

On writing what's true to your experience



Writer Shy Watson on building a structure for your work, the importance of DIY workshops, making time to write, the difference between composing poetry and prose, and saying everything.

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As told to Elle Nash, 2893 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Poetry](#), [Collaboration](#), [Income](#), [Beginnings](#), [Education](#), [First attempts](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Money](#).

What, to you, makes a good stanza?

I like it when a stanza is both independent and dependent. I like it to have the ability to stand on its own, to be its own little world, but to also add something to the greater poem. I like it when the line breaks really hit. I like when they have a double meaning. A stanza with a lot of that going on feels good to me.

How do you know when to make a line break? Is it just an intuition thing?

I feel it in my body. At Naropa, in one of my poetry classes they'd have us walk while writing poems, and feel when our bodies stopped. Their whole thing is somatic poetics and intuitive learning. It's a feeling thing more than a thought thing. If I'm saying it out loud, it's where my voice stops.

Is fiction feeling-based for you, or is it a little bit different? I know that you have been venturing more into prose, working on a novel recently.

Poetry feels like an entirely personal thing, where I'm not thinking of any other influences or anyone else. I don't like reading most poetry. Poetry seems like my own private therapy session. Then, when I'm writing fiction, it feels more like I'm in conversation with the rest of the canon. It's more like I'm having dinner with a bunch of writers and trying to keep up. It also feels more strategic than poetry. I have to consider the reader a lot more, I've noticed, when writing prose, whereas I think poetry is just so much more open for interpretation that I don't stress about getting a certain point across. I know the reader will make their own point out of it, but you can't really risk that so much in prose. It's a lot more straightforward.

You might risk losing the reader if you leave too much unsaid.

You have to say everything.

What was the decision for you in terms of venturing more into fiction more intentionally?

I read [Leopoldine Core's](#) short story collection, *When Watched*. It's really good. It won a Whiting Award. *When Watched* just felt like what I would be writing if I wrote fiction. It seemed like we noticed the same things. I was visiting my ex in Chicago. We went to this coffee shop one day for them to work on film stuff, and I wanted to work on writing. I just wrote down all these short story ideas. They were from my life. I wrote down stories

that I would like to put into writing, and one of them was a McDonald's employee's relationship with her creepy manager. Then, I started writing the story, and it just became novel-length. It took over, and it just felt really natural to be writing it. I felt excited about it in a way that I hadn't really felt about poetry in years, so I just kept going with that pull.

When you realized that it was less of a short story and more of a novel, was there anything you did craft-wise to help you get it to that point where it felt like a real novel? Did you plan?

I went from beginning to end, and then I sent it to a couple friends. I also sent it to Monika Woods. Then, honestly, she completely taught me how to write a novel. She was like, "No, no, no. This should be structured and have a plot," so then I crafted it more like a novel after the first draft. It was a lot of fictionalizing, because the first draft was basically true to my life, like super autofiction. I had to merge characters, because there were way too many, cut some people, cut events, fabricate events, etc. I had to mold it into something with an actual narrative structure.

Of the work I have read of yours, including your fiction, a lot of it focuses on class. It feels like a bird's-eye view of growing up poor in a way. What was striking to me and what's relatable were the ways your narrators notice the things they don't have. They notice, also, what is missing in themselves, or things people of higher classes tend to own. Not just materially, but there's this sense of lack, low self worth, or something that I think can purvey mental health struggles of the working class. I wanted to ask why it's important to present these kinds of issues in your work?

It's not written about enough. I feel like most novels I read, there's never this stress of figuring out how you're going to pay rent next month or what your next meal is going to be. It seems like the protagonists of probably 90% of the novels I've read are upper middle class, ambiguously okay financially. For me, money has always been a huge struggle. I started working when I was 11. I worked full time all throughout college. My family was constantly stressed about money and talking about it in the home, and I think it has a permanent psychological effect to grow up that way.

