

On being vulnerable in your work



An interview with writer Sheila Heti

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 2776 words.

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A book like *How Should A Person Be?* poses big questions, as does your latest novel, *Motherhood*, which asks questions concerning reproduction and responsibility to ancestors. Do you feel that questions have to be of a certain magnitude to warrant a book?

No, they just have to be personally compelling. The last book I did was about clothes, and dressing, and style, and I really felt like that is not a topic of a certain magnitude, as you put it. But it was perplexing me, so it felt worthy of writing about, because if it's important for me to figure it out, I figure it's important for other people as well. I'm just like everybody. You just also never know where a subject's going to take you, so I don't think the magnitude is in the subject. I think the magnitude is in the approach, and how much you care about it.

I was talking to a friend about *Motherhood*, and she mentioned your ability to hold up a mirror to readers. This made me think about the narrator in *Motherhood* consulting the I Ching using coins, which answer yes or no, about whether or not she should place a knife in front of a mirror in her bedroom. Which is to say, while reading *Motherhood*, I saw myself and I saw the knife.

That's cool. How do you mean you saw the knife?

I think I expected it to be more painful to read. I wasn't expecting to be a trans woman reading about reproduction in a way that made me feel affirmed. Now I want to share the book with my mom and my sisters.

That's amazing. That makes me so happy. I was wondering about that. I thought about trans readers, and I thought, is this going to be at all alienating? Because I didn't want it to be alienating to anybody. I think that this subject is already so alienating, and it already makes people feel left out in the cold, and the last thing I wanted to do with the book was enhance that feeling in anybody.

Do you want this book to be helpful to women?

Yeah, for sure. I mean, I want it to be helpful in different ways. I think that it's helpful just to say, "Think about this." Don't turn your mind away from it. It's an important thing to think about. It's not frivolous. It's not a waste of time. It's not something that should be beyond thought. If you don't think about it, you're more likely to end up in a place that you're unhappy with. I don't want people to be unhappy, because unhappy people do bad things to the world. I hope that the book lets the reader experience my thoughts and then their own thoughts, and that my thoughts become their thoughts, and then their thoughts become more clear to them. To me, that's a kind of help.

Are you guided by strong urges to finish every project which you start?

No, I don't finish everything I start, and I'm never in a rush to finish. I think it's important to finish, because if you don't, that work kind of haunts you forever, if you take it to a certain point. But if you don't take it to that point, it doesn't haunt you. It's like friendship. Not every friendship lasts years and years. Sometimes they just last a week, or sometimes they last a month, or sometimes they last a year. It's the same with a book. Sometimes a book is just with you for a little bit of time, and then it's not relevant to you anymore, and I don't think that you should force yourself to finish what's no longer relevant to you.

Does that apply to books you're reading as well?

Yeah, absolutely. I don't finish most books I start, and I don't think it's because they're bad. I got what I wanted out of it. Now I want something else.

What's in your queue at the moment?

I have Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists* in my bag, and I'm rereading Tao Lin's book, *Trip*. I read it once in manuscript form. He emailed a draft to me, and now I'm reading it as the book itself, because we're having a conversation about our books. There's a lot of similarities. There's a book that was just sent to me called *Bullshit Jobs* by David Graeber, which I'm excited to read.

What were some of your bullshit jobs?

I luckily haven't had very many. For his definition, a bullshit job is a job where you don't feel like you're contributing anything to society by doing it. Where it's almost like counting eggs or something. You might feel like a machine could do this as well as you, so why are you doing it?

For myself, I don't know. There was a while that I worked at Kodak, but I really loved the woman I worked for, so I wouldn't even call that a bullshit job, even though the stuff that I was doing was moving addresses from one database to another, and doing it very badly, and making lots of mistakes in the process. A computer could have done a better job. I would stuff envelopes, but as I was stuffing envelopes, I remember I made myself memorize poetry to keep my brain occupied. I don't remember those poems anymore, but I did for a few years, so I managed to occupy myself. It didn't last. If it had lasted for 20 years, I would have called it a bullshit job, but it only lasted for a year.

