

On documenting your entire life in your creative work



Writer Megan Boyle details the process by which her experimental liveblog eventually turned into a novel and discusses the ways in which writing and documenting our own interior lives can help or harm us.

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As told to Willis Plummer, 2928 words.

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Can you explain LIVEBLOG?

It's an experiment I did in 2013 when I was feeling at my wit's end—I was tired of the way I was living and not really motivated to write. There was a problem with myself that I didn't understand and I thought part of it had to do with not putting myself out there enough in my personal life. Liveblogging seemed like a good way to force myself to do it because I also have problems with self-discipline. The idea was to liveblog everything that I could think of on a relatively constant basis.

When you say "on a constant basis," would you be doing stuff and then stop to take notes on your phone or to post?

That's part of it. It wasn't really regulated. In my head when I started it, I was just like "I'm gonna do everything. I just want to put my entire consciousness in a document." But I found out that's impossible. I would take notes on my phone, but the times start to not make sense because a lot of it is just me in my room or somewhere, writing and thinking.

In some of the parts I've read, you're narrating about driving your car. Were you writing at the same time?

Yeah, I can't believe I did that [laughs]. I was pretty good at it, too, but I did get pulled over once for using my cellphone while driving. When I use capitalization it's because I typed those parts on my phone, but some of that would just be me in a parking spot. Or my phone would be closer to my body than the computer.

How long did you end up liveblogging?

I did it from March 17, 2013 to September 1, 2013.

At what point in that process did you decide, or realize, that you were working on something that was going to be "art?"

Early on. In March I had the idea that I was just going to continue doing this for the rest of my life. It seemed like it hadn't been done before. That's what began to excite me, and what kept me going, really, throughout the whole thing—that I'd just do this for my whole life, and that would be the "art" of it.

When did you decide to turn it into a book?

I think in the spring of 2014 sometime. Gian [DiTrapano] asked if I wanted to publish it with Tyrant and I said "yeah" and made tentative plans to take a break from the relationship I was in in New York, go to my parents' house, and just focus on editing *LIVEBLOG*. Then I totally lost it. I got really depressed and the project got put on hold until about April 2017.

Had you thought of publishing it as a book before Gian asked you to?

During the summer of 2013 I started thinking maybe that's what could be done with it. Around then it had started to seem like I wouldn't be able to keep liveblogging forever.

Would you describe *LIVEBLOG* as a novel? Or a blog?

It's a novel. It's gonna say "a novel" on the cover.

What does it mean to you—for it to be a novel?

Well, for one, I had to call it something, because it's basically a genre-less sort of thing. But, I would've been happy just calling it... what it was. It's not really important to me, what it's called. It is a novel in the sense that I made a story by seeking out narrative elements in my life and linking them together. Whether that's based on "true facts" is kind of irrelevant, because I think truth is in both nonfiction and fiction.

Sometimes when people talk about autobiographical novels, it seems like authors can get frustrated when the line is blurred between them as an individual and the character(s) in the book. For example, if I was referencing your book and I said, "And then you did this," you might say, "No, that's a character named 'Megan.'" Do you feel like that's an important distinction?

Not to me at all, really. But, I feel like for some people making that distinction is something they enjoy. It's just a different way of looking at it, but I don't quite understand it. It seems very "MFA-y." What do you think about that?

I have a hard time with it, too. I feel like I always want to respect how people want their book to be talked about, but it can be hard. Sheila Heti's new book *Motherhood* is focused on a first-person character named "Sheila" who's written six books, and there are pictures that she took in the book with captions like "Sheila Heti: the person's hands." And it's a novel.

It just seems like anything can be a novel. I mean, a novel to me is just kinda one complete thought linked together with scenes. *Motherhood* is about her decisions on whether or not to be a mom, right? I feel like you could just call it whatever you want.

You've written two books and they both have "blog" in the title. What does blogging mean to you? Also, what does blogging mean once it's taken off the internet and turned into a physical object like a book?

It's so weird. I've thought about how it almost seems like chance that they both contain the word "blog," but I think it's really sweet. But what "blogging" means to me... it was always a tentative activity for me, experimental and low-pressure. I've been pretty down on myself lately for the way I've handled my writing. I've always been really scared to put myself out there, and I feel like I've gotten lucky in terms of people wanting these things I've written to be books. I'd like to try and be more intentional about something in the future.