I remember when I was in college, I briefly dated this kid who was insanely rich. His parents had two mansions in San Francisco. One was in Presidio Heights. They had an art gallery in their house, and his mom made us filet mignon and poured us some ancient, expensive wine when I visited. He bought me dinner one night, and I was like, "Okay. Let me pay you back." And he was like, "Shy, money is not an issue with me." Then, he said, "People who grow up poor will always worry about money no matter how much they have, and people who grow up wealthy will never worry about money, ever." I've thought about that so many times since he said it to me, because it's so true. It's just always on my mind. I'm constantly budgeting. To have something occupy so much of my mental space, and to know that's the case for billions of people, but it's never really been in the novels that I've read, especially in the traditional canon, kind of upsets me. It seems off. I think it's an underrepresented mindset, even more than an underrepresented class, like just the psychology of worrying about money and the effect that it has on one's psyche.

I have to say the first novel I can remember reading at all that has anything to do with working class struggle and the psychology of making money, was Vanessa Veselka's book that came out this year, *The Great Offshore Grounds*. That's the first one.

Wow.

It's like Maslow's Hierarchy or whatever. When you're always focused on surviving, you can't focus on the things that can actually increase the quality of time that you have, because you're always trying to make it.

Exactly.

Why do you think we don't see more working class books published? Do you think that's a market demand that exists, or something else?

I think they're probably not being written so much because bigger authors usually have more money, or people who work a lot aren't able to produce book length pieces of work. I also feel like, and this is 100% speculation, people who are struggling more with work and money might not have as much access to literary agents or be as much a part of the literary world in general. There are definitely people who are working class and are part of the literary community, at least that I know of in New York. I guess I'm imagining the protagonist in my novel, living in the middle of nowhere in Missouri. There are people all across the country who are just working jobs in these places without access to a rich literary community. I don't know if there would be a market for more working class books. *The Great Offshore Grounds*... Is it doing very well?

It was longlisted for the National Book Awards.

That's good.

It's a big book, and it's one of those things where she's said, "I've always had to hustle in some form or another." And maybe that's why it takes so long to finish a work like this. Maybe I'll edit this out of the interview, but contrast someone like Ottessa Moshfegh, who has put out one book a year for the last five years. Talking about her process and stuff, that's particularly because of her life experience. She went to Barnard and the Brown, she's a hugely successful author, and her output is in part because of the way that she's been able to use her time to focus. She is doing amazing work, but there's a difference in the way a working class person has to prioritize their time. A novel like Vasselka's novel takes eight years, and why is that? There's an author out there working full time and raising children. There's all these things that go into day-to-day life that make it harder to get that work out in the world. I think access is such a good point that you make. When I was living in Arkansas, the library there was smaller than a McDonald's.

Wow.

They didn't carry much. They're just so tiny. Not very many books. Also, a highly religious area, so banned books might not be as accessible either.

I'm just thinking of all the people in these small religious towns that just do not have access to the literature that we read now, their lives are censored. That's nuts.

And you wouldn't even necessarily know, because you only have really what's available to you. I have friends who don't have internet in their homes. They're just using their phones really to browse Facebook and that kind of thing. Access is so, so huge. Growing up, even though I was writing and I was like, "I want to be a writer," I still had no idea about any of the process of getting published until I went to my first non-academic writing workshop until seven years ago or something like that. I just had no idea about how to get your work out there, nobody had ever told me.

They don't teach you that in college. It's ridiculous, because I went to Naropa, which our assigned reading was mostly contemporary women writers who teach in MFA programs now. I didn't have to read the old school canon at all, but even there I was submitting my poems to *McSweeney's*, *Tin House*, and *N+1*. Just the biggest name places, because I didn't know of anything else. I didn't know there were small presses, indie lit mags, or how to get started. I was paying 30 fucking dollar submission fees and skipping dinner, trying to make it big with a chapbook contest. You don't know these things until you know them, and school's not going to teach you.

How did you find out about the indie lit community, and what was that process like for you?

I found out because Witch Craft Mag, queen.

Oh man, I forgot about that.

I followed your Twitter. I don't even know how. Maybe I was looking up witchcraft Twitters or something. I'm sure that the name has really drawn a lot of less literary people to the magazine, because that's what happened to me.

