On finding inspiration in your pain and illness

Author Caren Beilin discusses seeing comedy in unlikely places, overcoming everyday shame and panic, writing about yourself in a fictional context, and what she's learned from her students' impatience.

March 16, 2022 -

As told to Maddie Crum, 2441 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Mentorship, Day jobs, Creative anxiety.

Your book *Revenge of the Scapegoat* is about many things, including the experience of a woman with rheumatoid arthritis. This isn't your first book describing pain and illness. What initially drew you to those subjects?

My own pain and illness did, which is an amazing thing about pain, that you don't think about it until you have to. And then when you have to, you really have to. It stops the other conversations and makes itself very known. Pain came into my life like a shock. Even though I'd grown up with a sick parent, even if you know other people. Once you actually experience pain, it's like a comedy. You can't even believe people are going around in pain. Like, what? And that came into my life in 2015.

It's amazing that other people can't feel your pain. You're having a conversation or working, or in front of your students or whatever you're doing, and somebody's stabbing you in the foot or something, and it's a very odd sensation to just be the personal kind of caretaker, or tender, to something that nobody else can see. Especially with these more invisible illnesses. And it's a comedy. It's hilarious that there's this whole other story going on that you're just sort of managing or is consuming you while there are so many—I would have to say very comedic multiplicities happening that feel outstanding.

It seems like a really difficult thing to translate into language. Are there other writers on illness or pain or disability who you admire?

So many. Yeah. I really love Denton Welch's *A Voice Through a Cloud*. He was meant to be a painter, but then got into this horrific bicycling accident and ended up writing these novel-memoirs about his pain and his extreme sensitivity. And then he struggles so much with that moment in illness where you're supposed to be so communal. You're supposed to lean on others. You're supposed to be so docile and taken in by what your needs are. And he didn't want to be that way. He was not that much of a people person. And what does it mean to not like people that much, but then to need them so much? I love writers who are kind of grumpy and he was just such a good grump about what was going on.

And I really love how Samantha Irby talks about chronic illness. She writes these comedic essays about growing up with a mom with multiple sclerosis, which is something I grew up with. I teach a narrative medicine class, and I start with some of her essays and it's the perfect place to start. She just really welcomes people to be human.

You've mentioned comedy a few times, and you approach your protagonist's illness with humor. Where do you think that impulse comes from for you?

I think that it is true that I have humor, and oftentimes, just in my life, like to tell funny stories. I have a self-deprecating style of being. But honestly the experience of—not writing this book, but publishing this book, has been a revelation to me: that I am a funny writer. I did not know that, which is very funny, but even while I was talking to Danielle and Marty, the publishers of *Dorothy*, and I increasingly saw that the marketing around it was going to be about it being a comedy, I was sort of confused. I was like, "Oh, okay. That's an interesting angle. This is all really serious though."

I think that if I am being humorous, it's coming from me being committed to being deadly serious and being willing to say what's serious to me. I feel very serious about everything. But also, I don't feel protective of that. I think it's good to laugh, but I wasn't making jokes.

And I think that *Revenge* has a few different origin stories. I think that's true of any writing project. You could think of different moments when it began. But one of them is the silliest moment ever, where I got way too stoned on some hot chocolate or some chocolate or whatever. And I was so out-of-my-mind stoned for like eight hours, and my partner was walking me through being alive. And then I finally was coming down enough to sort of just be okay.

I don't even think I was diagnosed at this time with rheumatoid arthritis. I was just in bewildering pain going to work every day. I was working at a bookstore. I could hardly carry the books. I was just really bewildered by pain and fear. It was such a hard time. I finally found somebody who would sell me some edibles. But I was doing everything at this moment to try to…I don't know, I was in a lot of screaming pain.

And I'm sitting there just feeling so silly, finally coming down a little bit from being so stoned, and I'm just in the bed, and I all of a sudden I just think that my feet are Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, who are two of my favorite characters in literature. And I just start putting on the silliest little puppet show with them talking to each other, and it was just silly. And my feet were—I could hardly walk. And I was devastated and really scared. And it was just such a good moment to be silly with my feet, because I was really scared of my feet from what was happening to them. And so that's very funny, but it's arrived at through kind of desperation.

I really enjoyed the dissonance in the book between the craft advice that the narrator gave her students and her students' lived experiences.

The book has all kinds of nonfiction in it. And I was working as an adjunct at an arts college in Philadelphia for a while. And yeah, I mean teaching is a very, very humorous and just lastingly humbling experience, and whatever you think you're doing in the classroom, or directing people toward, there's just something amazing happening that you don't understand that's also happening, or eight million things that are also happening. And it's such a comedy.

Teaching is buffoonery. You just put forward these ideas you have, or that your professors in graduate school had that you want to have now. And students are so wonderfully undercutting, and they are wonderfully undercutting because they're amazing in their thinking and they have all these thoughts that are not yours, but also the university experience is undercutting because people are in massive debt and it's not quite working and there are just other things in the classroom that will always undercut your ideas about literature. You just have to be so humble and think of it as maybe a comedy, but hopefully a redeeming comedy. I think it's redeeming to all be there together doing whatever we're doing.

Working with students who are of this younger generation, Generation Z, they're quick in places that I'm not quick. They're aware of things in a quicker way than I am. They have a different temporality to them entirely. Their impatience is really interesting. Where are they impatient? Where are they even willing?

