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As told to Loré Yessuff, 2710 words.

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On prioritizing inspirational relationships over professional connections

Writer Maya Binyam discusses juggling day jobs, building a creative community, and discovering new forms of success.

Your debut novel, *Hangman*, recently came out. What's been the most surprising thing about the book publishing process?

When I was writing the book, I was so immersed in the experience of writing it, so much so that I wasn't necessarily anticipating it becoming a book. I'm discovering through this process that I'm really motivated by the day-to-day animations that happen through the experience of writing. That's where I feel energy and life.

I had published a number of magazine articles and essays over the years, so I was familiar with the strangeness of working on something in private and then releasing it to the broader public. However, I wasn't sure how I was going to feel about other people reading the book and if I was going to find other people's readings of the book to be motivating and animating in the same way that I found the writing. It's been immensely pleasurable to have other people reading the book alongside me. It's helped me understand the book retrospectively. And though I've been grateful for the process of publication and the various structures around it for enabling a community around the book, they aren't particularly galvanizing for me.

So, you're saying the success of the book or the metrics around the book, they're not as validating to you as you thought they would be?

Yeah, and there's something completely liberating in that, too. It would actually be very depressing to me if I found them to be validating, and if I found them more motivating than the process of writing. I've been relieved by how little those things have tended to matter in terms of structuring my mood. Even when good news happens, I still feel lethargic or crazy, or bored, or whatever.

Are you saying writing a book didn't change your life? [laughs]

No.

I don't know if that's supposed to be really exciting or really sad.

Well, it has changed my life in significant ways. I always, up until this point, have worked a full-time job and then freelance jobs on the side, and the pressures, at least for now, to work full-time, have been alleviated by selling a book. So, that has meaningfully changed my life, in terms of how I feel about myself.

I'm curious to hear more about your life prior to writing the book. What was it like having a full-time job while also juggling a bunch of freelance responsibilities? I feel like this is something that a lot of writers, journalists, and artists of all kinds have to contend with. What was your experience with that like?

It was really difficult. Initially, I started working in the fields of publishing and writing when I was in my early 20s, I worked a full-time job that did not pay very well and also did not satisfy my creative or intellectual interests. So, I sought that satisfaction in other kinds of work, some of which were paid and some of which only satisfied my need for extra income. I tutored on the side. I had a ghostwriting gig for a bit. I also taught as an adjunct for a while, and I took on things that were not paid.

It was always difficult; the need for a full-time job, and then to work multiple jobs on top of that was very taxing. I certainly had more energy for it when I was greener. I don't know if it was because I was younger or because I was more naïve or wide-eyed. I don't think I had a sense of how hard I was working, and how that hard work was also detrimental to other things I cared about in my life, like, I don't know, my friendships.

It wasn't just taxing physically; it also really structured my life around work in a way that didn't allow my world to flourish in the way that I wanted it to. But I don't know, I'm ultimately grateful that I did seek things out outside of my day-to-day professional life because I think it was those connections—with other people who were also working full-time jobs—that gave me a sense of hope. I wish it hadn't been the case that I had to do that. And I still have that mentality, not just that mentality, but my reality is still that I have to cobble a bunch of different kinds of things together in order to ensure I'm making ends meet.

You said you're not really sure how you were able to muster the energy at the time, and I wonder if that's because everyone else was doing it. I feel like a few years ago, it was the norm to have a full-time job and then work after work, and juggle a bunch of things. I mean, people still do it now, but I think there's more awareness of how we shouldn't be doing that. Whereas in, like, 2015, the "in" mentality was that everyone should hustle and hustle and hustle.

Totally. Also, the revitalization of the labor movement in [the media] industry had not taken hold yet. And I don't mean to paint a totally naive retrospective image of myself, but I do think I emerged from college and knew that I needed a job, and any amount of money basically sounded okay to me, even if it wasn't right, even if I had some burgeoning sense of the ways in which my labor was being exploited. I wasn't angry yet, and if I was angry, I didn't feel like there was a structure, at least in my workplace, to enable that anger to connect me to other people. I felt isolated in that anger initially, and I hope now that in the industry, people don't feel so alone, even if their workplace isn't unionized.

I do think what you're saying is true. There's some sense that not only are the labor conditions fucked up, but there are things that can be done about it. Whereas when I entered the workforce, bosses were telling me, "In this job, you're going to have to work overtime, and you're not going to be able to bill for overtime, even though that's illegal. That's just the culture here." And sure, it's still happening, but I hope that people aren't buying into that lie so easily, as it seemed like my peers were at that time.

I don't think as many people are. There are memes about bosses being bad bosses, and corporations and capitalism. Even people who may not have a very good analysis of labor or capitalism, they're engaging with those ideas about how capitalism sucks. So, that makes me feel a little hopeful. Does it make you feel hopeful?

Yeah, it does make me feel hopeful. The popularization of an anti-capitalist analysis of work has been really exciting. I wasn't without that analysis, but I didn't feel like I had the means to do anything.

Maybe it felt a little bit more abstract?

It's not that it felt abstract. I think that for a long time, people in the industry had been encouraged to fend for themselves. That's still the case, obviously, and people are starting to counteract that narrative, that individuals within the workplace are atomized by modeling the ways in which they can actually come together. But I really felt the entrenchment of that narrative. A lot of the people in my particular workplace were more self-protecting, and I understand that, of course. But without any communal structure, there are individuals who are going to be headstrong and outspoken, and there are going to be individuals who take a different tactic.

It's tricky. Everyone has different reactions to it, to their working conditions.

Yeah, and they're all valid.

You've worked with a lot of indie presses and outlets like Triple Canopy and *The New Inquiry*. What was it like working with a Big Five for your book?

