Christopher Bollen on what it takes to write novels

July 13, 2017 - Christopher Bollen is the author of three novels—*Lightning People*, *Orient*, and *The Destroyers*, which was published earlier this year. He is an Editor at Large at *Interview Magazine* and his work has been published in *GQ*, the *New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, and *Artforum*. When asked about whether or not he seeks outside input while trying to write a book, Bollen is quick to say no. "There are certain weak moments in writing a book where if someone told you that it was bad, you would just stop. You would run away. I just would rather not know it's good or bad until I'm finished with it."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3043 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Beginnings, First attempts, Anxiety, Identity, Success.

You just published your third novel. Having already written two books, was it easier this time around?

Yeah, so much easier, but also harder in the test I set for myself. I always try to put myself in uncomfortable positions at the beginning. In this instance, I was so unused to writing in the first person that it was a challenge. I'm such a brain hopper as a writer. I like to write in third person. It was hard for me to stay in one person's head the whole time. It was claustrophobic and I didn't particularly like the character as I was writing him. In the end, I actually did like him, but for about half the book I kept thinking of ways to kill him off, but it's really hard to kill your first-person protagonist.

In other ways, it was so much easier to write. I feel like people say this all the time, that every time you write a novel it's like you've never written one before. I might find the fourth one is extremely painful and difficult, but from where I stand after writing this third one, I can say that it became a little less painful. It was still very hard, but I had the confidence of the first two novels to help propel me. What I felt more confident about this time, strangely enough, was that I didn't feel the pressing need that I did with the first book—and a little bit even with the second one—of putting my heart and soul into every line. That doesn't mean that I didn't work very hard on every sentence, I just realized that you don't necessarily *always* need to include little bits of your heart or your obsessions. It doesn't have to be so desperately personal.

All the characters don't have to be personal reflection of me. I don't have to see every thought they have as a reflection of my thoughts about the world. In a way, it's such a freedom. You realize that this isn't really about you necessarily. It has a lot to do with me, obviously, and there's a lot of me in the book, but it doesn't have to be some declaration of my inner psyche. Once I got rid of that, this rather narcissistic idea of writing, it was so much easier to control and see ahead and understand what had to happen and how it could happen best and how best to articulate it. That was a relief. As much as I love my first book, *Lightning People*, it is a novel in crisis in a lot of ways. It suffers from first novel syndrome, which is that you never think you're going to write another novel, so you literally try and put *every* thought you've ever had into one book. There are literally five novels in that one book that want to become something else, all tugging in different directions.

You have a day job as a magazine editor, which obviously keeps you busy. What has been your strategy for carving out a time for your personal work?

A wise person told me that it's foolish to think that you can't write a novel if you have a full-time job. That was reassuring, because I do have other jobs. It makes it much more difficult, certainly. I find now that I'm getting a little older that it is a little bit harder, whereas if you had asked me this even five years ago, I would have said, "Oh, you find the time. You rush home from work and then you sit in front of your computer for five hours. You eat dinner right before bed and you get up and do it again." I find now that it is a little bit harder to keep that rate up of productivity. I think that's why people shift to the morning hours when they have jobs, or other obligations, because at least you're fresh in the morning. I can't write at night at all anymore.

Time and energy are the most difficult things to maintain. That's also probably why there are a lot of people who write first novels and then never write another one—there's a huge, dramatic drop off with second novels. It's really hard to keep it up. I used to smoke cigarettes while writing, which was really wonderful fuel for me. It staved off the creeping boredom that comes in while writing. It's like a constant carrot. But then at a certain point you look up and you realize that you're 40 and you don't want to die by 50 of lung cancer, so I had to stop. Now I just chew on pens… or an actual carrot.

You have to be a certain kind of person to write a novel. It's sort of a demented and warped way of living. On beautiful days when your boyfriend or girlfriend wants to go outside to a park, you have to shut the door in their face and sit down, now *without* cigarettes, and just type away at something.

Do you ever work in a quota based way? I often hear writers say things like, "I'll do four pages a day and when I'm satisfied with what I've done. I can stop."

I'm really scene based, so I kind of get into it until the scene is done. I try to get to a certain point based on the paragraph. Not a paragraph break necessarily, but a scene break. Everything sort of moves toward getting to that end point where it can stop. That's how I think of it. That feels like a manageable amount of thought.

Your last two novels center around knotty, complicated mysteries. I know a lot of novelists and screenwriters who work from detailed outlines, having sort of worked out all the plot points in advance. Were these books figured out in that way?

Not at all. I totally made it up as I went along. I feel like it seems too blueprinty if you're writing from a strict outline. It feels like assembling IKEA shelves. You don't want to end up with an IKEA shelf. You want some crazy, baroque chair that was carved slowly and maybe the arms don't match. I always have an idea of where I want it to end. I don't know how to get it there exactly, but I know that it goes there. That's why I think thinking scene by scene is good. It's like sailing. You can see the coastline, but you have to figure out how exactly to get there using whatever you might have on the boat with you. So I don't use an outline. I've been lucky, because the fear is that you'll go so far into a story and then realize you have no way out. It's a real fear. It's a fear with these kind of books, because you have to solve them. You create this puzzle—this mystery—and then you have to solve it.

How do you know when something isn't working? How do you know when it's time to just throw something away?

