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March 19, 2024 -

As told to Patrick Cottrell, 1832 words.

Tags: Writing, Inspiration, Beginnings, Process, Focus.

# On only making something when you're driven to it

Author Rita Bullwinkel discusses competitive sports, writing as portraiture, and the practice of noticing.

Your debut novel *Headshot* revolves around a boxing tournament set over a weekend at Bob's Boxing Palace in Reno. The focus is on eight characters, one weekend, one tournament. When you began to write, were you thinking about constraints, either time-wise, location-wise, and so on?

Yes. I was thinking about how the space of a sports tournament is incredibly, relentlessly finite. Tournaments are very small, claustrophobic spaces where time both hurtles forward, and can also feel suspended. When one is competing in a tournament, like when reading a very good book, the rest of the world seems other and flimsy, which can be a good feeling. It's intoxicating. Also, I was trying to write a book of portraiture, and eight seemed like a good number of portraits to try to tackle, and also a number that would work in a class tournament structure, so that's why the book has eight characters, as opposed to 16, or 32, or 64.

Were there any particular books that served as models in terms of writing portraiture?

There are books that I love that are portraits, but they're usually portraits of just one person. *Kick the Latch* by Kathryn Scanlan and *Lord of Misrule* by Jaimy Gordon are both incredible, voice driven books of portraiture of individuals that also both happen to be about sport, in their case horse racing. One of the reasons I like both of those books so much is because of my ignorance about the sport that they deal with. I know nothing about horse racing, so when reading about the language of the sport, and the politics and the drama, I might as well be reading about dragons.

Another complicated but beautiful book-portrait that I love is *Ray* by Barry Hannah.

With *Headshot*, it was a great challenge to have eight main characters, and to try to take each of their portraits with equal weight. I don't think the weight is equal on each of the girls. Some do stand out more than others, and obviously some progress in the tournament while others don't, so we spend more time with them there, but I feel like I was able to make each girl contestant sit for a portrait, if ever briefly. Hopefully the reader feels like they know each of them.

Literary portraits are so different depending on whether or not the narrative is in the first person. Voice can be a kind of portrait. *Headshot* is obviously in the third person, so it's not the girls' voices that are primarily painting the picture, it's their interior thoughts and what is important to them, and what has hurt them, and what influences how each of them understands themselves in the world, and how they walk through space.

**You and I have talked a little about your background as a competitive water polo player. Win or lose, it seems like athletes are constantly forced to face their own limitations, bodily, mentally, spiritually or otherwise. Can you talk about how being an athlete might relate to being a writer?**

Many writers have athletic practices, or were once great athletes, and I think this is not an accident! Years ago, I pitched a panel to AWP (Association of Writers & Writing Programs) where I proposed that all the writer-panelists be former competitive athletes, and that a t-shirt gun would be rented, and that, mid panel, we, the panelists would try to articulate this connection, if there is one, and also t-shirt-gun-hurdle free t-shirts into the convention center crowd. The panel was not accepted. I think writing and sports-playing are both obsessive, deluded acts where you have to have some will, and some ability to improvise, and some imagination. Writers are also massive addicts, and that seems related, too.

In regards to this book specifically, I had this trove of memories, of being 12, 14, 16, 19, 21 and structuring my entire life around these tournaments, of traveling state to state, pool to pool, where everything was always the same, same girls, same tournament structure, same competition, but sometimes we were in Phoenix or sometimes we were in Texas or sometimes we were in Michigan. It was like traveling between space ships. I wanted to write about that feeling, the smallness and infiniteness of that world of the youth athletic tournament, and I felt like I could better write about that feeling if it was longer work, if it was a novel. Some other writers that write beautifully about the feeling of playing a sport are the way that Natalie Diaz writes about playing basketball, and the way that David Foster Wallace wrote about playing tennis. Joyce Carol Oates wrote a book *On Boxing*, but that book is about the feeling of watching boxing at Madison Square Garden, mostly, which is something else entirely. That book isn't at all about the feeling of competing, it's about watching and projecting on those that are inside the ring. I wanted *Headshot* to chase the feeling of competing.

