On making people feel things

Writer Alexandra Kleeman reflects on her evolving writing practice, the illuminating uses of keeping a journal, and what it means to truly look forward.

August 25, 2021 - Alexandra Kleeman is a Staten Island-based writer of fiction and nonfiction, and the 2016 winner of the Bard Fiction Prize. Among other places, she has published work in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Harpers*, and *The Guardian*. Her work has also received scholarships and grants from Bread Loaf, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Santa Fe Art Institute, and Art Farm Nebraska. She is the author of the debut novel ***You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine*** (Harper, 2015) (a finalist for awards from the New York Public Library, National Book Critics Circle, and the Center for Fiction) and ***Intimations*** (Harper, 2016), a short story collection. Here she reflects on her evolving writing practice, the illuminating uses of the internet, and what it means to truly look forward.

As told to Thora Siemsen, 2435 words.

Tags: Writing, Inspiration, Process, Education.

Do you have a structured daily writing routine?

I have an unstructured daily writing routine. On a writing day, I do a lot of things that might seem kind of psychotic taken together. I basically wake up around noon. I have a nocturnal writing schedule, and I spend all day just trying to soak up information, trying to fill myself up so I have something to work from. Then about 12 o'clock when my partner goes to sleep, I sit down and I start writing. I think it's kind of an unhealthy ritual. It's an all day ritual. In some sense, it's totally unformed, but in another sense it takes up the entire day without breaks. I'm always just worrying and trying to wind myself up and work myself into the problem that I'm going to write about.

How often do you journal for yourself?

I always have a journal with me. The journals kind of filter or restrain what I see. I try to only put things in there that exist in the world of the project the journal is intended for. When I'm writing down fiction, I have a separate journal for that, and I try to keep myself from mixing other things in there. When you go and read over it or when you're stuck and writing a non-fiction piece, and you hit a piece of information that doesn't belong at all, it can be really jarring for me. So the journals are there for extemporaneous thought, but they're also narrower than an all-purpose journal. Maybe I need an all-purpose journal, too.

You and your partner, your husband Alex Gilvarry, are both authors. What are some ways you make time for each other's creative practices?

I had never been with someone who was a writer, too, and I wouldn't say it's something I have to have in a relationship, but it's been really different and really great to be with someone who's always got part of their mind in their book project, too. It means that you have a person who understands when you're not wholly present because you have some weird idiosyncratic problem that you created for yourself worrying you in the back of your mind. It means that I don't feel guilty when I talk about this non-existent, self-created problem over dinner or whatever because it's really bothering me. It's not that we always have the right solutions for each other's problems, but it's a total freedom to share problems. You don't worry that your problem won't make sense to someone else.

Are there other writers in your immediate family?

There aren't. My parents are both academics, and they both shaped my writing in different ways. My mother studies Japanese literature and her books, the books that were translated into English, were things that I always snuck into her office to read, that I'd read without any context. I didn't know what the particular book would be about or what it would be like, but I'd read it. It showed me a literary world that was stranger and darker and more wildly alive than the stuff that I read in class.

When I was in middle school, I read *House of the Sleeping Beauties* by Yasunari Kawabata. It's about a sort of brothel where men can come and sleep next to luscious women who are drugged and put to sleep and they don't touch them, but it's this really erotic thing just to sleep near a young and life-packed girl. It made me really uncomfortable and I didn't know how to make sense of it in terms of what I was reading in literature classes, but it seemed so alive and so real to me.

My parents both write. My dad used to teach me how to write my high school papers standing behind me and watching every sentence I wrote and if it was wrong, he'd say, "It shouldn't read that way. Go back, delete it, rewrite it." It was so incredibly frustrating and I don't think it was a good way to teach, but it definitely got me prepared for a high-level of frustration in writing and that has a lot to do with my process. I get very worked up when I write. I'm a very slow writer. Half of what I write, I delete right away. Another half of what's left, I delete the next day. It's a lot of moving backwards and forwards and feeling stuck, but eventually it all accumulates.

Does your family understand what you do for work?

They do. They didn't use to read what I wrote. Honestly I'm still not sure if they read it, but they support it. My dad will defend things I wrote that I'm pretty sure he hasn't read, saying, "They're wonderful," when he encounters online criticism or whatever. I think the nicest thing, on that note, that my parents have ever done for me, my mom told me once out of nowhere, "You're a writer and I understand what that means. So I want you to know, if you need to use me or dad in your fiction, you can go ahead. I understand." I haven't really taken her up on that.

There is a cult you describe in your novel, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, called The Church of the Conjoined Eaters. I'm thinking also about how the word "cult" is synonymous with an obsession with something. What were some of your obsessions while writing this book?

I was obsessed with spiritual ways of eating. I read a lot of diaries from saints who thought of eating as a way to change and modify their relationship to the heavenly world. I thought it was really interesting that we have no direct path to goodness or better-ness, but we believe we can sort of manipulate that path by manipulating the things around us or our daily habits. The objects that people re-associate themselves with. Even though those texts were from really long ago, it still seems to express these beliefs we have that what's up there can be changed by what we do down here. Something I don't totally believe in. I have an affection for that; I long for some sort of relationship like that.

