On embracing the amateur role

Writer Naomi Kanakia discusses copying other people's success, having faith in heroism, and following a passion until she gets bored.

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You're clearly interested in so many different topics. How do you choose what to focus on at any given time, or choose what to read and write about next?

I don't know. It's nice to be a dilettante. I have this nonfiction book coming out called *What's So Great About the Great Books?* For that book, I had to actually do sustained research, which was difficult for me, because that research implied a certain level of completeness. I didn't achieve that level of completeness in the book, but I at least aspired to it. Whereas with my regular interests, there's no need for completeness. I start with one book and that gets me into something, and then I keep going until I'm bored. My e-reader has a random book function. One day it served me a copy of Njáls Saga. This was ten years ago. I read it, loved it, and was like, "I'm going to read every single Icelandic saga." So I bought a box set of all 49 sagas shipped from Iceland, in English. I got through 20 or 30 and was like, "I'm done. I'm finished. I don't want to read anymore." I enjoyed the experience, then moved on. That's what happens. I get really excited about something, develop a really big reading list, buy way too many books, get going, and at some point I'm ready to move on to the next thing.

Do you have different standards of what counts as complete when you're reading for "work" versus when you're reading for pleasure?

When you read an essay in the *London Review of Books*, *New York Review of Books*, or *The New Yorker*, it always feels like the writer read the book 10 years ago, is rereading it now, and has read everything there is to know about it. In reality, a lot of times those people are kind of faking it. On my own Substack I try to steer clear of having that kind of authority. I try to be open about the fact that this is a book I just read yesterday. I've Googled it, I've read some other books and I have some opinions, but it's essentially an amateur take. And that brings me a lot of peace because I'm not pretending to be a PhD or someone with a lot of authority.

Your honesty about things like that is a key feature to your writing. It feels so unique. Where did this openness come from? Is it about making your writing more accessible to others?

The effect is that it's more accessible to people. There's something distancing about authority. But there's a balance. For a long time, I'd read a book and then write a book review, and that wasn't necessarily useful, because people don't need to know I love reading *War and Peace*. Obviously, if you've read it, you probably like it. So you need to say something a bit more substantive about what you've read. It was difficult to find that balance of, "I know a bit more than what everybody knows, but I'm not an expert."

Does the platform of Substack allow you to be more experimental?

Definitely. You can just put something up there. It's a bit like Reddit, which has an upvoting mechanism. On Substack, if things get more shares and restacks, they kind of bubble up, and you can see what sort of approaches

are working well. It's helped me learn and grow my Substack. Whenever I see somebody else doing something, even if I don't understand it, sometimes I'll copy it just to see what happens. Like Celine Nguyen, who writes a lot about these European books and authors. Her posts are really, really long. They never fit in my email inbox. I was like, how can this work? This is not what you're supposed to do on the internet. You're supposed to be short and pithy… I realized that when people get to the end of a really long post, they feel much more invested in you and the post. It's a very different reading experience. This sort of experimentation is a lot harder if you're writing for a traditional magazine ecosystem.

Where do you think all your curiosity comes from? Can curiosity be trained? Your desire to read every Icelandic saga is probably not a normal feeling for most people.

Growing up, I mostly read science fiction and fantasy, and I wanted to be a science fiction and fantasy writer. And all the great science fiction and fantasy writers say you can't just read science fiction, you have to read everything, including the classics. I always felt that kind of literature wasn't for me, that it was inaccessible. Then after college, I got tired of feeling insecure about great works of literature. So I bought a list and started going through them, and realized you can just read these books. There's no test. Nobody's going to come and say you're not reading correctly or understanding enough. It's very freeing to not be an expert. There's no way of failing at learning. That's the key. I can open something up and see if I like it. And if I'm not getting it, there's Google or ChatGPT to help explain things.

You were in your early 20s when you shifted from reading science fiction to classics. Did something specific happen then?

I had graduated from college and I had a job—and this job was pretty good, as far as jobs went. But I did not enjoy it. It was so boring. It was filled with trivia and minutiae. And I thought, "I gotta become a writer so I don't have to do this job anymore. And if I'm going to get serious about science fiction, the greats tell me you have to read everything." When you're 23, you think anything is possible. Stephen King's book *On Writing* tells you how much he loves Anthony Trollope and all kinds of classics. So I thought that if I'm going to be a best-selling mega-famous writer, like Stephen King, I have to be reading Anthony Trollope. So I mostly did it to try and become a better writer.

