

On writing without shame or fear

Author Ashleigh Bryant Phillips on writing honestly about your experience, the problem with gatekeepers, and making art when you come from a rural place.

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As told to Kristen Felicetti, 2504 words.

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Back when we could all gather together at events, I remember sitting behind you at the [Stephen Dixon](#) celebration. One of the speakers, they said something about how for Stephen, it was “all about the work” and I noticed you were vigorously nodding at that statement. Maybe you don’t remember, but was there something that really spoke to you about that?

[Laughs] It’s wild that you asked me that right now, because almost an hour ago, I was in my mama’s kitchen, making some supper for us to eat. And we were talking about this recent conflict happening within my family over my debut book. Some of my kin feels embarrassed and real hurt by my stories. And this is something I never intended. And this has caused great stress within my life. I’ve been having bad dreams about it. Because where I’m from, family is most important. You sacrifice everything for the family. Every decision you make is for the family. There is no “I,” only kin.

So now, I feel like I have to pick between the work or the family. And I hate that so much. But when it comes down to it, the art and the work is most important. It kinda hurts me a little to even say it. But even if folks get hurt in the process, after we all die, the work’s the only thing that’s gonna be left. After everybody’s gone, the work will be there forever. And other folks can interpret it and enjoy it, and maybe somehow find meaning in it. Maybe it’ll even bring some sort of solace or peace. I write about my people because I don’t want their hard lives and hurts to have been for nothing. Don’t nobody in the bigger world ever see them or hear them now anyways.

So, I guess I was nodding way back in the day at that Stephen celebration, like I was taught to when I was a little girl in church, to nod enthusiastically at the part of the sermon that sounded good, even if you didn’t really know exactly what it meant. Being “all about the work” sounded right to me, it was preparing me for my book to debut.

You live in Baltimore now, but we’re doing this interview while you’re in Woodland, North Carolina, a town of less than 800 people, and the place you grew up. Your most recent collection *Sleepovers* is inspired by people back home and being proud of them. And these are people that don’t show up that much in literary fiction. I feel when you’re writing your own people, especially if they aren’t represented much in fiction, there’s this feeling of extra responsibility or extra burden to get it right. Like, am I playing into what other people will think is going to be a stereotype or a trope? Or am I trying too hard to resist that trope, and then I end up writing something emotionally dishonest? Was that a consideration for you? Or do you not think about things like that?

When I was writing these stories, I wasn’t thinking about a reader. Especially my first person narrators, of which there are plenty in *Sleepovers*, those narrators sure ain’t thinking about someone sitting down and reading what they’re thinking and seeing and saying on a page in a book. I’m just documenting, to the best of my ability, what’s going through the heads of my characters, everything they’re seeing, everything they’re feeling,

everything they're smelling, touching, tasting. And I believe that if I'm just honestly transcribing in this way, surprising things will pop up that are hopefully fresh and hopefully exciting and new and feel really real and immediate. And those surprises and bits of freshness will counteract or complicate the stereotypes that pop up as well. As much as stereotypes harm us and keep us ignorant, they're strong as hell to combat after they've been inbred within our society since the beginning of time. At a reading I did recently, someone asked me if I grew up in a church handling snakes.

Really?

Yeah. And though I didn't, I did grow up seeing a lot of snakes out in the country. So I guess the spirit is there. Earlier today, though, I tried my damndest to get my mama to throw away this Confederate flag shot glass that said, "These colors never run." And I can tell you this because it's true, it's a true detail. It's also true that my mama has never been north of Washington, DC. It's also true that she struggles to get by financially. And I can't get her to see systemic racism for the life of me. It is what it is. Because I am of the stereotype and trope of redneck simpletons, I can get in there and wrestle with all its nastiness, it's my job to do it. And I hope that other people from rural or overlooked places will do the same. Hopefully we can come out the other side with some revelation.

When you're not of the stereotype or trope, it's hard as hell to get in there and poke it and prod it and come out with something enlightening. Like I can't imagine myself trying to write a Londoner. That Londoner would say "loo" all the time and be really into "pubs,"—my god, so dumb, so useless.

I want to wrestle with complications. And I can only do that if I'm working from what I know. Here's where I give my "where I'm from testimony" that I've had to give to all sorts of folks since *Sleepovers* has come out. All I know is I'm from an isolated and poor county in North Carolina where there's more deer than people. Folks here don't have therapists, they have alcohol or drugs or they talk to god. Folks here sleep with guns and bring you food when someone you love is dying. My mama grew up suckering tobacco and my daddy was a mechanic and he always told me, "Never forget where you come from." And when I left home for the first time for college and found myself surrounded by people who saw me as a redneck country cousin, I was ashamed and embarrassed and wished I coulda been born and raised somewhere else. Luckily I was a good reader so things were easier for me to go to college. But a lot of kids back home never get the proper help they need with simple reading skills and just due to that, a whole world is much more difficult to access. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about that. And it was scary for me to tell you about that Confederate shot glass, but it's true. We're not going to learn anything as long as we're comfortable and safe. We have to explore where we're scared and vulnerable and ashamed.

I feel the same way. You mentioned how you want to see more rural people writing. There's a lot of talk lately in publishing about representation. And I don't really see a lot of discussion happening around diversity of education level and class and I'd like to see that enter the conversation, too.