There was a tweet, something about Denver, and I replied, "I'm living in Denver right now. Can we be friends?" Catch [Breath, a founding editor] responded, and then we met up. She invited me to a Halloween party at her house, and then turned me on to all these indie lit mags. Then, I started submitting to places like *Electric Cereal* (RIP), *Hobart*, *TAGVVERK*, and they published my poems. It felt so good, because I was like, "Oh, these places are publishing poetry similar to mine, they're actually interested in me. I'm not just doomed to fail." It was there all along, and I just didn't know about it.

Speaking of the non-academic, we have both participated in DIY-type workshops. That was definitely how I learned more about writing. I came from a journalism background. For me, learning to write fiction, I didn't even know where to start. For you, you got a creative degree for your bachelor's, and now you've done several kinds of DIY-type workshops. What has that process been like for you in contrast to the academic world?

Way better. I've been really fortunate to take a lot of great workshops. Shout out to Tony Tulathimutte, Chelsea Hodson, and Bud Smith. The fiction workshops I took in college were really hands-off. I remember my professor would say, "Your assignment is to write for three hours straight and then bring it in." Then, he would kind of workshop it, but not really. He'd just give it back with a few notes, and my classmates would say a couple things. But the DIY workshops I've done, especially Tony's, have been so helpful. Everyone reads the story, then independently edits it. Then, they all take turns talking about your piece. You get to hear every single person's perspective. Then, the workshop instructor carefully goes through and edits. They give you a very polished, basically new, draft of your work. The workshops also provided little lessons. Tony would bring in guest speakers every week to talk about different parts of craft, vision, or whatever that week's topic was. The people who run independent writing workshops care so much. They've created this thing on their own. They weren't just hired by a school to teach a class. They sought out to start their own thing, and maybe they have more creative freedom than professors do at institutions. I don't know, it just seems more fueled by passion instead of inertia or necessity.

I agree. I haven't taken CRIT, but I've worked with Tony. He's helped me with some of my projects. The level of specificity in his feedback has been so helpful, and it inspired me to be a better editor, teacher, and learn to be really exacting about things, if that makes sense. He taught me to watch out for laziness in my writing. You learn so much from being edited by good editors.

You are a great editor, by the way. Your edits on *Drive-Thru* were so helpful.

I appreciate that so much. Also, non-academic workshops are less expensive. I think that's one of the greatest things, it's the access. You can get access to this kind of academic level of workshopping stuff but without the price tag. The cost of the MFA is, in my opinion, immoral. It's not like you're going to get a job. There are more MFA candidates than there are academic jobs. It's so competitive, and even then, what? You're going to get an adjunct position, and you're going to get paid what? Like, 10 grand a year for that, if that? I don't know.

Yeah. Nothing. I mean, I'm only applying to schools that are fully funded, and it's good that there are several, but the fully funded ones are even harder to get into. It's hard as getting into Harvard Law School or something-

Harder, even!

Damn.

What has been the biggest struggle for you going from poetry to fiction?

Discipline. Editing. I didn't do any of that with poetry. Poetry I would just write when I was feeling a surge of emotions. Honestly, usually when I was PMSing or feeling really emo, I would sit down and just write a bunch of poems to get it out. It was just so intermittent. Sometimes I'd write once a month, sometimes 10 nights in a row. It was very disordered and chaotic. Then, I'd hardly edit it. With fiction, there are no bursts of emotional inspiration that fuel me to work on my novel. Honestly, the best thing I did for it was go stay with Catch for three weeks in Denver, because then it was like, "Okay. I came all the way here to do this thing." Then, I would wake up at like nine and have coffee with her. Then, when she started working from home, I would go into the

other room and make myself write for about four hours a day.

Building a structure for myself and having self discipline, and then editing is difficult, but you've got to do it. I'm on the ninth draft of my novel. I sent it out to publishers after the first draft, and it was so sloppy and so bad, but I just wanted to do the Jack Kerouac thing like, "I wrote an entire novel in a week, and I'm sending it off." It's hard but necessary to be realistic about what it takes to create good prose. I think it takes more work than poetry, honestly. At least for me.

Shy Watson Recommends:

Água Viva by Clarice Lispector

Skeletal Lamping by Of Montreal

A Dark and Winding Road by Ottesta Moshfegh

How To with John Wilson

Cafe Mocha Soylent

Name

Shy Watson

Vocation

Writer

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