Is this around the same time you transitioned to writing young adult novels?

No, that transition happened later. When I was 23, I was reading mostly classics but mostly writing science fiction. Then I did my MFA program, and was still writing mostly science fiction. But for my first novel, which was a young adult novel, I was visited by the voice of this main character, Reshma. That was the first work of realist literature I ever wrote. It came as a surprise to me. I had never written anything set in the real world before. And this was the book that sold to publishers.

Then I had a crisis of confidence and a lot of difficulty writing science fiction, because I thought a lot of science fiction was about these heroes who are exceptionally skilled and brave and courageous, and I didn't know if I necessarily believed in that anymore. Now I believe in it much more than I did then, but I found it hard to write science fiction for a while because of that.

Why did you go back to believing it?

I realized, what else is there? You can try to write about ordinary people who have ordinary skills, ordinary courage, ordinary intelligence and bravery and luck. But they're just going to have ordinary lives. That's the story you're going to tell. There are so many men who try and write these books that are basically, *what if someone was such an ugly loser that nobody would want to have sex with him; wouldn't his life just be so pathetic?* Yeah, it would be. If someone was so undesirable that nobody wanted to have sex with him, then his life would be awful! You don't need a book to tell me that. We all believe that we are not like that. Or I hope we all believe that we have something more going on. That's the truth these hero stories honor: when the chips are down, you have to be a hero.

Is heroism something to aspire to, versus a reality?

No. I mean, I think the reality is that we are heroes. The reality is that if your child is trapped under a car, you're going to lift that car. The reality is if someone's chasing you, you're going to run faster than you've ever been able to run. If things are really desperate, you will unlock a new side of yourself that you've never experienced before. Obviously bad things happen to people, but I do think people are exceptional in ways that are true.

You pivoted from writing science fiction to YA, and then from YA to nonfiction about the classics. With all this trial and error and repositioning, does it ever freak you out to think you could be doing something completely different with your life if something else had taken off earlier?

What freaks me out more is I just turned 40, and my writing career has really taken off a lot more in the last year or two. Until I turned 40, I always thought that if I needed to, I could get a job in the tech industry. I live in San Francisco. But now, with the tech layoffs, I actually could not get a job in the tech industry. No one would hire me. If I wasn't writing, what would I do? It's a scary thought, but I try not to think about it. With all this, failure is the norm. It's not unusual for most people writing young adult fiction to not succeed. I've been writing for 20 years. Along the way, I've known many people who quit writing. So I think I find it more surprising that I'm still around at all. My fifth book is coming out. That seems shocking.

And yet you consider yourself a short story writer at heart.

I'm really trying out this short story writer thing. My writing until now has always been more commercial, and I've always tried to offer some kind of value proposition to my publisher. Even my literary writing—my novel *The Default World* got compared to Sally Rooney. I always tried to write the kinds of things people might actually want to read. But these tales that I publish on my Substack are not really the kind of thing people want to read. People don't really want to read short stories that are self-published on your blog. In order to succeed with this, I have to convince publishers that what I'm doing is art. So I've been trying to ponder how I can convey the impression that I'm an artist.

I do think these tales of mine are definitely the fictions that have had the best response—and that, paradoxically, probably have the best chance of being published by a big publisher. Which is a very strange experience. I try not to be too self-aggrandizing or make too big of claims for myself. But I think calling myself a short story writer is safe. That is definitely what I am. That's what I'm most known for. And short story writers are so fancy. They're like Alice Munro or John Cheever. To be a short story writer is like being a poet.

You've written that great short story writers tend to have one story *so* great it continues to be read for a long time—and that you want to achieve this. I appreciate this honesty. Is this frank desire for greatness something you cultivate in yourself and admire in others?

I don't know. I have a troubled relationship with that. It's definitely why I started writing. It's one reason I started reading all these classic books. I do feel like what I do is different from what Raymond Carver does, and is more similar to what O. Henry did. His stories were for the masses. They were entertaining. And I've learned a lot more from writers like him, or from Robert E. Howard—writers who had more limited aspirations. But O. Henry, he's in a Library of America volume. One hundred years later, people are still reading him. His story "Gift of the Magi" is assigned in many 5th grade classrooms. So yes, I aspire to greatness, but I imagine it'll be more like O. Henry than Raymond Carver.

Do you miss writing long-form fiction? Do you ever plan to do that again?

