On finding the energy and will to move through impossible situations

Author and professor Patrick Cottrell discusses following your obsessions, following your intuition, and how to get unstuck.

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As told to Alexandra Kleeman, 2542 words.

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I've been a fan of yours for quite a long time. We met at a public library event in Austin, Texas after your first book, *Sorry to Disrupt the Peace*, came out. And I loved that first book, with its offbeat and alluring sense of mystery. Your newest novel, *Afternoon Hours of a Hermit*, is very interestingly a sequel, which has a lot of the same atmospheric and humorous rewards as your first. What made you want to write a sequel and how did you think about its relationship to the first book?

In my head I was like, "Sure, this could be a sequel." Then as I went on, I was like, "Well, the narrator is the author of the first book. It's technically not a sequel per se." But of course it's inviting comparisons between the two [books]. I wanted to know if a reader—whoever that is—could go back and see this same place, same atmosphere, same family, but also understand that something about this narrator has fundamentally changed. And the way that he's being perceived by others is really wrong. And I guess, it's almost like the books are nested within one another.

I became attached to the emotional atmosphere and I wanted to go back into it. Once the narrator of *Afternoon Hours* leaves the house, the book becomes radically different than the first one. Of course I had the thought that people would think that I rewrote my first book at various points in the process, but as I was writing, that's not what I believed I was actually doing.

It doesn't bother me if people think that I rewrote my first book because so many of my favorite writers have repeated themselves and have rewritten the same book over the course of their careers. Rachel Cusk, for example, with her [*Outline*] trilogy, Karl Ove Knausgård, Annie Ernaux, Patrick Modiano. I like when I can read a random page from a book and I know who the author is, based on their style and the book's preoccupations. Marie Ndiaye's books are so original, each one has a different premise, but they all seem to circle around the same themes and obsessions. There's nothing wrong with following your obsessions; the strongest writing comes from that impulse. If you don't feel strongly about your material, why write about it? I feel drawn to obsessive writers, obsessive minds.

It makes me think about Thomas Bernhard, one of the biggest writers of the same book over and over again. To me, when you get into Bernhard, the books also seem so different. *Extinction* has the same emotional palette in a completely different arrangement, scale, and register than *The Loser*.

Extinction feels like such a novel-novel. Yeah, he's important to me. It's amazing how contemporary his work reads. It's not dated at all.

Where does the impulse to write a longer project come from for you? Do you feel full of ideas for novels or do you watch and wait for the right one to pursue?

I don't have a lot of ideas, to be honest. I'm not someone who starts with an idea. For *Afternoon Hours of a Hermit*, I wrote from a feeling and an image, a photo of my brother that appears on the first page.

I really think the pressing question is: Do you have the energy and the right circumstances to propel yourself from the beginning to the end? Can you sustain your own interest in the project? You don't necessarily need a strong plot. It doesn't have to be a complex story. You can move through a book by other means, but it really comes down to energy. Do you have the energy and the will to do it? Is the situation set up in the right way so there's enough energy to move from the beginning to the end?

If not, it's going to be a struggle.

I think that that's very interesting because despite having an emphasis on atmosphere or on place or on situation, there's a feeling of propulsion through both your books that's palpable. There's suspense and you want to know what happens next, even though—

That's good.

… you don't necessarily think that what happens next will change everything, but there's still the chance it might. Mysteries can come in many forms and perhaps most of them are deeply unsolvable.

A resolution is something I'm dangling over the reader. There is a sense that something will be solved by the end. And I do think that's why I've used these noir conventions because there's the promise that justice or order will be restored. Isn't that the difference between a mystery and a noir? A noir has to have some element of justice. That's my sense of noir anyway, besides the atmospheric trappings. The noir holds you to a particular framework.

But at the same time, especially with this book, I feel like the end opens into something ambiguous. I feel attached to the ending of this book. If this ending didn't work, I don't think I could have gone forward with publishing it.

This book reminds me of some of my favorite existential mysteries, like Paul Auster or Patrick Modiano.

Patrick Modiano is truly obsessed with the same story. And that story from his childhood abandonment, it has proliferated beautifully into a huge body of work. Each book is a little different, but much of his work circles around his childhood abandonment and his parents' absence and their rejection of him, and the shadowy worlds his parents inhabited. His work seems to be about recovering those memories and repairing them.

I think for many people, stories can have these powerful, animating influences that are hard to let go of. We don't want to let go of them. My new book is very much about being stuck in the past. And the question becomes: How do you move forward? How do you move forward by writing another book? How do you move forward in the eyes of other people who don't want you to move forward, who would prefer that you stay the same?

That's such an interesting formulation—it makes me think of narrative momentum differently. What if plot were defined not by forward movement, but by the energy and struggle it takes to attempt motion? Or even stay in place. Who else is an inspiration to you in thinking through the dynamics of the novel and the short story in unconventional ways?

My colleague at University of Denver, Joanna Howard, is a brilliant writer. She writes novels, memoir, collaborative projects. She's an expansive thinker, writer, and reader, and she's also helped me in terms of navigating the world at large. Her latest novel, *Porthole*, is about a woman film director who has been canceled and sent away for having inappropriate relationships with her male stars. I feel strange saying "woman film

director," but it's an important aspect of the book, which is a social fantasy, in a way. It's so good.

One thing we have in common in our trajectory through writing is having written poetry before we turned to fiction. In my case, it denaturalized many of the craft elements of fiction—I could never think of finding a character, only of building one. Does poetry play a role in how you think of writing fiction?

