm trying to think, What is everybody's agenda? Why are they saying this? What do they really mean? What are they trying to achieve? And then, honestly, sometimes what's helpful is just to put something on the page. Put an orange on a desk. Once you have an orange, well, is it going to roll over? Is someone going to start peeling it, start eating it? Is someone going to tap it? Is somebody going to notice? Is it moldy? There are a million things you can do once you have an orange in a scene. That actually is probably my best advice. Just put something there on the page and to trust that something will happen.

How do you square making those little decisions with the potential arc of the story that you have in mind? Do you have an ending in mind when you're making those little decisions? Or do you let the decisions drive the story?

Usually I would not have an ending in mind. If I do, it almost always turns into a different ending. I just write and write and metaphorically throw oranges on desks, see what happens, see what's emerging, see when I get stuck, go backwards, see what's present on the page, and develop from there. After a first draft I do so much revising thatI try not to worry about that early draft; I'm just moving forward to an ending. Then, next draft/s, I'll go backwards and see, Do I need the orange on the desk, yes or no? Well, there's an orange on a desk. That's interesting. Why is it there? What can I do to make it more important? Throw things into the scenes, get to an end, then go backwards, see what matters, and see what might need to be set up more effectively because I didn't discover its importance until the end was revealed.

So it's different when you're writing a novel?

I have usually a vision of an ending in a novel. Everybody's going to get married in the end, or somebody's dying in the end, or they're all sitting around a breakfast table eating waffles. I don't know how they get to that point, but I do have a vision that that's the ending of the 300 pages. With a novel also, I usually need to know how much time is passing. If you're writing 300 pages and it has to be ten years, you have to move along quickly. If you're writing 300 pages and it's a weekend, that could mean 100 pages for each day. So I could have more details in there than if I'm trying to cover ten years' worth of time. It's a different way of thinking. And writing a novel is not like writing a short story that's ends up longer. To me, they're two totally different forms, with different techniques and "rules."

Who are some of your other influences for great political fiction? Or are you done with political fiction now that you've written this book?

I'll be honest, I don't often like political fiction. I like political poetry in the sense that a poet can see a

situation, respond quickly in a short space to this one moment, and move on. Whereas when I think about a political novel, even a fast writer will probably take a year to write the book, then another year before it's published if you're lucky. So two years later, the thing you were writing about has shifted and changed. I find that challenging. Some political writing is ranting for the like-minded, saying, this is so terrible. Like, yes, it is. You put it so well. Or, political writing can be a satire and the writer is mocking the people because the situation is so ludicrous. That can be really funny when done well. But my goal was to think about the people, think about the characters, ask those hard questions, create an emotional connection.

If have to pick somebody, obviously, George Orwell is an amazing political writer. *1984* is stunning , as is *Animal Farm*. While I was working on my book, I read some of Orwell's nonfiction. *Down and Out in Paris and London* is about his time working in terrible jobs in restaurants. Clearly it's political in the sense of examining class and capitalism. That's the kind of political book I like, where the reader feels invested in a story a story that exposes a larger, vaster picture about the world around us.

And the stories in Orwell's writing is more timeless, or addresses themes that are more timeless, than most transient politics these days.

I feel like political fiction has the opportunity to be more lasting when it's approached in that way.

On a completely different topic. What are your thoughts on AI-assisted fiction?

Oh, no. I'm so terrified. I don't see how it can possibly be deeply artful. I see how it could tell a good-versus-evil story. I see how it could regurgitate a bunch of amazing phrases that F. Scott Fitzgerald or whoever wrote. I just don't see how it can pull it all together into a reading experience that speaks to our hearts and souls. But that may be because I don't want to see that. But I think it's something to be reckoned with.

Theoretically, if you did put all of your writing into an AI robot and they spit out a couple of paragraphs, what do you think it would say?

There'd be a complicated mother-daughter relationship, and people would be sitting at dinner. Somebody would probably be 15 years old. And somebody would die.

That's a lot for just a couple of paragraphs!

They always say writers write the same story over and over. When you look at a lifetime of writing, it seems clear that most people have a deep core story they tell over and over. But that's also the fun, trying to find the new way to say these same things. And if you ever felt like you truly said what it is you're trying to say, you probably would stop writing. So you never quite can get it all down. So that's the exciting part, and the aggravating part, that's what keeps us going anyway.

Leslie Pietrzyk Recommends:

This stuffing recipe (scroll; so good it's in the "about" section of my author website!). For Thanksgiving, sure, but also for dinner, as in a bowl of this stuffing and nothing else. I could eat this stuffing every day for a year.

Reading "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman out loud while outside on a perfect June day. See if you can find a hammock. Pause to stare up into the shifting trees and/or clouds. Grab a piece of grass and chew on it. Close your eyes and *be*. Spending time outdoors with this masterwork of a poem created one of my most excellent, most memorable reading experiences.

Subscribing to something in real, live, actual print. I love paper magazines and newspapers, and a large percentage of anything I know that's interesting came about because I turned a page to stumble upon an article about a topic/person/place I'd never have thought to look up or Google. For the 25 years I lived in DC, I subscribed to the paper *Washington Post*, and how I miss turning those pages vs. now, scrolling. At the moment, here are some of the publications meeting my paper fix: *New York Times*, *Winston-Salem Journal*(great obits!), *The*

New Yorker, *Wired*, *Vogue*, *Cook's Illustrated*, and a rotation of 4-5 literary journals, including *Story* and *The Gettysburg Review*.

Buying a membership in a museum… art museum, history museum, museum of insects, whatever. Support what you're passionate about, and once you've forked out money for the membership, I bet you'll go more often. Stare deeply, again and again, at that thing you love. Conversely, feel free to dash in for a quick glance at something before heading off to meet your friend for coffee. Let yourself believe you own all that beauty. Here's "my" art to view any time I want!

These notebooks aren't cheap, but they make my words feel fancy and important. I write to prompts in their pages and consider the extra money well-spent because I rarely procrastinate with writing when I've got these pretty pages to fill.

Name
Leslie Pietrzyk

Vocation
writer