I'm so ruined. The way I write now is so compressed and moves so fast. I've tried to write novels recently. But it's hard to write them in this style. There's really nothing I can't say in 15,000 words. So I have to think about what I would write. I do miss it. With a novel, people are excited. If I sent my agent a novel, she'd be so ecstatic. Publishers, everybody would be so happy. It would be just so much easier to get people to read a novel. I feel like that's such an easier lift, and you have more leeway to play around because people are going to stick

with you longer.

Can you tell me more about your process being too condensed to write a novel? What is your writing process these days? Do you have certain hours in the day where you write versus read?

For my writing, the most fun thing I do is write these tales. So I have to put boundaries on that because otherwise I would just write so many of them. I can only publish once a week, if that. I set aside one day a week to write my tales, and I'll usually write two or three in a day. And then I'll look back and only one of them will be any good. But that's the most fun. I love doing those. I have more of a process for my nonfiction pieces, where the art is figuring out an angle, figuring out what kinds of writers are worth writing about, and what kind of background research is needed to make it work. So there's a big exploratory phase. But the more exploration you do, the harder it gets to actually write the piece. On Monday morning I try and write down a draft of next week's piece, and then I tinker with it steadily through the week until it finally goes up.

What are the upsides and downsides to Substack as a platform?

The big downside is, it is social media. Your relationship to the writing and audience are completely different than when you're writing for a magazine. When I publish something in a periodical, it comes out, and I don't even think about it. I don't like to read my reviews. But with Substack, that's your business. It's hard to distance yourself from the social media aspects of Substack: answering your comments, reading other people, commenting on other people, restacking other people. Participating in discourse is a key element of Substack. If you are just writing and just putting things online, it's hard to succeed without playing the social media game. I think it's a lot better than other platforms—not quite as toxic as Twitter, and you don't have to put your picture out there like you do with Instagram. So it's better, and I've learned to manage some of the feelings over time. But I'm highly sympathetic to many friends of mine who are like, "I just can't do it."

In so many phases of my life, I've experienced failure and seen peers of mine succeed, and had the feeling, "Why are they succeeding? They're no better than I am." Substack, for a lot of people, is just that same thing all over again. Why is somebody else getting so many subscribers? Why is somebody else so popular online? I think good stuff can succeed, bad stuff can also succeed, and good stuff can fail to get traction.

I don't know if your daughter is old enough yet, but are you going to teach her to aspire for greatness?

I mean, my wife is a doctor. Her parents are classical musicians, and they were like, "Don't become a classical musician. Just do anything other than that." I think my wife could have become a musician; she's really good at piano. But she became a doctor instead. So if my daughter ever came to me and was like, "Should I be a doctor or a writer?" I'd be like, "All else equal, you should probably be a doctor."

The way we millennials were raised was so horrible. We were taught to want meaningful work—something that's enjoyable, good for the world, high-status, and produces a decent income. These are terrible expectations to give your kids. But that's probably the same way I'll raise my daughter, honestly. I'll just be like, "I want you to do meaningful work that makes you happy."

Naomi Kanakia recommends five Icelandic sagas:

Njáls Saga. The GOAT of the sagas. There are two best friends. One day, at dinner, the wife of one best friend tells the other guy's wife to move over on a bench. Somehow this causes a blood feud that results in dozens of deaths, one legendary atrocity, and a lawsuit that spans the entire island.

Saga of the Sworn Brothers. Two best friends. They're super duper warriors. One day, one of them wonders, off-handedly, "I wonder which of us would win in a fight." From that moment, they know they can't hang out anymore, because they'll always be wondering, and they'll find it hard not to fight. So they go their separate ways, but when one friend dies, the other one goes to Greenland and kills half the island trying to avenge him.

Havard's Saga. This one is about a guy whose son is murdered. All these Icelandic sagas center around this really complicated legal system they have that I won't bother to explain, but Havard can't get justice under this legal

system, so he gets really depressed and lies in bed for three years. Then one day he gets up, gets a second wind, and gets revenge.

Grettir's Saga. The ultimate punishment in Icelandic society was to be outlawed. That meant anyone could kill you without facing repercussions. Usually if you were outlawed, you were supposed to leave the island and go to Norway. But for some dumb reason, Grettir just sticks around for fourteen years! He figures he's such a strong warrior that he can take all comers, no matter what. He's not entirely wrong.

Saga of the People of Holm. In this saga, a bunch of outlawed people get together on an island. And this island is impregnable, so nobody can get them, and they cause a lot of trouble. It has a much darker feel than most of the sagas—kind of a noir-like feel, with no heroes and no justice.

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