How do you account for the interruptions of your social calendar while writing a book?

I don't consider it interruptions. It took me seven years to write *Motherhood*, so I don't consider it an interruption. I need life in my life.

You wrote once in *Bookforum*, “When my work is going badly, it is usually because I’m trying to do something unnatural: build a permanent, perfect obelisk to celebrate my own glory.” What are some ways you nurture an attention to modesty?

I don’t ever think of that word. I think that making art is a kind of immodest act. I mean, you’re humbled by how hard it is, and how many great people have done it before you, and how your books compare to the greatest books that you’ve ever read. So there’s a kind of humility in that, if not modesty. I guess for me, I’m really good at taking feedback, and I don’t have this feeling like, “Oh, I wrote it, therefore it’s great.” I’m very open to all the ways that it’s not great, and taking suggestions from other people who read it, and working to make it better. I don’t just think it’s great because I made it. I always feel like it needs a lot of work, and it needs the hardest work I can give it, and it needs other minds to direct me.

Do you like the adrenaline of a deadline?

I don’t have very many deadlines with my books. I make up the deadlines myself in collaboration with my editor, but I try to make them far enough away that they aren’t adrenaline-inducing. But yeah, you do a lot more the week before your thing is due than you do in the months previous. I think it’s just necessary, or else you just work forever and you don’t work hard enough.

In 2001, you and Misha Glouberman created the ongoing Toronto-based lecture series *Trampoline Hall*, where three people deliver lectures on subjects outside their areas of expertise, then take questions from the audience. Over the years, what have you enjoyed most about the dynamic of a non-expert addressing an audience?

The vulnerability. I consider the lecture series theatre more than lectures. What is onstage that we’re watching is not a delivery of information. It’s like the expression of the character, the personality of the person, and their vulnerability, and speaking about something that they’re not an expert in is something that brings out a different part of you.

Then the audience extends themselves towards the person on stage with their heart, because they see that vulnerability. That is something I really, really love about the show. In the audience, you know that you could be onstage, because it’s not some person who’s onstage because they have a great deal of expertise.

Do you often read people and feel that they’ve attained that same vulnerability on the page?

Sometimes. I like seeing that. I think *Durga Chew-Rose*’s essays have that for me, for sure, in her book. Who else? I think Tao Lin’s new book has that. I just think vulnerability is beautiful, and it makes you feel close to another person, to see somebody who’s vulnerable, because you yourself are also vulnerable, and it just is a way of connecting, and I think it’s strong. I like seeing that on a page. I like seeing it in people.

Also in 2001, you were commissioned to write your play, *All Our Happy Days Are Stupid*, a process fictionalized in your second novel, *How Should A Person Be?* (2012), published before the play’s eventual sold-out runs in both Toronto and New York City in 2015. How did seeing your play onstage change how you think about timing?

It changed it a lot. Having the play, its first production in Toronto, was one of the best, craziest feelings I’ve ever had in my life. You want things to happen at a certain time for you, because you have this sort of controlling idea that that’s the way the world is supposed to work, and that’s the way it’s supposed to work in your life, and you know best. To have a play come out more than 10 years after it was supposed to, and it being fine, and it being better than it would have been if it had come out when it was supposed to, you’ve got to be in collaboration with time. You’ve got to let time do its work.

We’re not so smart about when things are supposed to happen for us. We’re in such a rush. We want things to happen the way we think they happen for other people. We don’t have very good imaginations. Our imaginations run along such boring lines in some ways. Like, oh, you write the play, and then it gets put on, and then that’s over. As opposed to all the crazy things that actually life is like, which is all these strange turns and twists and delays.

Fate’s intervention. Well, that’s like motherhood, too.