And I find myself writing toward my students. I don't think my students are the perfect audience for my work. But I need their impatience. Their impatience helps me understand what I need to say and what I shouldn't say, and how quick I need to be, or when I need to put things deeply on the ground so that everybody can be okay with it or know what I'm saying. Their quickness… I don't know if it's quickness. Impatience. Something. Something about writing into that group or somehow thinking of them, holding them in mind, holding their attention and what they can and are willing to attend to in mind, somehow has helped my writing quite a lot.

You also write about adjuncting specifically. And you mentioned that you have worked as an adjunct. How has that precarious work affected your writing?

Adjuncting is…god, what is adjuncting? It's very grossly underpaid labor. You're doing something so special. And so giving and you're holding up the university. In almost every instance that's true. You're holding up the university. You're holding that college up with your energy.

I was adjuncting in Philly, and it was really unstable labor. I never knew if I was going to be offered the classes. I was fortunately on Obamacare, and this was the first leg of Obamacare where it wasn't bad yet. So it was pretty good, the Obamacare. I don't know how I would've been an adjunct without Obamacare. It would've been a complete impossibility.

I was having a really good time in a lot of ways, but I think I was privileged enough to be adjuncting, too. I didn't have college loans. I wasn't in debt. Which is horrible to say. I don't think adjuncts are privileged, but it's just an impossible situation.

That reminds me of a quote from your book from the character Ray: "It's a privilege to be a good person or even to seem like one."

Yeah. And Ray's language in the book is Ray's language transcribed, and that's something that Ray deeply believes.

I wanted to ask: what is your relationship to the categories of memoir versus autofiction versus novels from life? Are you interested in those categories? Or not so much?

I have some interest in that. I think I don't really relate to memoir-writing because I think of memoir as being a very sincere or earnest space of wanting to convey something that has happened, or tell out a truth of some kind. Whereas I think more meta spaces, like an autofiction space, are more upfront in saying, "I'm using maybe my name and maybe nonfiction things or things that come from life. I'm putting my name in the mix, or something about my biography is in the mix here, but I'm using it to do something I want to do with literature. I'm playing with my biography."

There's something sort of insincere about autofiction that I really require. And I mean, there's all kinds of sincere heartbreak and real tenderness coming from me in the book. But to be able to use your biography to play, that is a very redeeming, helpful, healing thing to do. So I like that mode a lot more than, "Let me use my biography to tell or to profess or to confess."

How do you manage to maintain space in your life for writing?

I think the point of these interviews is in part to acknowledge people's labor and the disarray of work options and ways of survival available to you as a creative of person. That just becomes really a bombarding thing in one's life. And you feel fear and panic and shame a lot of the times. And then, add on top of that just the internet and social media and things that take our attention or make us feel kind of worried and ashamed and panicked.

As a concrete example, when I was starting to write *Revenge of the Scapegoat* and I felt quite a little amount of space in my life, I just felt bombarded by all of these other kinds of emotions that were not creative emotions or things that were really going to help me. And I couldn't write, and I hadn't been writing for a long time, for me. I just felt pretty stalled and blocked. And one of the first things that I started doing that allowed me to write again was that I would meditate in a chair in my room, and I would meditate for 20 minutes, and I would just do this mindfulness meditation with my eyes open, just calmly staring at the corner of my bed.

What is something you wish someone told you when you began to make art?

That’s a really cool question, because I think we all have different traumas of what people did tell us when we began making art. So it’s really fun to think of a corrective. Okay, I have an answer that I feel very certain of, but it’s not that cool of an answer. It’s not really good, but it is what I wish. It’s so genuinely what I wish.

One of my regrets in my writing life is that I was not exposed to the writers who I really, really use and need and liberate me as a writer very early. I didn’t have a particular writing teacher who just saw me and knew that I needed to read these particular books, and it would’ve been so awesome if somebody had recommended these writers to meet earlier, because I think I would’ve loved to be a younger reader of these writers. It would’ve been such a perfect hit, and it would’ve really liberated me from some of the stuff that I was exposed to at that time, which was a little more traditional.

And I’m specifically thinking, one of my regrets in life is that I wasn’t a young reader of Dennis Cooper. And I wish I read him in high school. I wish I was around with some of his work. I wish somebody had handed me that, and I feel the same way about Violette Leduc. She’s somebody I discovered only recently, and I should have been reading her when I was young. It would’ve been really instructive. Just her freedom of personality and the way she expresses that in her sentences. I mean, I’m happy to know her now. You can’t change fate or timing, or maybe it was the right time to meet new books, but I just think that I would’ve been more radically open at a younger age, given more permission.

Caren Beilin Recommends:

Medical narratives and creative work that intervenes in some sense on the medical industrial complex:

Hilary Plum’s recent essay here.

Samantha Irby, specifically essays from her collection *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life*

Carolyn Lazard’s essay “The World is Unknown”

A Voice Through a Cloud by Denton Welch

We Both Laughed in Pleasure by Lou Sullivan

Your Presence is Requested at Suvanto by Maile Chapman

Joan is Okay by Weike Wang

Post-Traumatic by Chantal V. Johnson

Name
Caren Beilin

Vocation
writer, teacher