**I think I was going to be on that panel. I was really confused about AWP's lack of support for us. Anyway, there are so many beautiful and strangely grotesque images throughout *Headshot*. I'm thinking of this moment when one of the boxers, Rachel Doricko, is eating an orange. "She picks the white veins of orange peel gunk carefully off each segment." The phrase orange peel gunk is so pleasing. I love the way you see and hear the world. Do you have a practice of noticing? Do you keep a notebook? Or are these images more spontaneous and intuitive?**

Oh gosh, Patrick, this compliment means so much to me coming from you, one of the greatest noticers, and therefore writers, that we have! James Wood very aptly titled his beautiful book of literary criticism *Serious Noticing*, and I think that is a good description of not just what happens in literary criticism, but also what happens in literature at-large. My favorite books show me the world in a way that changes how I see and hear. I try to notice things, although I think my powers are limited. I don't keep a notebook, but I am an obsessive list-maker, but it's almost as if as soon as I make the list, the list becomes irrelevant. Somehow, the making of the list is the only thing that seems to help me. Here, with the orange peel gunk, I think you are right that I liked the sound! I do like the sound. I write out-loud, so will often privilege the sound of a word, or the sound of a sentence, above all else.

**Would you say your attention to and privileging of the sonic was honed through your editorial work with Diane Williams at NOON?**

Absolutely. Diane is brilliant and working with her at NOON was one of the most impactful experiences of my life. I was deeply changed by working with her, by listening to her orally consider work, and by listening to her turn over the merits of sentences both for their sonic qualities and for their narrative meaning. I first started working for Diane in 2012, which was also when I first started producing a great deal of writing. Diane always says, good writing needs to stand up orally. Serious readers will read your work aloud. There is some writing that I like that does not sound good aloud, mostly stuff with a lot of dialogue, and that's fine, but for my own work I do want to try to make it stand on its own legs when read aloud.

**With the structure/form of the tournament in place, you've created propulsive energy and a lot of forward momentum because at the end of the book, we know someone will win. You can move forward and backwards in time while still having the anchor of the tournament to come back to. Did you always have this form in mind?**

No. I wrote a draft of this book from a single character's point of view, in the first person, and it wasn't good, it wasn't what I wanted the book to be at all, so I just threw it away and started over, this time with the frame of the tournament, from the third person, and that frame felt true and right, so when I started that draft, I wrote it all the way the way through, and thought, yes, this is the book that I wanted to write.

**I've thrown away huge piles of words and pages and sometimes it can be so freeing. If one feels stuck in one's writing, what do you recommend?**

I recommend reading. I also recommend walking. I think a lot of bad writing happens when people write at a time when they do not want to write. I only write if I'm driven to it, if it feels like there is no other option than to begin.

**Your work, including the story collection, *Belly Up*, frequently revolves around the horror of having a body. There's so much physicality and visceral movement in your book. I'm thinking of Andi Taylor who visualizes "a tunnel of vacancy" in another boxer's rib cage which must be filled by her hand or the way Rachel Doricko imagines her "insides looking like pounded veal." I myself have a problem writing about**

**physicality and the body. You're really good at it. How do you do it?**

This is a great compliment! Thank you. I think having a body is really strange, and so I think that is likely why I frequently circle it. Although I'm not sure I am horrified by having a body, I think I am mostly just confused. Bizarrely, the periods in my life when I have been most in control of my physical form, when I was competitive athlete, are the same times when I felt most estranged from my body. It's almost like the more I asked of my body, the more it seemed like a tool, as something separate from myself, as something that could be used.

**Rita Bullwinkel recommends**

Dead in Long Beach, California by Venita Blackburn—nobody bends time, or writes sentences, like Blackburn. I've loved all her books, but this sci-fi masterpiece is my favorite yet.

Isolarii publishes incredible, small, pocket-sized books in the tradition of renaissance island books, and everything they make is brilliant, but they're newest, Under the Wings of the Valkyrie by Sjon, is magnificent.

The images of Jenna Garrett always leave me changed. I'm grateful that two different versions of two of her images don the American and UK *Headshot* covers.

The best art gallery in San Francisco is Staircase Gallery. See any show they have up. They're always stunning and otherworldly.

babaa, which was recommended to me by the brilliant writer Natalie So, makes the world's best sweaters.

Name

Rita Bullwinkel

Vocation

author

Fact

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Jenna Garrett

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