

On realizing you can't quit



Writer Vanessa Veselka on challenging yourself, standing by what you make, the physicality of writing, and why it's useful to be bored to death of your own coming of age story.

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As told to Elle Nash, 3011 words.

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While *Zazen*, your first novel, was written in first person, *The Great Offshore Grounds* is written in third person and it rotates through the different characters' perspectives. What were some of your reasons for changing your process through this project, going from first person to third person?

I find third person really problematic.

Oh, really?

Yeah. When you write a first novel, particularly if you've written it in first person, I think most writers that are honest with themselves get to the end of the book and they go, "Well, wait a minute, how much of this voice is my voice as an author that I get to carry with me, and how much of this is the narrative voice of the character?" And I was somewhat mortified to realize that like well, yeah, frankly most of that belonged to the character. All writing is a set of compromises in trying to figure out what you're willing to trade for what. I knew I wanted to try third person, but then what happened was I hated it.

Why?

I stayed with it to try to find a way through. I'm still not at peace with third person. I still don't feel like I got in some ways what I wanted to go after more experimentally at the prose level, but I'm not giving it up. I found the problem of third person, or the challenge, is that it is inherently normalizing.

What do you mean by normalizing?

So in first person, that sort of sonic, broken nature of voice allowed me rhythm. I was a musician for many, many years and it's a very sound-based writing that I do. I think when you look at really traditional 19th century novel writing, you have a "Dear Reader" kind of work. I found it suddenly like being in a straight jacket. And very, very normalizing...it felt more pedestrian. I took it as a learning curve. I have certain strategies that are successful for me in first person, and I was sick of them. The way I do my work in general is to really try to start with a premise: What do I not know how to write about? What do I think I don't do well? And what am I afraid of?

Right, kind of like to sharpen the self, or sharpen what you want to try to do.

I like a challenge.

Did you plan it out and plot and structure, or did you just start from the beginning and just write to the end? It's so big, it's hard to imagine not actually planning.

I did not plan any of it. My whole process starts by free writing dialogue. Before I even have characters. I'll write a sentence that has some traction for me. And then I answer that sentence. In *Zazen*, I remember I just sat down and the first thing that came to my mind was: "Can you sit still on fire?" And the second thing was: "No, you can't, it's biological." And the characters emerged from that. They emerged in their own conflicts. There's a natural sort of Socratic tendency I have with that dialogue.

Do you do cultural research or anything like that outside of writing?

I tend to write about things I know something about, but then I tend to get obsessive about elements of it. There are a couple of places in *Offshore Grounds* where I really did have to do research in a classic sense. I have not fished in Alaska, but I did live in southeast Alaska. I know many people who fish in southeast Alaska and I know a little bit about that. And my father was adopted in the early '70s by the Tlingit, so I have sort of a Tlingit side to my family in that way, and so I'm familiar with elements of Tlingit culture through that. So there was nothing in the Tlingit stuff that I hadn't already had a long time interest in, or experience in talking to storytellers with. I didn't think I was going to write about tall ships, but I knew I wanted to write about having to sail on a boat with no electronics, so I actually went and reached out to a tall ship that had a sailor training program and went and worked there for a month. I could never have written about it if I hadn't. I did drive night cab, and a lot of the experiences that I write about I've had.

They mesh in these different ways.

I think the one thing that I'd mention about that, and that I'm kind of bullish on, is that it really helps to have become bored to death of your own coming of age story. I don't have any allegiance to telling the stories of things I've experienced, as they happened. And I have no allegiance to them being assigned to minor or major characters, or to the agendas or the stories of the emotional realities of them. I have therefore a great facility to just crumble up the ingredients and put them wherever I want. For setting, for tone, for the kind of people who lived there. And that way I can actually use experience in a way that allows me as an artist to use it rather than me as somebody who was a thinking, feeling human who wants to carry or express those elements I wasn't able to express.

You're really painting this wide... I don't want to say portrait, because it's such a massive story, and you're taking those elements and you're adding a bit there, adding a bit here, where you're thinking, I'm not writing about me, I am making something that is fully imagined art.