I don't think so. Something I appreciate about poetry is that it exists on its own. It's a document of a particular moment, an arrangement of the world in that moment. It just is what it is. So I appreciate poets for the way they help us understand and see the world. With novels, there's so much that we have to do with moving characters around in time and space; we're constantly explaining the way the world works, what things look like, how they feel. Poets don't have to do that. How lucky for them.

And with novels thinking about what needs to be scaffolded and structured and contextualized and what can just be.

Maybe something that we can take from the poets is the fact that we need to do less explaining. Maybe we don't need to do as much work as we think we need to. That's something I thought about with this book. Could it be a strength to leave certain matters unexplained? Patrick Modiano does that. His books are about conjuring a particular mood, atmosphere, and feeling in the reader. It's not so much about what gets resolved or not. He immerses the reader in a complicated and upsetting emotional world. What happens on a plot level is secondary. He does that book after book, which is kind of amazing.

I feel remiss to not have asked about your short stories, because I know perhaps you're compiling a collection. You just had a piece out in the *Paris Review*, "Curtis," and you've written a story that I adore about otters. What's the relationship of these shorter prose projects to the longer novels that you write?

It's always a relief to write a short story compared to a novel. I even hesitate to call them short stories because they're so short. They're like prose poems. I don't think they adhere to traditional story mechanics. What I will say about them is that I write them quickly. They seem to arrive and I don't work on them for too long. I listen for the sonic quality of the sentence, I try to make the situations as absurd and compressed as possible, and the last line should always be something wild.

The story form that I struggle with is a traditional story that's about 15 to 20 pages. It's funny because that's the form I teach in undergraduate workshops. I've written one or two of those and it was so hard each time. I can't seem to figure them out. But these shorter pieces, they're almost like transmissions or accounts.

One of the things that struck me so much about "Curtis," is the feeling of freedom and having this third person voice. It just feels really agile and can take unexpected turns.

That's interesting. I don't like writing in third person. Sometimes it is necessary, but I don't enjoy third person at all. And actually, ["Curtis"] had so many little edits once it was accepted, I was shocked at how badly I wrote that story. Little mental errors everywhere, it was horrifying. The editors at *The Paris Review* made the story a thousand times better. I don't think I could write in the third person for an entire novel. There's something too manipulative about it.

What is it about the first person that is sort of a home or origin point for you in writing?

First person allows you to be direct and intimate while creating a ton of space for emotional evasion.

I always go back to Lydia Davis and *The End of the Story*. It was on the new fiction shelf at the library, like…in 1995….some time in the mid-90's. I was in high school when I read that book. I've read it numerous times since then, but I initially found this kinship with that close first-person voice that can't stop obsessing. That was my gateway, that was my portal. I didn't really know that I wanted to write like that, instead I looked to that book for guidance about the adult world.

Somewhat mistakenly, as a teenager—I was like, "Oh, this is what adults are like. This is what adult relationships are going to be like." The entire book is about a rumination on a breakup with a man she's still obsessed with and how to write about it. And based on the premise, I thought, "This is going to teach me how to be in a relationship."

I feel like you weren't totally wrong. My life is more Lydia Davis-y than anyone else's.

I love her. I think that most of my favorite books are in first person. There are so many beautiful and brilliant third person books, too. Jane Bowles always writes in third person.

When you talk about it this way, it makes me think when you're obsessing or when you're afraid or when you're neurotic, first person can kind of honor that. But writing in third person, there's something faintly derogatory about it or ridiculous. It doesn't take the obsession as seriously as it should be taken.

There's more detachment in the third person. It's easier to laugh at the situations. When I write in third person, I'm aware of the characters as comic figures. That doesn't happen for me in first person, because it's more about the transmission of interiority. As a reader I enjoy the feeling of being immersed in somebody else's obsessions, not my own.

I think you do such a good job following your own path through the novel and making it unique and satisfying in a really unconventional way—in a way that might run counter to a lot of conventional craft wisdom about how characters should be fleshed out or what we need to know to care for them. I wonder from a teaching perspective, how you try to free your students to be creative in that same way?

Intuition is so important. More writers need to trust their intuition and make it work. You have to keep surprising yourself. If you're not surprising yourself and you already know everything that's going to happen, that's where you lose interest and energy.

More writers need to feel the freedom to follow their own intuition and to be really wild and bold stylistically.

And upon reflection, I always wish I could do more than what I did. Whenever I look back after finishing something, I'm like, "Ugh, I wish I would've gone even further." But I think that my new book was very intuitive and not following any kind of traditional arc. If you can just close your eyes and imagine what you want to be reading—that's what I think about. I try to describe what would happen in a book that I would want to be reading on my own. It sounds silly, but sometimes it works when I get stuck.

No, it's almost like you are your first reader and to write the exact book that you would want to be reading is the promise… The whole reason to write, I suppose.

Perfect, let's end there.

Patrick Cottrell recommends:

WNBA: If you've lost faith in the NBA, watch the WNBA, especially A'ja Wilson (Aces) and Alyssa Thomas (Mercury).

Dogs: best animal, period.

Helen of Nowhere **by Makenna Goodman:** It's special and increasingly rare when a strange and beautiful book is published fully as itself, fully realized.

Milwaukee: I'll always consider Milwaukee one of my true homes even though I don't live there anymore and rarely go back (I return there in my writing).

Crawl **by Max Delsohn:** You could pair this vibrant story collection with Jose Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* and feel momentarily better about the world.

Name

Patrick Cottrell

Vocation

author, professor