On being open to new approaches

Cartoonist and illustrator Adrian Tomine discusses storytelling, challenging yourself to draw the impossible, using imagination for therapeutic reasons, and being open to ideas.

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As told to Quinn Moreland, 2261 words.

Tags: <u>Illustration</u>, <u>Comics</u>, <u>Film</u>, <u>Mental health</u>, <u>Collaboration</u>, <u>Time management</u>, <u>Process</u>, <u>Success</u>.

How has the pandemic affected your creative process?

The work routine that I'd become deeply accustomed to—eight hours of uninterrupted solitude, five days a week—completely vanished this past year. My wife was working from home, and both of our kids were either at home all day or going to school sporadically. And when I say "home," I mean a pretty small apartment in Brooklyn. From a mental health perspective, this was a tough transition for me. I've always spent a lot of time alone, and I quickly realized how important that was to my creativity but also to my overall mood. I felt lucky that this upheaval came along right as I was finishing a book. Trying to make a deadline (or worse: being stuck in the middle of a massive project) in these conditions would've been maddening for me. It took a few months, but I eventually made a mental shift and just accepted that things were different, and I had to have different expectations about what I'd be able to accomplish. Since then, I've been working almost exclusively on screenwriting, which for some reason is much easier for me to do in fits and starts.

Pre-pandemic, how much was your work shaped or inspired by going out into the world, observing strangers, facing unexpected disruptions, spontaneity and the like? And how has that changed now that your bubble of interactions has most likely shrunk?

That experience of interacting with the world was always a component of my work, especially with regards to my *New Yorker* illustrations, but I've found that it's definitely less essential than my ideas and thoughts. Also, the screenplays that I've been working on are adaptations, so the original texts are really my main source of inspiration for now.

In terms of adapting your work into screenplays, how has it been to approach the same stories through a different medium?

I've enjoyed the process a lot. I like working on adaptations, too, because I have a very solid foundation to start with. In some cases, I honestly felt like I was able to correct and improve things from the book that had bothered me over the years. I've written some things totally from scratch, and it can sometimes feel like you're adrift in outer space or something.

Do you feel precious about your characters going off into the world and being interpreted by actors?

I don't feel as precious and protective of the characters as I thought I would. I feel confident that my original versions of these stories—the books—will continue to exist and have their own audience. The truth is, I've had complete artistic freedom and total control over my comics for my whole career, so I'm not looking to replicate that situation. In a way, my illustration work prepared me for screenwriting in that it showed me the benefits of

collaboration. Of course, there are also great hazards, but like I said, I feel like I can always retreat to my drawing board and make a comic any time I want, and that's very comforting.

Could you walk me through the process of creating a *New Yorker* cover? Are you responding to a specific theme or a moment in your own life as it corresponds to a bigger picture?

The covers usually begin with an idea, which is not the same as an image. I don't think I've had a single cover that started with a specific composition. It was more like a scene or a situation or an experience—more like a little movie in my head—and then I went through a sketching process to arrive at the image that would best capture that. Then it becomes something of a juggling act, trying to balance things like graphic design, composition, style, etc. with the original idea. I guess what I'm struggling to say is that I don't set out to just make a pretty picture. It's more like I'm trying to express or capture something, and then I'm trying to figure out a way to turn that into a pretty picture.

Do you feel more or less in touch with your imagination these days

The fact that I don't know the answer to this question makes me think… less? It's very hard to sort out and quantify. I've been doing plenty of daydreaming about non-creative stuff, like visiting friends and family on the West Coast, seeing movies in theaters, eating at restaurants I miss, so maybe I'm using imagination for more therapeutic than artistic purposes these days.

Pandemic aside, has your approach to working changed over the years?

My approach to working is constantly changing. I feel like I've been on a life-long quest to find the best way to do everything, and I'm still coming up empty. I'd probably be a horrible teacher because I don't really believe in any kind of "right way" for everyone. Switching from making comics to writing has been a massive shift, but a lot of those changes were imposed or necessitated by the task, not things I intentionally changed. I have a feeling that it's probably the internal stuff that matters most in the long run, like being open to new ideas, being your own worst critic, and aspiring for a level of satisfaction that's ultimately unattainable. I've tried my best to keep those things consistent, even when I'm trying out new pen nibs or changing the angle of my drafting board or whatever. In terms of how it's changed in the past year, I've had to come to terms with something that I always suspected, which is that there are a lot of things that are more important than making comics.

I imagine that many people have reevaluated their priorities over the past year, I know I have. Could you elaborate on this? What has shifted for you? Has the meaning of work changed?

I've just become a lot less obsessed with work, and more able to enjoy my time as a parent. At the start of the pandemic I predicted that the experience would push me in the opposite direction, so this was kind of a surprise. Work is still very important and fulfilling to me, and if I don't have several projects in progress at once I feel kind of unmoored, but it doesn't consume me the way it did when I was younger.

How do you be your own worst critic without becoming a defeatist?

