On believing in your project

Writer Michelle Hart on getting people to pay attention to your work, writing the book you want to read, and not giving up on something even if it takes a decade to complete it.

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As told to Michelle Lyn King, 2838 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Inspiration, Mentorship, Identity, Day jobs.

I remember reading and loving your story on *Electric Literature* back in 2017. I was excited to learn it was going to become your debut novel, *We Do What We Do In the Dark*. Did this book start as a short story or were you always aware it was a novel?

The short answer is, yes, the book did start with that story, but it actually began before that. I started writing the book when I was a sophomore or a junior in college. That's around when my mom died, and I was writing my way around grief. My mom passed away in much the same fashion as the mom in the book does and, for better or worse, while that was happening, my dad kept the nature of my mom's illness from me to the point where, when she died, it was very surprising to me. When she died, I immediately started reconstructing the time when she was sick, just to figure out what I missed. Some of the stuff that's in the middle section of the book is almost verbatim what I wrote when I was in college, but it wasn't until graduate school that I started writing beyond trying to figure out my own childhood.

What stood out to me most was the relationships between characters. Do you have any tips on writing intimacy and dynamic character relationships?

It's really tough to write intimacy well. The thing that really helped me was just reading people who did it well. Garth Greenwell is an expert at writing intimacy. Sally Rooney, of course, is a very popular answer, but other than Garth, I don't think there's anybody better today that's as good at just putting two people in a room and seeing what happens. I think that also is true of Leopoldine Core, who wrote a short story collection called *When Watched*, which is ironic because most of the stories are just about two people alone in a bedroom, and what they do and talk about when they're not being watched, when they're just alone together. Those three authors were really formative in thinking about how to write intimacy. Also romance novels. They get such short shrift, but I remember reading a Jasmine Guillory novel and just sort of being like, "Oh, so you can just get right to the horny stuff." It also helped that I was writing a lot of this book while I was doing other things. After college I had four part-time jobs and it was very much a book, at least in its very first iterations, made of stolen moments. For a book about an affair, it was actually kind of perfect. I was writing on the notes app on my phone at Port Authority. I was writing in Gmail drafts. I was writing in public, but writing about things that I would be really embarrassed if anyone read.

The other thing that stood out to me about your book was the shape of the plot. I was tearing through your book, and while I wouldn't consider it a book without a plot, it doesn't have what we've come to think of as a conventional plot. We move back and forth in time, and, despite being about an affair between a student and a professor, the book is comprised of very small moments. When you were thinking about constructing the shape of this book, what did that look like?

I find discussion of plot really fascinating because I simply have no answers for it. It's one of those things. It's like pornography. You know it when you see it, right? You know plot when you see it. For me, time is a plot. Rather than think about what happens next, I zoomed out and thought about what happens five years from now, what happens six months from now? Time became a way of moving plot forward. Time itself became the story. The piece of media that influenced me the most in that regard is the second season of *Battlestar Galactica*, which ends on a "one year later" time jump. The entire next season is al about filling in those gaps about what happened in that year. I remember seeing that on TV and just sort of being like, "Wow, I really like that way of storytelling."

Especially as a queer person, time is really interesting. There's this queer sense of time where when I look back at my childhood and the things that I did as a teenager and the way that I was when I was with boys, I'm just like, that is just not me. I feel like I didn't live that life. In some ways being queer is about trying to figure out when you have begun life, so time is really, really fascinating to me as a method of moving the story forward and seeing what the consequences are of things. It's really hard to convey emotional consequence in present tense. For me, it was much more interesting to check in with the character throughout various stages of her life. From a craft standpoint, it's kind of a cheat. If you don't think that you're good at plot, whatever that means, plot is just basically causality, right? Well, if you don't think that you're good at establishing that causality, jump ahead in time, and then we'll see the effects of [the event].

You mentioned that you've been working on this book since undergrad. I imagine that [doesn't mean] sitting down every day for hours since you were nineteen, but this book has been living with you for years and years and years. For so many people working on a book or any larger project, that can feel a little crazy making. You're working on this project and you don't know if it's ever going to see the light of day. Do you have any advice about how to continue forward?

You have to believe in the story that you're writing. I've always been a really big reader. I've read a lot of books. That was amplified tenfold when I got a job as the assistant books editor at *Oprah Magazine*, where I read even more books, but I've always been a really big reader. Over the 10 years that it took me to finally finish this book I was continually surprised—pleasantly surprised—that this story just didn't exist. There are a lot of stories like it, for sure, particularly in terms of a professor and student relationship. I'm not covering new ground there, but this particular story doesn't exist. That's really what kept me going.

I had this clarity of what this story was and what this story meant to me, and to the rest of the reading public, whoever they were. In the times where I really felt like giving up, I thought, "No, this story is important." That's not to pat myself on the back at all. I'm my own worst critic, but I do think in terms of stamina, you have to believe in the story that you're telling. It was important for me to make sense of the things that had happened to me, and I think that universality is found in the particulars. There's a lot of weirdness in the book that's very singular to my own weird thoughts. [Finishing the book] was a lot of tricking myself into thinking that people would relate to it on some level. There are things about this story that I thought people would just respond to. Belief—delusion, maybe—but belief in the story that I was telling, the specific story that I was telling, was the thing that made me continue on. From a slightly more egotistical standpoint, the more I read, the more I was like, I think I can do this. Again, I don't mean any sort of self congratulations on that, but there was just a sense of, I can do this. I want to do it and I believe that I can. That had a lot to do with it.

Speaking of *O*, how did being a book reviewer change your writing?