I really liked this quote you said in an interview with Jeff Oloizia, "Imagine how powerful it would be if we were to equip poor rural people with the ability to get their work published with its flaws and all. I want to see misspellings and run-on sentences, I want it to be as pure and untouched by editors in New York City as possible."

I wondered if you wanted to talk more about that and if you had any more ideas of how you think that could happen, because that's something I'd like to see as well.

We've seen it in visual art. My favorite type of visual art is often called outsider art, where folks from rural isolated places create from their own passion without any instruction. Never seen a Matisse, never seen a Monet, they're just doing their own thing. And it's so pure and powerful.

I would love to see *The Paris Review* publish a story by someone written from the house across the street. The house across the street from my mama is where a little boy was found dead in his trash can. That tore mama all to pieces too because she'd given that boy's mama money for diapers from time to time.

Unless we start listening to the people that need the help the most, we're going to keep killing each other, we're going to keep letting each other suffer and die. Our government ain't gonna take care of us, we can see that clear as day, so we got to do whatever we can to start taking care of ourselves.

The way I see it, the publishing world should seek out writers from lower economic backgrounds, who grew up in low literacy households, and who can actually shed light on what the actual fuck is happening in the forgotten places of America, where folks need help the most.

And I think the only way it's going to happen is if we have somebody inside the gates of the publishing world who's lived it. I feel like the gatekeepers, the folks on the inside, whenever they get stories from folks that aren't represented in literature, they don't know the difference between the cliché and what's real because they've never lived it before themselves.

Luckily change is already happening. *Vanity Fair* just brought on some new editors, including Kiese Laymon, one of the lights of our times.

You talked about how you don't think of the reader when you're first writing, but what's your process for revision?

Most of the time when I write a story, I've been seeing it and hearing it in me for a very long time. So when I write that first draft, I don't really fuck with it that much. If I do, maybe some scenes get cut, some things get more streamlined. Sometimes I'll change a point of view.

I'm not a big believer in sitting down every day and putting words on the page. Words on a page do not help me. I'm trying to transcribe an experience of a person. And that can only happen if the person is willing to share.

So you're like, walking with them more before you even sit down to write.

Yes. And I'm listening and observing everything that's happening around me. And when I come across something that makes sense to what I'm hearing and seeing in my head then I just kind of lock it in. Because you never know what you're going to encounter in your everyday life that is going to make sense to the story that you're building. It can be little things, like one time I was in the grocery store and I was looking at canned beans. And I was like, "Oh my god, my [character] Krystal, she always buys Bush beans because even if they're more expensive, they taste better and that's important to her." And even though I didn't use that in any of Krystal's stories, it's still very important to know that about her.

I like to see and hear my story like a movie in my head before I write it. I've found that in my experience of being in workshops and teaching creative writing that folks who need to revise a lot are big fans of ideas. They don't really know who their characters are, what they want, where they're from, where they are, what it all looks and sounds like exactly. They have some ideas about it but nothing's set in stone. For me, there's no real meat to it.

You mentioned teaching, what kind of things about writing do you teach?

In Bible school camp that I used to have to go to every summer, there would always be a scripture that we would repeat every day. And we would have it remembered by the time we went home from camp. So the scripture I get my students to learn is "No fear or shame in the dignity of your experience, language or knowledge." It's one of Jack Kerouac's rules of writing that I stumbled on one day. And I'm not even a disciple of Kerouac, I've never read a book by him. But if I can get my students to remember anything when they go home from my class, I hope it's that lil rule. It's guided my work and helped me wrestle with hurts and fears.

Beginning writers are really afraid when they're first starting out because they want to write something cool. They want to write something good. They want to make art. There are all of these expectations.

But I feel like in order to create any gripping, true, real work, you have to be unafraid. And you have to be honest about who you are and what you've experienced, because that's immediately going to reach the reader. I just try to get my students comfortable with who they are and where they've come from. And I do that by telling them where I come from. Loretta Lynn's "Coal Miner's Daughter" and Dolly Parton's "Coat of Many Colors" are also very helpful. Those preach "No fear or shame in the dignity of your experience, language or knowledge" all day long.

I try to make my students proud of their work too. I do a lot of memory driven writing exercises, a lot of psychologically driven writing exercises so that students can get to know themselves better, can get to revisit their memories and stories. A lot of folks don't realize they have the most amazing stories from their lives. All you gotta do is be willing to look closely and honestly, with no fear or shame.

Ashleigh Bryant Phillips Recommends:

The work of Minnie Evans.

Free Day by Ines Cagnati, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* by Randall Kenan, the poems of Frank Stanford.

The music of Brother Theotis Taylor and this Classical Impressionist compilation.

Raising Bertie. Portraits and Dreams.

Telling others you're grateful or appreciative of their work/existence. Even if it's a stranger.

Getting a BBQ cornbread sandwich with coleslaw and Texas Pete hot sauce from Bunn's in Windsor, NC and reading all the marks inside the front door where it's been flooded from the river over and over again.

Research where the most economically distressed counties are in your state. Learn the names of those counties and the towns in them. Find a nursing home in that area. Send the residents one or two of these lil pets. As seen here.

Name

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Vocation

Writer

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Missy Malouff