I'm just going to say that women get nailed all the time as if the only way they can be artistically conscious is through biography. They're always told, "Oh, this isn't an intellectual endeavor, an artistic endeavor, this is just something that intuitively flows from your biography that you have to tell." It's such a dismissal of the actual process.

Have you ever had to deal with those kinds of frustrations?

Yes, and it's horrific. This one specific time, I was doing an event in San Francisco with Charlie Jane Anders called *Writers With Drinks*, I think. And it was a great event, but what happened is I went and I read this story about this woman who has a three year old. It starts out like she's got a sick kid, but then you kind of wonder is this kid sick at all or is it just her fear? It's introduced as fiction. Afterwards there's a line of people who have very graciously come up to tell me that they loved that story, and they all refuse to see it as fiction. Every single one of them is like, "How is your kid now?" I said, "My kid's fine. My kid's never had an issue." They'd go, "Oh, but it's based on stuff, right?" And I'm like, "No, I created this." And then they look at you like you're a sociopath.

Because here's the thing, I think. It's a power differential that they don't want to women have the power in.

Which is, "if you can manipulate my emotions, you are dangerous," right? And we'll give men that power. But there's something about a woman who can write something that manipulates your emotions, because that's how I think people perceive, "I felt this way, it felt real, I felt for you."

And then to find no, this wasn't part of you, this was something created, they don't feel like they're in some power relationship anymore. They feel like they're in a subjugated place.

I noticed that Cheyenne and Livy, in the novel, are 33 years old. I turned 33 this year and everyone was like, "It's your Jesus year," and I don't know what that means. It's almost around the time of a Saturn return I would say, I think that happens to a lot of people between 27 to 32. Was there a reason you chose this age, and if so, why?

Yeah, it was very intentional. I am very interested in what I call a second coming of age, which is in the period of people's early to mid 30s. You get to the point where your old coming of age story, or your vision of yourself as a teenager, and I don't mean necessarily professionally, I just mean in terms of your aesthetic ideas—what you will put up with, what you will not put up with, where you think your life might go—it's all kind of run to a certain course at that point. You see artists, and particularly musicians, just dropping out and quitting. And then there are those of us who are lifers. Who realize, "Okay, maybe I'm not going to be anything." Asking, "Am I still okay, does this still matter enough to me?" I was curious about those people for whom they're going through stages after stages of finding a different life. They're still committed to whatever they're trying to do. They're not giving up on those things, but there's a cost for that. And there's this question for a lot of us, particularly artists, but could be for anybody, is do I even have a choice in some ways. I always advise people to quit the arts because if you can quit you should. If you can't quit, it's your work. You know what I mean?

Like if you can't quit, you'll always be half quitting. But you find that you're one of these people, I am, that cannot quit. Even if it's the worst idea in the world, because it's not possible. I quit music multiple times. And tried desperately not to do it. And just kept returning. The characters, they've lost the sort of coming of age story that tells them it's all about potential, there's no potential left. Meaning it doesn't matter. You're at an age where potential no longer matters. It's doing it and asking, "Do you have the stomach for it?"

One thing I really love about this book and about your work is you focus a lot on working class struggle and representation of working-class life. In your website bio it says you've done many different jobs at different points in your life, and I relate to that a lot, I've worked retail, worked in coffee shops, grocery stores, trying to make ends meet. I think part of that life is making it work with what you have. There's an ingenuity, you push forward and you really try to find a way to survive with whatever you have available. I wanted to ask you about why it's important for you to write about that kind of work, and what it means to you.

I mean, first of all, it's the only kind of work I've done with one exception. Which was union organizing. I've waited a million tables, I've worked in kitchens—like dishwasher and bus jobs—I'm not a cook. I've sold flowers on the LA freeway as a teenager. I worked in strip joints well underage. I drove night cab for a period of time. I've cleaned hotel rooms and I have cleaned houses. I've taught guitar, like really hand-to-mouth guitar lessons to kids. To me that is the world that's real. It's the world that most people in one way or another are in, right? Where there's always this complexity about how you do anything. Decisions are made to solve immediate problems that create constant stack up of more debt, more issues, extraneous circumstances. So all the characters in this novel, they're trying to get from point A to point B. The nature of a lot of American life is a constant hustle.

