

# On forging a new path



Author and filmmaker Christopher Zeischegg discusses reinventing yourself, finding the right audience, and sticking to daily rituals.

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As told to Brittany Menjivar, 2750 words.

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**Your collection Creation is largely about your collaborations with the artist Luka Fisher. I would love to hear what it's like to make such a close friend the subject of your art. How involved was Luka in that process, if at all? How much did you tell her about it when you were working on it?**

The book initially was not supposed to be about Luka. The most shithead version of me was thinking, "If I put out a short story collection, I'll have a placeholder that will give me a year or two to put out another novel." So I started compiling the short fiction and essay work I had written over the past 10 years or so, a lot of which was written during a specific time in my life when I was very close with Luka.

I had written an essay about her back in 2010 or so; I revisited that, and it kind of [lent a structure to] the rest of the collection. I thought it would be interesting to weave our relationship throughout the text, and I did bring it up to her at that time. We did a lot of crazy shit together in the first several years we knew each other—and then I got married, and I was less willing to hurt myself or suck dicks to pay for art.

I've calmed down quite a bit, but she's still involved in underground queer film and so forth, so I wanted to end the book with a more contemporary conversation about where we were at in our lives. I thought that would add a certain sweetness to the book because so much of it is about explicit sex and violence, and my relationship with her is this sweet, platonic friendship that has carried on for nearly 15 years now.

**In the book, you assert that while many projects spring from a specific emotional state, it can be difficult and even harmful to sustain that feeling for the duration of the project. You write a good deal about a short film in which you had staples inserted into your chest. How do you personally navigate the relationship between art and pain, whether emotional or physical? What do you think about the idea of suffering to create good or important art?**

It's not an unusual thought process, especially for younger artists, to feel like pain has to fuel your work. That was probably true for me in my 20s. I do think [the impetus for a creative work] has to be a problem that you're confronting, and it has to be big enough that it's worth making something out of, especially if we're talking about a novel that's going to take several years to work on. That feeling has to be pretty crucial—but I only fester in the shit for a few months, and then it becomes more monotonous, like going to the gym. You've just got to do it to get through it.

When I speak to a lot of older artists, it seems to be love for work that propels them beyond that stage. Otherwise, you're just caught in the novelty of feeling one thing or another. When I reach the latter half of writing a book or the editing process, I'm not really emotional about it. It becomes about craft—and I take that seriously at this point. But there's still something exciting about the energy that comes from youth, especially from people who are really volatile. That's probably why most of the people who blow up in music are in their

teens and early 20s—they still have that insane emotional vitality. But it's hard to sustain that and live a healthy life.

**You've written about your insecurity around being perceived, especially after quitting porn. When it comes to your career as a writer, do you still feel the pressure of the public eye, or not so much?**

It's less now, just because enough time has passed that fewer people immediately identify me with my porn persona. Initially I felt as if it gave me an audience—but I hated the audience. I was able to publish my first few books on the basis that someone would read them because I was at least mildly popular in adult films. But the feedback from that audience was terrible. They'd say, "This isn't sexy," or, "I don't understand why you made up this part of your memoir where you're getting murdered." [laughs] My relationship to porn and sex work at this point is pretty negative. I don't think it was a good thing for me—and yet I've mined it quite a bit for my work. It helped me to come up with these books, but also I hated it and I never want to do it again. With my last novel, *The Magician*, it was the first time that I was able to find an audience that understood what I was doing, and that's been nice.

**How do you think that audience came about?**

It's been a mix of luck and my pursuit of getting this book published. I had put out two books with an indie press here in Los Angeles called Rare Bird. This woman named Oriana Small—who I think has written the best porn memoir ever, called *Girivert*—introduced me to them. I'm grateful to have been with them, but I don't think the books found the right people. So when I wrote this last novel called *The Magician*, they didn't want to publish it. I couldn't find an agent; everyone I tried said "No," or "This is not going to be something that is going to make money." Long story short, I looked on my bookshelf, I saw the book that I thought was the most fucked up, and I emailed the publisher. He said he wasn't doing very much, but he suggested I talk to this guy named Philip Best, who curates Amphetamine Sulphate Press. He put out the book, and that was the first time that people reacted to my writing in a way where I felt like they understood what I was trying to do.

**As you mentioned, you often return to the same themes in your writing. You write about sex work a lot; there's a lot of Dennis Cooper-style violence. How do you continue mining these themes while still finding ways to make your stories fresh and interesting?**

I'd like to *not* keep returning to the same themes, first of all. I think why I'm at the end of my rope with this shit is... In my early 20s, I discovered people like Bret Easton Ellis, Dennis Cooper—a lot of the more commercial transgressive writers, for lack of a better word—and that was really exciting. Then, by the end of my 20s, I felt like I had become a character in those books [laughs]. When my porn career ended, I ended up being a hustler. Then I was working for James Deen, the porn star, around the time he got accused of sexual assault. So my life fell apart again. I had a very grim idea of my future, and it was wrapped up in this bullshit. It was the only way I really knew how to make money, but it was no longer any fun. And my way of processing that was writing.

**If you want to move away from those themes, what do you hope to explore next?**

I have a draft of a novel in the can; with that manuscript, I'm trying to go back to what I was interested in prior to my life becoming so wrapped up in sex work. I still loved horror films, and I want to return to that love with whatever sort of literary sense I have now and craft something that isn't explicitly about me and the bullshit of whatever I was dealing with. I'm almost 40 years old now. I do motion design for a living. My life is on an even keel—even though shit happens. I'm getting divorced now, which sucks, but I'm not going to write a divorce novel. I like genre fiction written in an elevated style; I don't know if I can call my own shit elevated, but that's the attempt.