It was a really pleasant experience as the writer. It was really wonderful. My editor, Mitzi, is a brilliant editor. She provided notes on the manuscript that were very smart and helped the manuscript become more robustly what it was always trying to become. And that type of editing, I know from working as an editor, can be the most pleasurable editing, and it's also very difficult. She offered notes on the manuscript that I found almost undetectable, and yet they played a big role in helping to shape it. So, it was genuinely a very, very pleasurable experience. I found at every step, people seemed to understand my work and were able to position it in a way that helped it get into the hands of people who would likewise understand it. So, there was seamlessness there, at least from my perspective, that I was really surprised by and delighted by. I also used to work at FSG as an editorial assistant.

Oh, funny.

It was fascinating to be on the other side of that. Things that may seem as if they happen on their own are, in fact, happening because oftentimes, assistants—people who are at the bottom of the publishing hierarchy—are working very long hours and working tasks that can be thankless. When I was doing that work, I found it very frustrating. I loved working with authors but doing the various project management things that are necessary for a book to get made, I found very difficult. And I think I survived in that job because—well, I don't want to indict myself, but I did survive that job, in part because I was able to steal time away from it and work on the things that I found nourishing. I guess it worked out for everyone in the end because I sold the novel. [laughs]

But there can be a huge discrepancy between the experience of working at these places as an assistant and producing work for them as an author. I wish that discrepancy didn't exist, and I wish that more authors were aware of the behind-the-scenes and the undervalued work that's going into producing their books, which wind up looking to the public like a singly authored work when in fact, it's not. It's intensely collaborative, and oftentimes the collaborators aren't credited in the way that they should be.

I haven't personally worked in book publishing, but I have a lot of friends who are currently working in it, or who have recently left because of the working conditions. And that's a big grievance I hear from my friends. Even the authors who claim to be the most, I don't know, politically righteous, have no awareness of how to treat workers, specifically assistants. And it's really surprising that some really talented writers can be really shitty to assistants.

They're probably conditioned to believe that they're the centers of the universe when it comes to the production of their own work. But it is just really unfortunate. I remember when I was an assistant, I was a horrible assistant. It was difficult work and thankless work, but I was also bad at it, in part because I didn't care about a lot of the things that I had to do, like filing my boss's expenses or whatever. I was like, "I can't believe I have to spend my time doing this." Not necessarily because I thought I was above it, but because I couldn't believe a world in which someone couldn't file their own expenses.

How do you go about defining the creative and writing community in these very precarious times and navigating it? I know you used to live in New York, and now you live in LA, and both of those places are notorious for having very sceney, exclusive creative communities, especially New York with the writing scene. How do you go about navigating the ickiness?

Yeah, it's tricky. I haven't been particularly invested in the social circles that crop up by virtue of the fact that people are invested in having the same kind of career. I assume that people want to be around other writers or editors because they're schooled in the same kind of professional culture, but I've never really cared about that. I actually have found it very unhelpful. And I feel like that's often where a kind of exclusivity gets germinated. That's also where the hierarchical structures of professional life get reproduced socially. I've always been allergic to that, but I have sought out a creative community that relies on not necessarily stylistic similarity or even genre overlap, but a willingness to produce hope in each other, and I found that mostly in spaces where money doesn't really have a role to play in things.

You articulated something really poignant, especially when you said that the professional hierarchy can duplicate itself in non-professional circles. I guess that's what is so icky about creative community, and I never really thought about it that way.

I think people develop a shallow attachment to those professional connections, just because, in the short-term, they can boost your ego, but they're empty and take meaning out of life. So, ultimately, I don't think it's particularly helpful to rely on them. I'm always confused when people start new magazines, for example, why they have assistant editors and why they have interns.

That's so true. I never thought about that. What do you consider a meaningful way of making friends or thinking about art in a world full of such vapidness? What is meaningful and nourishing to you?

Oh, I don't know. I guess it's true for me that, whether I'm trying to forge new friendships or forge community around art making, what feels important to me are connections that yield new thinking and new challenges. A lot of people seek out relationships with others that confirm their social position in the world. That can be incredibly helpful if you are someone who is oppressed and is seeking out solidarity. I don't mean to argue against that, but even within networks of solidarity, new and deeper thinking has to be produced. And it's so hard to articulate because I certainly don't mean to make a trite statement about how people should be seeking out the opinions of people across the political divide. I don't find that nourishing or helpful in my day-to-day life. I find it incredibly frustrating. But I don't know, it's hard to find people, I think, that dare you to act on impulses that might seem marginal or unimportant in the dominant political or creative climate. And yet, that feels very important to me, and that does feel like it produces meaning.

I think there are relationships that people have that actually repress a desire to create or that produce anxiety or competitiveness or whatever. I think almost everyone knows what it feels like when you have a friend or collaborator who enables you to express yourself and just create something new in the world.

People often talk about networking with people who hold some kind of social or professional power, but the most productive, and I mean productive not in the sinister sense, but in the literal sense, the most productive connections I've made with people are with people who I'm inspired by, and who enable the creative impulse in me. And not all relationships are like that.

Maya Binyam Recommends:

Keeping a dream journal. I find mine painfully boring to write and re-read, but it makes for better dreams.

The album *Sons of Ethiopia* by Admas, and in particular the song "Astawesalehu."

Veganism.

I like to keep cloves, cardamom, and cinnamon sticks in my teakettle, especially in the colder months-- something I learned from my stepmother. You can drain the water, add more, and drain it again: the spices will continue to flavor it, and your tea.

G by John Berger. I read it when I was nineteen, and I don't remember it at all, but it initiated a series of big changes in my writing life, and I'm attached to those changes.

Name


Maya Binyam


Vocation


writer

Fact

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