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As told to J. Bennett, 2779 words.

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# On not being afraid to challenge yourself creatively

Adult star and author Joanna Angel discusses the process of writing a book, feminism, the difference between art and porn, and throwing away your outline and seeing where you end up.

**You're an author, director, performer, dancer and entrepreneur—among other things. Is there an underlying philosophy that you bring to all of those endeavors?**

I enjoy creating in any way, shape or form—and I also enjoy entertaining. There's the type of artist that would be completely fine with creating art that no one ever saw, but I need an outlet. I like to do something that other people can grasp and see and react to. You kind of become addicted to that when you're in the public space. You want to just keep creating, and you feed off that energy.

But writing a book is a little bit different for me. It's harder and more time-consuming, and it's less of an immediate kind of gratification because, first of all, it takes a long time to write and then—after you're done writing—it takes a long time to publish. And you can't tell someone, "Please read my book," the way you can tell someone, "Listen to my new song." You can tell someone, "Listen to my new song, watch my porno, watch my new trailer, look at this photo." We live in a world of such immediate gratification with social media, where you can just put stuff out in the world so fast. I feel like writing is the last art form that somebody has to sit and take time with before they react to it—which can be incredible, but it can also be frustrating.

**When did you start writing?**

I've always been a writer. I think anyone who knew me in college was always like, "When are you writing a book?" In fact, when I first got into porn, a lot of my close friends were like, "Oh, this is just something else you can write about." I would always be that person that would get myself into kind of ridiculous situations so I could have more experiences to write about. I used to take writing workshops in my off time. When I was much younger, I'd go to poetry open mic readings. I had a little poetry zine.

So the writing part of me has always been there, and I feel very fortunate because it was always my goal in life to write a book. I don't know if I would've gotten that opportunity if I didn't do porn for all these years. Going to school and being a writing major doesn't really get you a book deal, but doing porn and having people follow you on social media who look at you and jerk off to you eventually gets you there.

**Is that why you got into porn—to write about it?**

I think there were a lot of reasons I got into it, but the life experience was the main one—just something shocking to experience and delve into. I don't know. It was a whole bunch of weird reasons I wound up here. Growing up in the punk scene, I liked things that shocked people, that offended people. A lot of the taboos of porn are what excited me about it. As time goes on, it seems like a lot of people really try to fight against those taboos—especially the kind of modern-day, very feminist sex workers. But I kind of miss the days when people looked down on it a little more because it was "wrong." Over time, porn has become so accepted—which is great in some ways—but I liked that it was this weird, kind of underground thing that people didn't approve of. That always drew me to it.

**There are still plenty of people who claim that you can't be a feminist and a sex worker. What's your response to that mentality?**

They're just wrong. But at a certain point, you can't convince someone. When it comes down to it, there might just be two different schools of thought. It's like if you're a Trump supporter, you're a Trump supporter. It's hard to change them. Trump could do a million stupid things, and they're still going to love him. The feminists who believe that porn is wrong, that's just how they think. There's really no convincing them. But I think what bothers me—and I guess it's somewhat the porn industry's fault, too—is that it is very hard to get real research and real data. If you want to think porn is wrong, you could find a lot of information that would make you believe it. You could watch *Hot Girls Wanted* on Netflix and be like, "Oh my god—this is so wrong. These girls, what happened to them? *Blah, blah, blah.*"

The media likes to focus on the wrong things instead of the right things. If something bad happens to a porn star, it's very easy for the press to pick up on it. But if a porn star does something good, it's not in the press that often. I had a hard time even getting people to write about me writing a book, but if I was coming out with some kind of abuse story or something, the people who are pro-sex worker would write about it. But are you really pro-sex worker if you're only writing about porn stars when something bad happens? As much as I think it's important to come forward when something happens, it's just as important to show sex workers thriving and accomplishing things.

That's a whole other issue within itself. When the subject of porn and feminism came up in college, I didn't really know how I felt about it. I tried to do whatever quick research I could, but I was not a person that watched porn. My very first click onto a few porno things, I was like, "Whoa." But I didn't know anything.

I think the definition of a feminist is that you believe that we live in a patriarchy and you find it a part of your duty as a woman to change that. Whatever it is that you do, you want us to get away from that patriarchy. You can do that in porn, and you can do that not in porn. But I obviously know so much about the porn industry, and I think women can get a lot more out of the porn industry than many other industries. I mean, look at music: It's so male-dominated. It's even kind of segregated. I think porn is pretty inclusive, and there's a lot more women in control and in power than you'd find in almost any other industry.

**When you wanted to write your first novel, did you get any sort of pushback from the publishing industry? It seems like they only want juicy memoirs from porn stars—not fiction.**

Well, I'd say I was very lucky. I always had my foot in writing, and I've contributed to several anthologies. There's been a few where it was a bunch of sex workers contributing. I got my book deal because I contributed to a certain collection of erotica called *Asarotica*, which was put together by Asa Akira, a very close friend of mine and an amazing author and woman in the industry. I had a chapter in her book, which had chapters by many other porn stars, and she told me that the publishing company took an interest in my story, and so they contacted me.

But I have actually tried to ask around. When the time came and I knew I had a bit of a name, I was like, "How do I get a book deal?" People were like, "You have to get an agent. You have to do this. You have to do that." I tried cold-emailing people. Nobody wrote me back, so I have to give credit to authors who have managed to push through that and actually get a book deal that way. I'm sure me having a following helped with that, but they contacted me about my writing, so I was lucky in that sense.

