July 12, 2024 -

As told to Michelle Lyn King, 2404 words.

Tags: Writing, Creative anxiety, Inspiration, Process.

On creating a school for yourself

Writer Madeleine Cravens discusses knowing when a project is done, paying attention to the world, and being inwardly ambitious.

Pleasure Principle **is your first book. How does it feel and how did you know that this collection was ready?**

I feel excited and a bit trepidatious. I think I didn't realize I was writing a book until fairly recently. I started writing a lot of the poems—the majority of the poems that are in this book, when I was 24 and 25—and I was focused on perfecting, or at least getting better, at the poem as an individual form. I really had no goal of writing a book. I just wanted to write several good, complete, finished poems. It wasn't until fairly recently that I felt it aggregate into a book.

I feel like I have a good idea of when a poem is done because I don't want to meddle with it anymore. The book felt done because the concerns and questions that I was working through while I was writing felt over to me. It felt harder to write from that place.

Did you feel that you answered the questions you had through the process of writing?

I think so, yeah. Through this book, I was thinking a lot about my relationship to Brooklyn, my relationship to my family, my relationship to intimacy, to knowing people and being known, and a lot of those questions are not as prevalent for me anymore because I'm no longer in that context. I was writing about Brooklyn, and the book was becoming the book, and then I had to move for the Stegner Fellowship in California. The book does pivot in the end to some poems about California, just because I was finding it quite hard to write about New York when I was no longer there, so then that became the ending of the book.

What has writing this book taught you about yourself and your creative practice?

I think I'm still figuring that out, but something that has been really clear to me is that the book felt very collaborative. I don't think many of these poems would have happened if not for conversations with particular friends, or people who told me to read certain things, or certain trips I took with loved ones. It feels good to be reminded that even though so much of this is writing alone in my room, what made this book happen is time I spent with other people. [Writing this book] taught me the importance of being close to others and entrusting that that enters the work, even if it's not immediately clear how it will.

Was [the writing process] collaborative in the sense that friends of yours were reading these poems and giving you feedback or is that not really part of your process?

No, I definitely received some feedback when I was in graduate school, and I received feedback on the book throughout the Stegner Fellowship from Louise [Glück], who edited it really heavily. But I didn't show the book to anyone in my personal life, until it felt really finished. I just feel like certain people who I love have really taught me how to be an observer and to witness and to be in the world and pay attention, and they have their practices of doing that have imbued the book in certain ways.

When you are receiving feedback, how do you discern what is a good note? How do you decide what notes to take and what notes to ignore?

I think it's pretty intuitive. I feel flexible with my poetry. I don't feel really attached to a poem looking a particular way, so if someone suggests an edit to me, I usually just create a version of the poem in which I make that revision and let it sit.

You were raised in Brooklyn. You now live in Oakland. How have these different cities influenced your work?

I see so much of who I am as a poet as related to both growing up in Brooklyn and living there as an adult. I think there's a speed to New York City—and at times a freneticness and an anxiety—that to me feels conducive to writing a poem. There's a quickness to the movement there that maps neatly onto the speed of thought that poetry can achieve. California is different. My life is pretty quiet. It's a lot slower. It's a lot more introspective. I'm still trying to figure out what that means for me as a writer. I'm in nature a lot more. That's a new thing. I'm like, how do I write about that? How do I describe this tree, this type of tree that I've never seen before?

The first time I was introduced to your work was when [your poem] "Leaving" was published in The New Yorker. I read it in the magazine and loved it, and then I felt like I was seeing it all over Instagram and Twitter. I wanted to know about your relationship to that external validation, both the institutional validation of The New Yorker and the validation of your peers.

The reaction to that poem was surprising to me and really, really wonderful. I think what struck me the most in terms of people responding to that poem was that people seemed to be able to have their own individual experiences with it that were quite far outside of the ideas that I was thinking through while I was writing it. A lot of people reached out to me saying they were either broken up with or were going to break up with somebody using that poem, which is…I'm not quite sure how to feel about that. [Laughs]

When I was writing it, [I was thinking through] ideas about resisting a linear progression of romance and the family that is found in heterosexuality or heterosexual relationships, and what it looks like to live outside of that. It's been an interesting experience because people have had really personal reactions to the poem that are a bit outside of the thoughts that I was thinking through, but I think it's fundamentally good that people can have these individualized reactions to it.

I'd like to talk about how plot and character functions in your work, particularly in [the collection]. These are words that we typically associate with fiction. I remember going to Maggie Millner's launch [for *Couplets*] at Greenlight, and she said that she gets really frustrated when someone assumes that the speaker of a poem is always her. She was like, "Poets can make shit up." I don't know how much of *[Pleasure Principle]* is made up, but I am wondering how you think about things like an arc or plot or character in your poetry.

I do feel strongly in just theoretically adhering to the logic that poets are allowed to make things up because I do sometimes do that, but it's confusing because I also do write a lot from my lived experience and record things as they did actually happen or in my understanding of events as they actually happened. It's an interesting slippery ground in which I feel like 75 percent of the time I'm adhering to the truth and 25 percent of the time I'm not. I think not just for me, but for people who write, who have close relationships with people who don't write, that can be a confusing thing.