It changed the way that I read. I read a lot of books when I was younger that I didn't like that I thought I had to finish. Some of those books I ended up kind of liking in the end, but when it became my job to read such a large amount of books, I became very, very conscious of what turned me on and what turned me off. When it came time to enter the writing zone, I still had that sense of "Okay, why didn't I like the opening of this person's book?" You learn very quickly when you read that amount about what excites you and what bores you. You always hear that you have to write the book that you'd want to read. For a long time I thought that was kind of bullshit, like something people say because they know that no one else would want to read their book, but it's actually true. It's about finding the thing that excites you and knowing and believing that's going to excite someone else, too. I used to love books that were full of flowery prose, and I found that when I had to read more

of it, I was like, "Oh, just give me a sentence with no clauses. That would be great. Who has time for multiple clauses?"

In terms of the writing, nothing that I wrote at *O* was longer than 300 words. What you learn in working at a magazine is to make every word count. I learned a phrase while working at a magazine called "throat clearing." It's when a writer takes too long to get the actual story of the article started. They're just clearing their throat. A lot of times I would send something in that my editors at *O* would say, "You're clearing your throat here. Just get to it."

That style of writing—I guess it's a kind of minimalism. It sounds like you're being lazy, but I think the opposite is true. I poured over every sentence of this book many, many, many times. That's probably why it took 10 years. I left my job at *O* last summer and for the first six months that I was jobless, I worked on one scene of my new novel. It's not like a very sustainable way of going about things, but working in magazines taught me that clarity is the most important thing.

My mentor Akhil Sharma—he was my thesis advisor in graduate school and just one of my absolute favorite writers—always said this thing about the reader: the reader is not your friend. That was kind of a mantra of his. It took me a while to figure out what he was saying. To me—and this actually ends up in the book—it's that readers are always looking for an excuse to not read what you've written. It's a really cynical way of thinking about reading and writing, but I think it's immensely helpful, and I learned that from magazines. Picture somebody like on the beach reading a magazine article of yours. If they don't like the first graph, that's it. They're just going to flip the next page and read the next article. Magazine writing and editing very much taught me that clarity is the thing that captures people.

Do you think being a reviewer has changed your relationship with reviews?

You know, I tend to take things very personally, even when they're clearly not at all personal. I'm a lifelong 76ers fan and one of the 76ers players was up for the MVP award this year, Joel Embiid. He became the underdog to the Denver Nuggets' Nikola Jokić, and I take that personally. I think that Nikola Jokić being voted for MVP is clearly a sign that the NBA has it out for me personally. So, yeah, I would love to have thick skin and say that I can shut [my response to reviews] off and that it's not like they hate me. But I don't know. I would assume that if I get upset that a 76ers player is not going to win the MVP award, then I'll probably be marginally upset if I get a less than rave review.

I should say that at *O*, we never reviewed books that we didn't like and we never did negative reviews. I guess in a weird sense if I'm *not* being reviewed, I would take that personally. Oprah had a missive that said why waste time talking about things that we don't love? I think that's a good philosophy to have in general, and so we never really reviewed books that we didn't like. We often *talked* about books that we didn't like and those were some of the most fun conversation that I had as a book reviewer.

It's hard. I find it really hard not to take things personally. When I first got my book deal at Riverhead, I had a breakfast meeting with my editor. The book is pretty autobiographical in the sense that I put a lot of my own emotions into it, a lot of my own loneliness, a lot of the things that happened to me in my life. At breakfast, my editor said something like, "I really like books like this. I just really like books about unlikable women. Yours does it so well." Here's me having written an autobiographical character and I'm like, "Uh, so, what do you mean by 'unlikeable?'"

You're like, "Can you let me know the specific things this character should work on? What tips would you give them if they wanted to be more likable?"

Exactly. Even something as small as that. I didn't write a memoir. It's not like any criticism of the book is going to be a criticism of my life and the way that I've chosen to tell it. But I don't know. It's hard not to take it personally, especially since it's my first book and it's been with me for so long. I imagine if I had a 10-year-old kid who I was really proud of and some other parent was like, "You didn't raise this person right," I would be like, "Oh, that stinks. I thought I did okay."

Back when you were at *O*, you asked 115 queer authors to say the book that changed their life, and so I wanted to ask you: what are the books that have changed your life?

At almost every stage of my life, I can point to a book that changed my life at that point. But if I were being totally honest and if I wanted to choose one that not a lot of people have chosen, I would say that in 2008, when DC comics killed off Batman, they created a character called Batwoman and she was a lesbian. In 2008, I was a ridiculously huge DC comics fan. I was a freshman in college and DC had this event called Battle for the Cowl, which was a competition to see who would be the next Batman since Bruce Wayne had died. As a freshman in college, I saw that there was a member of the Bat Family who was a lesbian. Her story involved getting expelled from the army via Don't Ask, Don't Tell. It was revelatory to me that that was possible, that I would find that character at that time in that medium.

I couldn't remember encountering a lesbian in a story that I was engaged in. I didn't see Buffy until college. I hadn't seen Xena until college. I hadn't seen The L Word until college. I lived 18 years of my life without really seeing a lesbian. Seeing a queer person in media and lesbianism was not something people talked about in the schools that I went to.

When I encountered Kate Kane and Batwoman, it just clicked for me. I knew as soon as I read that that I was gay. Her story is very inspiring. Despite being kicked out of the army because she was a lesbian, she becomes even better. She found her way to serve, and that was really formative for me, especially because it was in that medium. After that I watched *Buffy* and was like, "Oh, Willow's a lesbian. Okay." And then I read *Fun Home* and I was like, "Okay, Alison Bechdel, great." But it was really Batwoman where I was like, "Oh, that's me."

Michelle Hart Recommends:

Bubbakoo's Burritos

Victory Brewing Company's Sour Monkey

Replaying the *Uncharted* video games instead of watching the movie

The Worst Person in the World

Reruns of *Rick Steves' Europe* as ASMR

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