When they contacted me, I really did think it was going to be for a memoir. I always assumed my first book would be a memoir. There was a while where I really wanted to write one. Now, I'm so happy that I've been writing fiction because a lot of women in adult or in entertainment in general, if their first book is a memoir, a lot of times people just think they want to tell their story and don't necessarily look at them as a writer—or they might assume that you got a ghost writer or whatever. But I'm sure one day I will write a memoir. I mean, who knows? If I get that million-dollar book deal that Amy Schumer got, I'm not going to say no. But I'm also not going to wait for the call.

**What were the challenges you discovered as you started writing your first book, *Night Shift*?**

Writing a book is hard. It's like, be careful what you wish for. I've written a million scripts, and I know people might laugh at writing a porn script, but it's pretty fucking challenging. I've written 30, 40-page porn scripts, and it's got to flow. Sometimes you have writer's block. So I would have the same challenges that a writer of a mainstream TV show would go through. There are pornos with intricate plots! I've also been a guest sex columnist, and, like I said, I've contributed to a lot of anthologies and written short stories, so I guess I always thought it would just come naturally to me.

But, no—it's so different to write a novel. Sitting down when you have literally nothing on the first page is so daunting. Writing the first word when you know you have 90,000 more of those words to go, you almost feel like it's a joke. So I tried to get advice from other authors. I tried to read as much as I could about writing a novel. But, ultimately, you've got to just dive in and do it. There's no easy way.

**What drew you to the choose-your-own-adventure format?**

The publishing company suggested it. They wanted me to try doing a choose-your-own-adventure erotic novel, which is another layer of difficulty. I started with an outline, and since it was choose-your-own-adventure, it almost looked like a crime map, like, "Okay, and then she's going to go here, and then

they're going to go there." So I did that, and then I started writing, and halfway through my writing, I just threw out the outline because I started going off on my own tangents. And then I had to come up with a new outline. That actually happened to me both times. With my second book, I was like, "I'm going to really stick to my outline this time"—and then I didn't, because once you get going, you've got to just go and see where you wind up. But it's challenging. I look at it now and I can't believe I wrote all this. I mean, it's 350 pages.

**As you pointed out, the choose-your-own-adventure style is another layer of intricacy that most novelists are not dealing with at all. I imagine that many—if not most—established authors of fiction are incapable of writing something like this.**

It was pretty difficult. You're trying to make sure every single story matters and every single story has a beginning, middle and end—multiple middles, actually, with all the different paths and all the different adventures. It was pretty fun. I tried to make it so that it doesn't seem like one main story and everything else is just around it. I really tried to make every single story really matter.

**What are the challenges of writing erotica?**

You're constantly trying to find different words to describe sex, and there's really not that many of them. I was always worried about repeating myself and I would find myself thinking, "What word can I use for orgasm here? Okay, what position have they not done?" When you're really in the middle of the book, you kind of forget what you did in the early chapters.

People had told me, "If you want to write a book, just self-publish." No way—I need a person to give me a deadline. I need a person to look over things and be like, "Yes, no." In the editing process of my book, my editor pointed out that there were two sex scenes in the book that were almost identical. You know when you're telling a friend a story that you've already told them and they're like, "You told me this, dude"? It was like that. I genuinely must've thought in that moment that it was the first time I was coming up with it.

**Someone looking from the outside might think that you're writing erotica because you're a porn star. But I can't imagine it's as simple as that. Was erotica something you were drawn to before you got into porn?**

I have always liked writing about sex. I was never particularly drawn to erotica, but this is kind of where I landed. I did read a lot of erotica before I started the book. I wanted to make sure, yes, it's important for people to get aroused by the book, but I wanted the story to be good. I wanted the characters to be good, the stories to be good. I wanted people to want to keep finding out what happened beyond the sex.

Also, it's funny. I can't take myself as seriously as a lot of these erotic authors do. Humor is very important to me when I'm describing anything, but particularly sex. And not really when I'm describing the sex, but the story leading up to sex. Think about if I was talking to my friends about a date I went on or what I did last night—and it's a sex story. I would use humor in that, too. So I hope that people find the book easy to read and fun and not quite as heavy and serious as a lot of other erotica out there. I wanted it to be relatable because there's no reason for it not to be.

**The history of the naked body in art goes back millennia, but people seem to draw a line when it comes to erotica or porn. They don't think of it as art. How do you feel about that?**

I guess I have mixed feelings about it. I definitely think that porn is artistic, but do I want to see it next to a sculpture at a museum? No. I think that's what separates porn and erotica from the art world. When you make a porn, your number one goal must be to get someone off. If somebody didn't get off to it, you've failed at making a porn. Whereas if you watch a Netflix movie that has some penetration in it or something, it's meant to arouse you, but you're not watching for the sake of getting off.

It's funny because I've always tried to fool people with my porn scripts. It's always my goal to write a plot that's good enough to get people to *not* fast forward through it. I'd always pride myself on it. I think I've definitely succeeded. At the AVN Awards, I won an award for best screenplay, so I wrote a pretty self-deprecating speech. I'm like, "I won an award for the part of the porn that everybody fast-forwards through, not for the actual porn that was made." And I guess I tried to do the same with my erotica.

So while I don't want to be the person who says porn's not art—I think porn is beautiful and amazing and complicated and I think it's important—I do think there is a difference between something that is artistic and something that is pornographic. It's the same with my book. Obviously, I want people to read it—but there's very, very descriptive sex scenes. I guess I would not give this book to my parents. But if I was in a nude photo shoot that's hanging up in a museum, I'd be like, "Mom, look what I did!" So maybe that's where I'd draw the line.

Joanna Angel Recommends:

1. Supermarket (the novel) by Bobby Hall, a.k.a. Logic
2. *The Queen's Gambit*
3. Ghost - (entire discography)

4. Killswitch Engage - Atonement

5. The Used - Heartwork

Name

Joanna Angel

Vocation

Adult film star, director, writer

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