In terms of plot and narrative and arc, I love fiction, and I first came to reading in general as a teenager, as a real lover of fiction and of stories and of plot. When I realized what I liked to write was poetry, there was this disjunction between being someone who [has] a deep love of story, but who can't really write in a way that makes a story happen. I see the book as sort of emblematic of this frustration of really wanting story, wanting cohesion, but what happens when you can't produce that or you're not really even living in a way that is conducive to that kind of completion?

I'm thinking about your LitHub essay, ["Queer Correspondence: On the Radical Potential of Epistolary Poetry"] where you write about a relationship you had with someone but no one in your life really seemed to understand [that relationship]. It was a relationship beyond labels and there's tension in your work that comes out of the question "How do you tell a story about something that doesn't necessarily make logical sense or adhere to the structure of a story?"

Yeah, exactly. What does life look like outside of the pressures of narrative legibility? I think that's interesting. But then obviously undercut by my strong desire for cohesion and legibility sometimes.

In that same essay, you wrote about being 24 and writing poetry in the morning before your office job. What was that period of life like for you?

Yeah, that was definitely a strange and isolating time. I didn't have many free hours in the day. I had to be extremely focused, and I felt like I was creating a little school for myself in the mornings before work. No one knew I was writing poetry. I felt sort of embarrassed to share that I was doing it, so I would just wake up extremely early and read for an hour and then write for an hour.

I honestly feel like I learned more in that year than in any other year of my life, or the growth that I can now track was pretty immense. It was definitely a fraught time, having these artistic ambitions and not sharing them, and not being seen as a writer in the world. That felt depressing and hard, but there was something really special about the boldness and intensity and fervor of my isolation in that time.

How do you balance ambition and creativity? Do you consider yourself an ambitious person?

I would not necessarily say I consider myself an ambitious person in the traditional sense of the word. I don't really desire to have power over anyone, and I don't desire immense financial or material gain. But I would say I am privately and inwardly extremely ambitious, and ambitious within just the context of

myself.

When I first started writing, I knew I was writing poems that were really not good. More than anything, I wanted to write poems that felt clear and alive, and I was aware that I was not doing that, and the fact that I was not doing that was extremely upsetting and preoccupying to me. I had this real single minded commitment to getting better, which I still feel I don't feel far from. So that's maybe where the ambition is.

What about your relationship to self-doubt?

I try to be patient with myself. I just try to write a lot and I would say 75 percent of what I write, I discard. I don't delete it, but I just put it in a file somewhere and never look at it again. For every poem that is in this book, there are probably 30 other poems that never saw the light of day. I hate the feeling of writing a poem and not liking it and not feeling like it's doing what I want it to do or evoking what I want it to evoke. It's a horrible feeling, but I think it has to be balanced with patience and a trust that something will eventually come. I doubt myself all the time. I'm maybe not the best person to ask.

I don't know. I think someone who doubts themself all the time but then finds a way through that doubt is the right person to ask. I have a good friend who has almost no self-doubt surrounding their work. I'm always in awe of her, but I'll call her up when I'm feeling insecure and she'll be like, "Just don't think about it!" which is not advice that I find to be particularly helpful.

People like that, I really respect. For me, I can't imagine not hating myself or my work a little bit. It feels necessary to the force that makes me keep writing. If I were in a place where I really felt like I had done something perfect or perfectly, I don't know where the drive to go on would be.

Do you have any poems of yours that you read and you're like, "Oh, this is perfect"?

"Leaving" came out really easily. It came out exactly like that, and I do think the music to that poem feels correct and did not take much effort. But I sat around for a year and waited for that poem to happen, so I think a lot of it is just waiting.

There's one poem in *Pleasure Principle* where a person named Joe is telling the speaker that they shouldn't apologize for their obsessions because they're entertaining. What are your obsessions? Are they different from the obsessions that you had while writing this collection?

In California, I don't really feel close to an obsessive mindset. My lifestyle here isn't conducive to obsession. I love being obsessed, but as of now, I feel more like I'm in a state of enjoyment or interest rather than intense fixation. But in New York, I was close to many obsessions. I was absolutely obsessed with running. I was obsessed with reading all these books about urban planning and New York City history. I was obsessed with someone who was not available to me. I had many of these things that I would think about for hours on end.

Obsessions do eat you alive, but I always find it a little bit sad when I'm no longer obsessed with something or someone I was once obsessed with.

Yeah, when you're in that deep obsessive state, it feels like it will never end, and then it almost always does. It has to. It's not sustainable to continue living like that. My past obsessions are almost unrecognizable to me.

Madeleine Cravens recommends

"A book with a hole in it," Kamelya Omayma Youssef

B. Chehayeb's paintings

Yael Malka's photographs of Riis Beach

Astoria Seafood

The Bolinas Ridge Trail on a clear day

Name
Madeleine Cravens

Vocation
writer, poet

Fact

Yael Malka

Related to Writer Madeleine Cravens on creating a school for yourself:

- Poet Emily Zuberec on finding the shape of what you want to say
- Poet and essayist Jenny Sadre-Orafai on getting outside of yourself
- Poet Maggie Millner on making sure to prioritize your needs

↑