On resisting the cliché



Writer Rachel Connolly on resisting groupthink, finding inspiration, and how constraints help the creative process

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As told to Loré Yessuff, 2298 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Inspiration, Time management.

Something I really like about your criticism is how sharp and sensible it is. You don't pander to your readers or spoon-feed your ideas, and you don't settle for easily digestible arguments or conclusions. How do you go about developing your ideas and resisting groupthink?

Thank you for reading my work that way, because that's what I hope for when I'm writing criticism. Sometimes when I read people's criticism, I feel like they almost assume that they're writing for someone who's not as smart as they are. So they think if they make a slightly janky argument, and the reader won't notice. I always work from the presumption that if I've seen a trope or an incomplete argument in something, most other people have, too. In terms of developing ideas, I have a sensibility, a way of seeing the world. I try to be reasonable. I try to be fair. I try to avoid cliches and tropes and two-dimensional thinking. And I think a lot of what I write is basically applying that way of thinking to different situations or different things that people are talking about.

I feel like that's a big strength of your writing. Your sensibility shines through both your nonfiction and your fiction. You mentioned that you have a certain sensibility, a perspective. How would you define it?

My friend Tim once said to me, "Your writing is really concerned with whether things are true or not." I think that's a really good description of the arguments I tend to make. They're basically like: *Is this a sweeping generalization or is this a fact?* I'm hyper concerned with reality. Stereotypes really, really bother me. Stuff that feels inauthentic in some way really bothers me.

I could see that in your novel too. Your conviction is clear, but not in a moralistic or preachy way which is how a lot of fiction is right now.

Yeah, there's a big thing in fiction at the minute for it to be really didactic and teaching you these lessons about the world. I think the book that publishing loves has got an evil posh guy, and he's going about being really evil, and then someone gives him a lecture and then he learns his lesson. I find that stuff so fake because I know people's backgrounds and stuff definitely shapes the way they behave to some extent, but I just don't really believe that it's so straight down the middle as that way would have it. I find that so unmoving.

Yeah, it can feel formulaic. I think people like it because it's relatable, and maybe it feels cathartic for them. But I like that you resist that and that you're not pushing for clean conclusions about people.

That's my dream in fiction—to write characters that genuinely feel ambiguous and confusing, who actually do confront you a bit and [make you] think, what am I supposed to think of this person?

I'm curious to know what some of your inspirations are when it comes to writing, whether literary or otherwise.

Music's always been a really big part of my life. I'm a huge Bob Dylan fan. I love that the second one of his song starts, you're like, "oh, I couldn't be listening to anyone other than Bob Dylan." This is definitely his song, I'm in his world. I was reading a literary magazine recently, and there was a lot of MFA fiction, it was all very formulaic. It all started with the same sentence, which was basically X met Y in Z setting on this date. Four different stories, all the same [beginnings], word for word. That's my nightmare to do that. I always want to try and think of a sentence that's going to bring in something totally new, so that hopefully when you start reading a piece of my fiction, you're like, "oh, this could literally only be this person." I think that [inclination] comes from music.

There's a writer, Eugene Martin, who I read. I think he's really brilliant and very underrated. Who else? William Faulkner is probably the first writer I read that made me want to write a book. I'm actually rereading some Samuel Beckett stuff at the minute because I think the arc of his fiction is really interesting. It's anti-payoff. I love Toni Morrison's work. I think she's amazing, but I don't know if I think she's an influence on me. Her prose style is amazing, but it's so different to mine. But I feel like sometimes you read someone like that, and even though you don't end up doing stuff that reads similarly, she's given you permission to think in a certain way.

Do you know the writer, Yūko Tsushima? She's a Japanese writer.

What has she written?

Territory of Light was a big one.

I haven't read it, but I've heard of that.

Oh my god, she's really good. I was reading a lot of her work when I was working on my book. She writes about these mental women, who are sort of in control at the same time. She's probably a very formative writer for me.

Also, I go and see a lot of art stuff because I find that makes me think. I went to see these Frank Auerbach sketches recently. There was this interesting formal thing where he'd drawn and drawn and drawn until the paper disintegrated, and then he'd patch the paper up and draw new heads and new heads. It was quite interesting because you couldn't look at the final sketch without thinking about all of the different iterations of it.

Yeah, that's really interesting. I follow your Substack and I saw that you wrote about it. I'm not familiar with Frank Auerbach, but I'm definitely going to look into his work. You talked about this a little bit, but I'd love to hear more about your approach to fiction versus nonfiction and how your approach to each genre differs.

There are some similarities. When I start working on a [nonfiction] piece, I will make a document and email myself notes. I work that way for a little while before I sit down [to write]. When I eventually do, I have this document full of stuff already, so I'm never really sitting down at a blank page. I do the same thing for fiction. I get scenes or sentences in my head and I start putting them into documents, and then it grows from there. By the time I sit down to work on a short story, basically, the whole story is almost written. It's just all over the place. No one else could look at it and see what it meant, but I can be like, "Oh, this thing would have to go here and then this character would need this other thing."