**I did notice that another thread running throughout your stories is the fine art world—why is it a source of fascination for you?**

When I was first hanging out with Luka, she was so interested in visual art. I liked it, but I didn't know anybody except for heavy-hitter artists. I did have an opportunity to be in a Matthew Barney film around 2012,

which was one of the coolest experiences of my 20s. But what really pushed me in that direction is that I started a relationship with a woman I ended up marrying back in 2016. She's a professional artist, so for the first several years we'd go to museums for fun, and she would show me different artists she was into. I developed an appreciation for that world, but I also realized how much of it is bullshit. So much of the art world is a facade, as is the literary world. How many people are actually doing this as a job? Very, very few. And yet everyone's pretending, and most of the people who can put out work on a regular basis are funded by other things.

**A lot of your work is autofictional in nature—and a lot of that autofiction revolves around killing off friends and loved ones. You start *Creation* by talking about how you wrote about your dad's hypothetical death in your autofictionalized memoir. Then Luka Fisher and Christopher Norris, author of *The Holy Day*, die. What's up with that?**

In the case of my father, that was the one situation where I actually felt pretty fucked up about it. My father bought the book to support me symbolically and was just flipping through it. And then he found a passage about him dying, and he ended up reading that whole story, and he didn't have the context to understand what the fuck autofiction was. So it became this wound for him, at least temporarily. He got on the phone with me, and I felt really sad trying to describe what I was doing.

As for the other part, though... If people don't know Christopher Norris, he has now designed three book covers of mine. I love him. We have a weird history—I can't remember meeting him [during this time], but he swears that we did. He was a production designer at Kink.com at the height of my adult career, but he was also an ex-hardcore kid and into fucked up movies. He mailed me a copy of his first book when it came out, and we became big fans of each other's work.

He had asked me to write a short piece for a reissue of his novel *Hunchback '88*, which came out through Inside the Castle. I wanted to play with the trope of cursed objects, VHS tapes and so forth, from nineties horror films—[except the cursed object in this case would be] his book. Then, when I was putting together this collection, I was like, "Chris, can I extend that story and be really mean to you because I think you'd find that funny?" We like to make fun of things that we're both into, but kind of think are embarrassing—like old dudes who are into hardcore bands and graphic design. I was talking on the phone with him, and we were both like, "It's so fucking stupid how many of these bands we were into as kids are now doing these midlife crisis tours." And the joke was, "The graceful way to age out is to write transgressive literature." So that's what we're doing, for better or worse.

And then Luka... She's just such a good friend of mine. For her and for Chris, it's a flattering thing because I'm involving them in my work.

**You do motion graphics as your primary job. Do you have any interest in filmmaking as a personal creative practice right now, or do you mostly see it as a career that you enjoy?**

Well, I went to film school. I graduated from USC in 2010. That's why I did adult—to pay my way through school. For a long time, I was interested in visually adapting my literary work, which is kind of why I started writing more seriously. I thought, "This is a way towards making movies."

I think my perspective has shifted a little bit. I still would love that possibility, but I kind of don't want to do it as an indie filmmaker anymore. My last major personal film project was with Luka and a few other people. We made a short film that was supposed to be a companion piece to my novel *The Magician*. When we started that process, I was a hooker... and then I fell in love with this woman, and that was not part of the deal. My aspirations for my future became much more traditional—I wanted a family and all of that. So there was a change in my trajectory.

Now that I do editing and motion design commercially, I'm less interested in spending my free time doing filmmaking. I certainly don't want to be in front of the camera anymore, and I sort of stopped watching movies because then I would be staring at my fucking screen all day. I still want to adapt something, but I don't know what would need to happen for that to be a reality. I am not going to raise a bunch of money, ruin my life, go

into massive debt the way most young directors do these days. The industry has changed so much since I was a kid, and the mid-range film is so hard to produce now.

#### **How do you work around your career to make time for your writing?**

Over the past several years, I've learned that I need routine in my day to day, so I have a much less volatile life [than I used to]. I wake up at 7 AM. I make coffee, I meditate, I journal. By 9 AM, I go to my desk and start working. That's it, every single morning—unless something fucked up happens.

When I was with my wife, I would spend some time with her in the mornings, so if I really needed to work on something, I would get up a little bit earlier. When we were both in the middle of intense projects, we had a good dynamic where she would work late into the night and I would get up early, so we each had our own time. If I get into another serious relationship, I'll probably attempt something similar. I have a lot of respect for people who keep consistent work hours for things that they're very serious about.

#### **Christopher Zeischegg recommends:**

*The Cathedral of Mist* by Paul Willems. This is my go-to book recommendation for pretty much everyone. It's short, beautiful, borderline spiritual, and you don't need to be familiar with any niche literary movement to get into it.

*United Kingdom of Anxiety* by Zamilska. If Trent Reznor hadn't resigned himself to scoring Disney films and had instead committed suicide, so as to be reincarnated as a Polish electronic producer, it might sound something like this.

Burpees. The fastest way I know of to fight depression & 'body positivity.'

Independent literary presses. If you read books, you already know about the classics - obviously, take your time with those. But anything exciting (i.e. worth your time) written in the past 5 years or so is probably not coming out on a big press. I'd recommend you start here: Apocalypse Party, Amphetamine Sulphate, and Rose Books.

Kindness.

#### Name

Christopher Zeischegg

#### Vocation

author, filmmaker

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