When you were maintaining the liveblog, were you thinking about your readers? I recently tried to blog about my life and I was always very aware of who I imagined reading it at any given time.

Definitely. I kinda write about that in *LIVEBLOG*—who I imagine as my reader. In the past I would get anxious

about "actual people" reading my blog, and that's probably why I've had so many unpublished blogs. But with *LIVEBLOG* I started to just imagine my reader as "somebody." Not necessarily somebody I'd want to be with romantically, but something like that. Some kind of benevolent, loving "thing" that understood me. Sometimes I'd get anxious because I'd start to think, "Oh! What if people are reading it!" But I checked StatCounter a lot back then, so I kind of knew.

Do you feel like you'd recommend blogging to someone who wanted to be a writer but couldn't make themselves do it?

Maybe. I'd recommend liveblogging within a time constraint. Maybe a week or something. I actually originally thought I was only going to liveblog for a week, and then I just kept going.

When I heard you were publishing *LIVEBLOG*, I honestly thought... but who needs it in a book? It's already on the internet. Did you ever have the fear that you were recycling stuff?

Totally. That's actually one of my biggest anxieties about it now. I've spent enough time working on it that it's different enough from what was originally out there. But, I think that's also partially what caused me to lose interest in editing it. I was just like, "Who cares?" That thought is poison, though. The great thing about saying "Who cares?" is you're always right—no one will care unless you want them to care. After enough time went by I realized I did care about this crazy thing I did, and I wanted to share it with the world again, and owed it to myself to share a better version of it. I also think it'd be so cool to hold it as a unit. Although I kind of hate when people are like, "Oh, I just love to hold a book!" I don't really geek out about the "feel of a book," but the weight of the internet is cool.

The book starts with a pretty literary opening passage. You state that your intention for writing *LIVEBLOG* is to motivate yourself to fix the thing that's wrong with you. Do you think editing and publishing the book version is part of that same goal? What do you want other people to get out of it?

I eventually did kind of figure out all the shit I wanted to, but I did it privately over the course of about five years. I'm still figuring stuff out. I used to read it and it would make me so sad. I felt so alone. I feel like it's a cliché to say this, but I really want people to feel less alone. I guess I just want to reach people. Because also, it didn't work. It failed. And it's pretty obvious to me now why it failed—I just never had intention with anything I was doing. I didn't have a focus. And I feel like a lot of people could be living like that and thinking, "Why do I keep missing the mark?" This is an example of somebody missing the mark.

Whenever I've found myself in a dark place on Twitter or something, I feel like the medium would reinforce it. Like I'd be trying to be dark so I could tweet about it. Did you feel like that was part of why it failed, or did you just feel like you couldn't be intentional?

I've always been curious about that dark part of myself because I haven't really understood it. I feel like I'm always trying to keep it from other people, which used to cause me social anxiety. Like, "Oh, I can't just be who I am all the time because I'm fucking dark." But I mean, there's a kind of permanence about how "I'm fucking dark" sounds in your head, alone. Really I was just alone a lot and my moods shift a lot, and the darkness came and went along with everything else. I think that's part of why liveblogging failed—I started to feel like everything about me was coming and going, and my only relationship to that was in documenting it.

I think the idea of wanting to reach people makes a lot of sense, but are you nervous about the other side of that—hurting people you write about, or feeling embarrassed by how you present yourself?

A couple of years ago I hated it. I couldn't stand it. But now I'm more at ease with who I was and that moment in time. I had to get some distance from it. And in terms of hurting other people, I guess I do say some questionable things about people sometimes. I would encourage anybody who feels hurt to email me so we can talk about it.

I wanted to ask you about the idea of editing it. What are you trying to accomplish by editing it? In a certain way it makes sense, but it's also weird, right? Because it's a "liveblog" and it's supposed to capture this specific moment in time. How do you approach editing? What are you trying to accomplish as the editor?