I think putting stuff down and then letting it grow is definitely the way I work on both [genres]. But fiction, I think, should be a much dreamier space in a way. On an ideal day, I'll get up at 6:00 and work on fiction first and then do other work. I think that waking up first thing in the morning and not having interacted with the world and coming to fiction with that energy, it sounds, like, very woo woo, but that energetic difference of needing to have your brain almost untarnished.

You're so right. I like what you said about needing a dreamy space for fiction because the nature of that writing demands imaginative thinking. You once wrote something in your Substack that I resonated with. You said: "There is no other way to produce creative work than under arbitrary constraints." At one point in your writing career, did

you come to embrace constraint, and how do you feel like this acceptance influences your writing?

I think that's been my whole career. I studied maths and physics at university, and then I was writing around other jobs. I was working in insurance for a while. Then I got this three-day-a-week job doing data analysis in a journalism context. So for ages, I was always looking for time to write. I was quite used to getting up in the morning before other work and writing then. It was quite constrained, but I think that way of working can be really, really, really, productive actually, because you have to get rid of a lot of the neurosis.

I don't mean this in a mean, privilege-discourse way, but London's full of people who have come from this very specific world of very expensive private schools and all of that stuff. Sometimes, I speak to them and they've had so much stuff in their life, but they haven't really managed to do that much with it. They're very good at having a narrative around why they haven't been able to. It's like, "Oh, I am learning French so that I can write my novel." But you're not learning French to write a novel, you're just avoiding writing a novel. The best excuse I ever heard was this person who said that they were thinking about getting an art degree because they wanted to learn how to illustrate a book to then write one. I was like, that's not a real thing.

When you come from such a plentiful environment where you've got so much stuff, sometimes it can be a barrier in a way because you think everything needs to be perfect. Everything needs to be in line. I need to have months and months of spare time. I need to have all of this stuff. Most work doesn't get made in that way. Most work gets done around other work or time constraints. Even the biggest trust fund baby in the world has the time constraint of their life.

Exactly. I hear a lot of those excuses all the time. I'm not a trust fund baby, but I think it's easy for me to make those sorts of silly excuses too. But, it's nice to think about how to make things despite the boundaries within your life, instead of wasting all your time trying to take those boundaries away. Piggybacking off of that, obviously, the publishing and literary world can be very elitist and exclusionary. A lot of people who have a lot of money get to determine the shape of the literary world to a certain extent. I wonder how you go about preserving your sense of self from that reality.

Yeah, the literary world is shaped around a very specific type of person. If you get anywhere in the literary world and you're not from that and you don't like that image, I think you actually have a bit of a responsibility to try and support other people. That's something I feel really strongly about, trying to create a world more like the one you'd want to see instead of just complaining about the one that exists.

I try and help people out professionally a lot, because, obviously this is my own judgment, everybody has their own separate judgment about this, but I think when I meet someone, I can tell if they're a person who's had an easy ride or not. If I can tell that they're the person who's not going to have an easy ride, I'll make an extra effort to reach out and help them with stuff. Because the fact is who else is going to do it? The gatekeeper-type people are not going to do it.

Right, exactly.

It's easy for all of us to sit and complain about the way that things are, but if you've got even a tiny amount of power to change it, you should try to change it. For example, if I'm asked in an interview, what writers I'm reading, I often try and think of people who don't get loads of press because I think, well, the people that the industry is not supporting are the ones I rather like, but I notice so many other people are just like, "I'm reading Annie Ernaux," and I'm like, we're all reading Annie Ernaux.

Yeah, we're all reading her.

I personally think if you don't like the way things are shaped and you have a tiny bit of power at all, it's important to try and do all the small things you can to change the shape.

Rachel Connolly recommends:

Reading recommendations: *Liquid Snakes* by Stephen Kearse, *At the Edge of the Woods* by Kathryn Bromwich, *Bolt from the Blue* by Jeremy Cooper, Tabitha Lasley's non-fiction writing, and Lucie Elven's fiction and criticism

The Pomodoro method. You set a timer for 25 minutes and work, then break for 25 minutes, and do it again. It just helps you get things done. It's pretty foolproof.

Sphynx cats. They are the elite pet, very dog-like and beautific in temperament. Monkey-like in their activities. Exceptionally life-enhancing.

Cynar spritz is a drink I discovered recently that I find impossible to make at home. It's way more tangy than other spritzes. It's elegant to have a niche drink order I think.

Learn to go to parties and events by yourself. Lots of people are weirdly prangy about this but it's a good thing to do. You meet interesting people. You can leave a conversation whenever you like. Nobody thinks you're weird!

Buy a cheap alarm clock. Turn your phone off overnight and don't wake up to it, keep it in a different room and turn it on as late as you can. I check emails at 9ish but I don't turn my phone on till 11 or 12.

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Vocation
writer