It's constant, navigating what you're willing to trade, without any idea that you're going to necessarily break out of it, but more that you're going to get an edge on it, that you're going to figure it out, that there's going to be a way that you can get what you need out of it and just get to the next thing.

And at the same time, I love the ingenuity and the grift and the sort of way that people philosophically tell themselves this story about it so that they have their own narrative, they have their own way of seeing things in the world and placing themselves in the center of their experience, and I feel like a lot of times that's given short shrift. And those are my characters, those are the people that I love, and see, and understand them best.

How did writing start for you in this process? Is this something now that you can do full-time?

Like you, I sort of feel the pressure and there's one big exception going on right now, but in general, I have continued to work. Since *Zazen* came out, there was a long period of time where I could live off my writing. And did. At the level of \$16 to \$24,000 a year before taxes. And when you're talking about freelance, you're talking about a third coming out in taxes, it is not easy figuring it out.

It's a lesser freedom, like you're free from the day to day—you could do it but you've got to hustle.

You've got to hustle. One article getting spiked from *Harpers* that I had once screwed me up for a year financially. It was three months of work that just went away. You're very vulnerable to things like that. And so I sort of pasted things together that way for quite a while. I'm not saying this in any kind of bravado, but I would rather do something like washing dishes as my job than teach at an MFA. And that's not to be disrespectful of people who teach at MFA; it's that I'm too restless in some ways to do that work. I'm a very physical person and writing already takes a lot of physical stagnation. I don't have much left. I want to be doing something physical, or I want to be doing something that's like I'm just watching people. I was able to make my living in this way for about eight years on and off. But that was also with racking up debt, that was also with constant hustle, that was with the ACA. There were a variety of things that allowed me to do that. In the last year I've been working again as a union organizer for the first time in a long time. And that is not something I will do permanently. But the time period and the needs of what's happening in this country, and I have a skillset there, I feel like it's part of just showing up for this moment in time.

Union organizing is like god's work, it's really important.

Thanks.

Did you worry about marketplace concerns at all while you were writing? Because as a person who is writing, who is also kind of in the struggle, in that hustle, did you ever see this book as a way out, like, "I'm going to sell this book," hope for a small survivable windfall? Or were you thinking, "I don't care about that, this is just the work that I need to do and whatever happens financially with it is whatever happens."

No. I sat down once to say, "Okay, I'm going to write something that can sell. And it's going to be YA." I came up with this great idea of something that could be written fairly quickly and also have a graphic novel medium. Within two pages of starting it, I turned it into something that nobody would ever fucking buy. I had just turned it immediately into something that was like, 'well, that just X'd out 90% of anybody who would read this.'

I was fortunate enough with **The Great Offshore Grounds** I'd signed initially a preempt deal with a publisher after *Zazen*, and so when I first started writing this book it was like, "Okay, we're going to pay you to write, you're going to have an advance," and I was going to write it. The problem was it didn't work out that way. The editor had moved to another publisher, and the person I was with wasn't really the right match. The book that I was making was not one they wanted.

I had a choice. They were a great publisher. A very coveted publisher. Do I listen to the people who seem to know what they're talking about and make the book that they want to make? Or do I pull up stakes and walk out with nothing and tell them I'm going to find them their money somehow. And I went the other way. I spent about a year and a half really going like, "Okay, nobody's going to put this book out, I've put years into it," and feeling very foolish but never regretting doing that. Because at the end you only have your work. You only have what you make. I feel like it's already a total victory for me. My editor is amazing. My agent, the agent that I ended up going with was amazing. There's a beautiful physical book in the world that is the book I meant to write and I didn't have to compromise anything I cared about. I'm forever grateful for that, so it was worth it to me.

Vanessa Veselka Recommends:

1. Gibson acoustic guitars with heavy gauge strings.

2. Learning to write cursive as an adult.
3. A earnest approach.
4. Midrash.
5. Maria Bamford's One-Hour Homemade Christmas Special.

Name

Vanessa Veselka

Vocation

Writer, Union Organizer

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Vanessa Vasselka