Yeah, and I think a lot of women today kind of have this feeling of, “I know how it’s supposed to happen for me, and if it doesn’t happen in exactly this way, there’s something terribly wrong in my life, or there’s something terribly wrong with me.” It’s just not true, and it’s such a horribly painful way of thinking. It would be so nice if there was something that reminded us that just because we think it should be a certain way, doesn’t mean that’s actually the best way for it to be for us.

Your brother, David Heti, is a stand-up comedian and you write in *How Should A Person Be?* about having to “know where the funny is, and if you know where the funny is, you know everything.” Do you come from a generally funny family?

I think my father is probably funny, and my mother in her own way, but I don’t think of us as a funny family. Everyone’s pretty serious in my family. I don’t think that my family squelches funniness, but it’s not like we sit around and tell jokes or anything like that, or all try to make each other laugh. No.

That could be a funny thing, to be so serious.

Yeah, it is, totally.

During your time as interviews editor for *The Believer*, you said to Joan Didion, “It’s hard to find a book that’s safe to write. Because one always goes to dark or difficult places.” Which part feels less safe to you, the writing of a book or the releasing of it into the world?

I feel unsafe in different ways. The unsafety in writing a book is the fear of not being able to pull it off, to finish it. Then, where it’s going to take you mentally, and in terms of the choices you make in your life, because it always affects everything that you’re doing and your path forward.

Releasing a book, the feeling of unsafety is just people hating it, people hating you, and then being cast away from the herd of humanity. Especially now. I don’t think I felt this when I released *The Middle Stories* or *Ticknor*, because there wasn’t the internet the way that it exists right now. I always feel very aware of how fragile my perception of my own work is, and I know that people will see it differently than I do. The fear is just the fear of being attacked in the street. That’s completely different from the fears that you have writing it.

Does having a dialogue with friends about your work help you feel more comfortable with some of those things that you’re worried about?

No, not always. I had one friend read the book, and she read it at a pretty vulnerable stage in my writing of it, and she really hated it. I felt completely crushed and humiliated by what I had written, and that exact fear of being an outcast from society. Her reading of the book and her response to the book made me feel like an outcast from her and from our friendship. So, no.

Yeah. But you invest in friendships where someone could tell you how uncomfortable you made them feel, as a friend, in your work.

Yeah. I mean, there's no good in the friendship if there isn't honesty. And that sometimes means that they're going to hate it, and think you did something really bad. But I've never had an experience quite that painful as the one of my friend reading that draft in 2016. I would rather that happen than it not happen, but it was hard.

Do you read your reviews?

Yes, and I told myself I wasn't going to. I'm not seeking them out. I'm not Googling myself. If I know that the review is published and somebody tells me to read it, I'll read it. I'm trying to find the balance, because I am sort of curious. I only read them once now. I'm not going to read it twice. But why would you close your ears to what people are saying about it? It's a conversation. Art is a conversation. Like what you were saying earlier, it's not an obelisk. It's communication between human beings. Yeah, I couldn't imagine. It would be like a one-sided conversation not to know what people were saying about it.

Have you avoided a one-sided conversation through collaboration?

Yeah. I mean, well, the first two books, *The Middle Stories* and *Ticknor*, I was pretty isolated in my life at that point. The books kind of have, to me, a very isolated feeling. Sometimes I miss it. Sometimes I wish I could just go back to that place of having no friends, and feeling totally alone in the world and alone with my writing, and apart from culture. It seems to me so far away and so long ago, and I guess it was. That's maybe something for my old age now.

Have friends or family members ever explicitly told you to not write about them?

Family members, no. I had one friend who told me to never write about him, and I never did. I'm not sure if I would have anyways.

Sheila Heti recommends:

The [audiobook](#) of the 1955 novel *Marjorie Morningstar* by Herman Wouk, narrated by Gabra Zackman

[This](#) interview with Mike Myers on WTF

Barbara Ehrenreich's article [Welcome to Cancerland](#)

The art of [Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian](#) (recommended to me by Margaux Williamson)

[Suzanne Farrell flinging a dove away between 0:15 and 0:25](#) in her role as Titania in George Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Name

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Vocation

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