You have to, at heart, be quite arrogant and self-assured.

When you have a germ of an idea, when do you know when it's worth pursuing?

When it doesn't feel like work to pursue it. Instead of staring at a blank sheet of paper, I like to do a lot of this kind of preparatory work in my mind. So if I have a handful of rough ideas rattling around in my brain, I kind of trust my subconscious and focus on whichever one keeps popping up and evolving in my thoughts. It might not be the best idea objectively, but it's the one that's going to hold my attention and excite me, so that's the best one for me.

In *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist* there is a section where you overhear a man complaining about your graphic novel *Summer Blonde*. The stranger says, "Don't end a story abruptly and then try to pass that off as anything more than cowardice." I was curious—how do you know when to end a story?

For the record, that scene in the book is 100% true to life, as unbelievable as it might seem. He was an unbelievably cutting and astute critic, and most of what he said rang very true to me. But to answer your question: It's one that I get asked a lot, and unfortunately the most honest answer is that it's a completely intuitive decision. I wish there was a more concrete formula I could share with people, but I don't think such a thing exists. It's almost like if you were playing a musical instrument and trying to decide the last note or chord of a composition. You can get very technical and try to calculate the best choice, or you could follow a prescribed pattern or tradition, but in the end, what really matters is what sounds best to you. I will sometimes have a feeling or tone that I want to arrive at, and it's a question of figuring out the best path to that. Other times, I have a very specific image or line of dialogue in my mind, and it's almost like that ending was handed to me. The best feeling is when I'm writing extemporaneously and I suddenly realize that I just wrote the ending.

You've often said that you are trying to trick yourself into the mindset of when you were a teenager and drawing comics was more about simple enjoyment than a career or work. What are the routines or tools that help guide you back to that place?

Some of it is just a nebulous, mental game. Like, you just tell yourself to not think about how a book will be reviewed or how it will sell or whatever. But there are some more concrete things that I've done over the years to help me with this. One is using cheap and simple tools. When I drew *Shortcomings*, I was obsessed with using the right kind of paper (which I had to buy in large sheets and cut down by hand), the right brush (which I would meticulously test out at the art store with a jar of water), and the right pens (which I was constantly cleaning and refilling). At a certain point, I felt like the process of acquiring and maintaining those materials was taking up more of my time than actually using them. So in an attempt to really free myself of that, I went in the complete opposite direction and challenged myself to make a comic using typing paper and a mechanical pencil. And out of that came the story *Killing and Dying*. More recently, when I started working on *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist*, I made a point to not tell anyone—not even my publisher—about it. I worked for about six months without discussing it, sharing it, even mentioning it to anyone other than my wife, and that was really helpful because it didn't feel like anyone had paid for it or was expecting it. I had the idea that if it started to seem like something I hated, I could just abandon it and no one would know, and that really freed me up.

Do you think you will try that approach again?

Probably. I enjoy the feeling of committing to a project once I decide it's worthwhile, and no sooner. Deadlines help me wrap the project up, but they're daunting and inhibiting in the early stages of creating something.

How do you define success?

Industry awards and money. Just kidding! When I was younger, my only goal in life was to have my comics published, so anything beyond that has felt like a lucky, unexpected bonus.

Are there any details you always look forward to drawing?

I like the challenge of drawing something that I think is going to be impossible, like a car or a very specific facial expression or a very detailed messy room. I used to avoid things like this when I was younger. Like, I'd just have characters standing around with their hands in their pockets so I didn't have to draw the hands. Or I'd suddenly switch over to a loose, sketchy style and kind of fake it. But now I enjoy putting in the time and work, because that's all it really takes to draw anything.

You recently created an illustration based on a 1942 photograph Dorothea Lange took of your grandmother shortly before she and your grandfather were incarcerated in segregation camps created by the U.S. government. I read on Instagram that the print was acquired by the Library of Congress where it will exist alongside the original photograph, which is incredible. What was it like working on that piece?

I've said this before, but when I draw something, particularly in my precise, detailed illustration style, I develop a very close connection to whatever I'm drawing. I feel like I not only come to see the subject better, but due to the amount of time I spend creating the work, I develop an unusual sense of connection with the subject. So to go through that process with an image of my grandmother—someone I haven't seen in several decades—felt very moving. I'm often at a loss when people ask me for advice, but I will now suggest drawing a detailed, considered portrait of someone who's no longer in your life. I'm not sure it'll make you a better artist, but it will allow you to experience one of the more transcendent aspects of creating art.

Now that you have published a memoir, what has surprised you about your path as an artist?

The biggest surprise to me is that the path has continued for so long.

Adrian Tomine Recommends:

Homesick for Another World, Otessa Moshfegh (book)

Pen15 (show)

Killer of Sheep (movie)

Sunday, Olivier Schrauwen (comic book)

Bagel Hole (bagel shop in Brooklyn, NY)

Name
Adrian Tomine

Vocation
Cartoonist and illustrator

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