In the present day, I became obsessed with the Fruitarian Movement. Something I read about when I went to spend some time at the Woodstock Fruit Festival where people are on an all raw fruit and vegetable based diet that mostly tilted toward fruit. The experience of switching 100% away from my previous diet and just eating raw fruits and occasional vegetables all day long, to feel the way that that changed my mind, changed my energy level, and kind of made the world feel new, it really felt like proof that you are what you eat in an essential sense, but your experience of the world has a lot to do with what you take in, right?

Hermione Hoby wrote in the *New York Times* that, in writing, you seem always to be encountering the world for the first time. How do you stay open to stimuli like that in your life, and in your work?

I often feel like I am encountering things for the first time. This is a really personal read on myself, but for a lot of my life, I've seen myself as a person who dips into one job or one field or one interest for a period of time and then quickly exhausts it and moves on. There was a time in my life when I really thought I was going to be a geneticist, and I was very invested in being a geneticist. I worked in the lab. All of a sudden, I feel like it went away. It happened with relationships, too. Living in a world that's arranged all around this person, and then suddenly one day, I'm not and it's time to move on to some other world. I think in some sense what drives me is a feeling of newness, which I connect to curiosity, which can also be a really fickle thing.

When that feeling of newness is gone, then I'm uncomfortable with that. This isn't the case with my relationship now or with writing, because I think writing is one of the few fields you can be in where what you're working on always presents you problems. Even if you've successfully written a novel, it doesn't mean you have any idea how to write the next novel. It's always starting from scratch and the only thing that you gain from your experiences is a sense of confidence, a sense that it's going to work out later on, but it can never work out using the exact same techniques. That's what I like about it, and that's why I will not suddenly drop this life to become something else.

Throughout these pursuits, did you maintain a writing practice?

I did. I always wrote to reflect on what I was interested in, what I was doing. I liked biology and I liked lab work, but I always had thoughts when I was doing it or thoughts when I was reading my genetics textbook that we're not really on topic, were not good scientific thoughts, because they didn't lead me further into the material. They branched out and connected like mitochondria to some kind of completely unrelated idea in Ancient Greek medicine. I always liked branching and jumping, and I think for science I was always supposed to focus inward.

Writing was the constant. I think writing was a kind of universal way of processing things that happened. I think some people process visually and they can work out a lot of feelings and a lot of thoughts that they have through drawing or sculpting or arranging images. For me, something exists more once I write it down.

In your short story collection, *Intimations*, there's a story called "A Brief History of Weather", where there's a game called Many Questions, which is similar to 20 Questions, but seemingly less limited. What are some ways that writing is like this game?

I think that a lot of what we do as artists or as writers comes directly from forms of play that we learned when we were younger. I think one thing that's central in playing is a suspension of the ordinary rules, and the willingness to be troubled by new rules that are made up that are not the real world's rules, but rules that you set up as problems for yourself. I think that writing is a game like that, a more open-ended game and one without a clear goal, or often without a clear sense of satisfaction when you finish it.

A lot of the play that I used to do as a child doesn't qualify as a full game. One of these hybrid things that I did as a kid was called "being wolves," and there were rules to being wolves, and the rules were also changeable, and the goal was always to change the rules in a way that would make being a wolf more exciting but without ceasing to be a wolf. I don't know why it was so easy to occupy that shared space and sort of understand with whoever you're playing with which things violated the rules and which didn't, but I think that on my own as a writer, I sort of do both sides of that when I write by myself. I propose something to myself, and then the other part of me shuts it down or takes it up.

That game sounds like an inverted version of this story of the child who cried wolf, of telling yourself a version of that story.

There's a very interesting rereading of that story that I think is ripe to happen. There's also a way in which the boy cries wolf, and the lesson is supposed to be that he told the lie and he harmed the fabric of society, but in writing fiction and increasingly in our public sphere, I feel like crying wolf brings a wolf-ness into the world. Even if this time is really terrifying, there's something compelling about it, because we're all trying to make reality with our speech. Reality is less of an independent thing than ever. It's more and more how we talk about it, or the cumulative way that everybody's opinion of it highlights these parts and diminishes these parts. Reality has become more fictional, which should be exciting to a fiction writer, but actually it's not.

What does it mean to you to be forward looking?

There's a clinical sense where I always want to, in my fiction, think less about how can I tell this story and more about how can I take this feeling, which I know is a real feeling and a real experience, and solidify it. Make it something that other people can see, and then we can talk about it. Forward looking, for me, is always just about widening our ability to sense and our ability to experience.

Alexandra Kleeman recommends:

VALIS by Philip K. Dick

Empathy by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions? by Vinciane Despret: A Belgian philosopher's expansive critique of how our methods of studying animals limit the type of behaviors they can show us.

Brainiac - *Bonsai Superstar*: This album excites all my atoms. I listened to it a lot alone on my first cross country drive. I remember pulling off the highway and into an abandoned convenience store parking lot in a little town in Iowa because I had to dump out a cooler of mostly melted ice. It was very dark but there was one streetlight that looked decades old, and a swarm of big moths flying smack into the light and falling into the pool of light below, and "Flypaper" was playing on my stereo. It was probably the most American I've ever felt.

Walk instead. I love to walk distances that are usually driven or bussed, it makes me feel more like a body. I respect the space in between more after I've let it make me feel small.

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Alexandra Kleeman

Vocation
Writer

Fact

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