Do you know the book, *The Woman in the Dunes*? I felt like that a lot—how she's just constantly getting more sand dumped on her and has to keep digging it out. I just couldn't keep up with all the stuff I wanted to say. There are typos and repetition. In 2015, I took out a lot of the length—over a third of it—because it was monotonous in a way that wasn't adding anything. I wasn't trying to say anything about monotony. Editing has also felt therapeutic. It's allowed me to go back and redeem this sort of "failure" part of my life.

You're sober now, but in the book there's a lot of drug use, and it clearly comes from a really difficult time in your life. Do you think you needed to suffer to make this kind of art?

Oh, definitely not. Hell no. I don't think art needs that. "Hard life... that's reality baby!" There's something manufactured about that; it's not hard if you're trying to live hard. I was really pretty fucked up for a long time and looking for a way to help myself. I talk about *LIVEBLOG* being like a suicide note in the book. I just wanted to outsource my life into it so I wouldn't have to live it. I would love to try liveblogging again now—without drugs or drinking. But I don't think that's the answer...I didn't get saved or anything. I just had to change a lot of my bad habits.

What draws you to making art about events that are so close to your actual life versus creating more fictionalized plots?

It's most accessible to me. It's pretty lazy and pretty easy. It's always felt forced or contrived when I try other stuff. I feel like I'll always be writing about my life or the details of my life. Packaging it in some kind of narrative feels really appealing to me, because I'm always doing that anyway—thinking about what was I doing this time last year, how the tones and shifts of my life have happened. It's cool to be able to do that with movies and writing. It's like you have a little more control of that thing that goes on in your head all the time by thinking, "This reminds me of this, which reminds me of this."

When you're making art that's weird and unprecedented, where do you look for artistic guidance?

For *LIVEBLOG*, I didn't look to anything else. I just looked at it. It would have been impossible; I just wanted to stay true to the material. I just looked to myself. When I stopped editing in 2018, I had all these track-change comments where I'd go on and on just shit talking myself. That helped me indirectly, but it didn't directly affect the text.

Was editing a stressful process for you? A lot of artists talk about the anxiety of refining such a huge first draft—that every change could be making it worse and not better. But it sounds like you had a very clear vision of how it should be.

Yeah, I really identified with the material, but I did lose focus. In 2014, I edited the first draft and it only took me a week. That's when I was taking tons of Adderall. Then the second draft was taking me months and months and months. That's when I started to freak out and I started to hate it. I was making these really stupid changes, like words would stop making sense. The document I ended up sending to Gian had all these crazy spaces and seven versions of an unfinished sentence—each one "one-upping" the one before. That keeps with the unedited feel, but I did take a lot of that out by the final version.

It took a long time from the initial writing of the liveblog to actually submitting a final draft. Do you think that timeframe was necessary? Would it have been easier in a shorter time frame? How long did Selected Unpublished Blog Posts of a Mexican Panda Express Employee take?

That one was really fast. I didn't start editing until summer 2011, and then it was published in the fall. I had written a lot of those blog posts years before; it's a different kind of book. This one couldn't have been done a

different way. I thought it would have been cool to have it come out in 2015, but my mental state was just such that it couldn't happen.

Were you able to start working on anything new during the duration of *LIVEBLOG*, or did you feel locked into this one project?

I felt so frustrated. I felt like I couldn't write again at all. There's been a lot of pressuring myself, too. I have so many documents, so many things that I've started and not come back to. A huge part of that is that Adderall is a terrible drug for me. I would write cool sentences, but then I'd look at what I'd written and think, "Ugh, there's no soul." I'd like to revisit that stuff now and just be a grownup about it. I was writing sci-fi-ish George Saunders-y things and I thought I'd do a novel like that for a while, but I don't want to talk about what I'm going to do next. That's a great way for me to jinx it preemptively.

Megan Boyle Recommends

Five things I like:

Syndicated/non-streaming TV
Penny loafers
Running
Backgammon
My vape (it's a Suorin Drop)

Five movies I like:

Seven Chinese Brothers
Hereditary
Mandy
Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot
Mind the Gap

Five books I like:

The Secret Teachings of Jesus - Four Gnostic Gospels by Martin Meyer
Juliet the Maniac by Juliet Escoria
The Sarah Book by Scott McClanahan
Love's Executioner by Irvin Yalom
How Should A Person Be by Sheila Heti

Name

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Vocation

Writer