Never. I'm a hoarder. I never throw anything away.

So it's a process of tinkering with it until you figure out a way to make it work?

Yeah. For sure. I feel like I'm not very confident about very many things, but I'm always confident with my initial ideas. I can steer it the wrong way and sometimes have to backtrack, but I always feel like the beginning has to be solid in order for the book to be good, so I work really hard on the first chapter, nailing it. That usually comes really quickly, but I just want it to be solid. I want to believe in it from the get go.

How do you nourish your creative self in between books? Is it just a process of turning your mind off and watching a lot of movies and not thinking or reading a lot of books and doing the things that you can't do when you're also writing a book?

Reading books is very helpful. For me, travel is a humongous boon. Wherever I go, I suddenly have a book in me. A lot of those books don't get written, of course, but it's fun to think about. I went to Acapulco recently for the first time and immediately had like eight scenes in my head. That book will probably never be written—and maybe it shouldn't be—but you never know. I'm so stuck on writing about Italy right now that I kind of canceled out any other locations. I wrote a book set in New York, then a book set in Long Island, followed by a book set in Greece. I want to keep traveling in the books. It's so much fun to write about.

Do you share your work with people as you're writing?

No, and here's why. There are certain weak moments in writing a book where if someone told you that it was bad, you would just stop. You would run away. I just would rather not know

it's good or bad until I'm finished with it. I just need to go through it, get it out of me, and then hopefully I can fix it later. For me, if I'm 30 pages in and someone's like, "This is actually not a good place to start," I'd probably just be like, "I give up. Okay, fine. Done. Not doing this story." I don't know. I do that as just a way to protect the story and myself. I don't show it to anyone. I think I work best just writing through and then working on it once it's done, once the first completed draft is done. Until then I keep it super private.

That brings me to my next question—how important is it to have a good editor and/or a good agent? And how closely do you listen to their advice?

It's *so* important. Crucial. If at the point that you're dealing with editors and agents—and if they are offering you serious advice—chances are good that they're probably right. I mean, unless they're not really reading it carefully. If they have a huge problem with any of your book, it probably does mean you need to change it, or at least rethink it and maybe try to see a different way out of it. I generally don't think people are just arbitrarily telling you things, like the ending of our book is bad or this character makes no sense. I know it sounds better to just say *believe in yourself and stick to your guns!* but usually the advice you get from editors and agents is in service to making your book better. I mean, maybe you'll ultimately stick with your ending, but you have to think it through.

Whenever someone says something to me about a character—something is off and they can't quite put their finger on it, I know there is actually something there that needs to be readjusted. It doesn't mean you have to delete the character or totally change them. It just means that there's something too watery that's not working, that seems wrong. I really listen to people's advice. I don't always take it, but I listen to it, and I respond to it. I think if someone tells you that your ending sucks then you've got to go back and start to look at it a little bit. I changed the ending of *Lightning People* like eight times. It was crazy. I like where it ultimately ended, but I still think about the other endings. The alternative endings of that book were really interesting too. One day, I want to use one of them somewhere else.

I often tell my poetry students that whatever the thing is that you're trying to do, first go and immerse yourself in as much of that thing as possible. Eventually you kind of absorb that vernacular and when you start to try and do it yourself, it will come out of you a lot more naturally. You want to write poems? Read poems. Is the same true of writing novels?

Well, I have two thoughts on this. One is I think saying "I want to be a writer" is actually a lot like simply saying books touch me in a way that is very important and I want to somehow be a part of that. I think a lot of people when they're young and say they want to be a writer it just means that they want to be a part of the literary community. That can mean that they end up being an editor or an agent or bookseller or just a passionate reader. Some of these people don't really necessarily need to be writers. I mean, I hope they are, but I think that want to write is often just a love of books. Sometimes "I want to be a writer" means "I read a Sylvia Plath poem that made me cry."

That already means you're a special person in my mind and I love you for that. If you really do want to pursue writing, I think there's a terrible mistake that people make, which is becoming too obsessed with this idea that you have to find the "real" voice inside of you. There is this idea that there's some cabinet inside of you that has an authentic voice trapped inside and that you have to find the handle and open it. That is not how you develop a voice. You develop it externally as much as you do internally. You read and you copy people. You listen to the way they build sentences. Then, you copy it until you kind of get your own version of it down. It's not internally built, it's actually externally built. It comes from other people. The anxiety of influence should not be an anxiety. It's okay to mimic. It's okay to read other people and want to do that too. It's how anyone learns. It's work and it's actual craft, it's not just searching inward and trying to find the "real" you. You shouldn't worry about that too much. You understand as you get older what your strengths and your weaknesses are and you make peace with that. Eventually the "real" you will come creeping out, whether you like it or not.

5 Books I always return to for inspiration by Christopher Bollen

• *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote. Every two or three years I have a new favorite novel. But for the past twenty years my second-favorite novel has remained *In Cold Blood*. Capote paints the most authentic and frightening portrait of 20th Century America in this heartland crime novel because he manages to play defender to both sides—the innocent Clutter family who deserve the reader's sympathy, and the ruthless but warm-blooded Dick and Perry who are not forgiven in these pages but are given the opportunity to explain. Furthermore, Capote's prose is a reminder that clean, simple sentences punch much harder than elaborate orchestrations of wit.

• *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. This novel has a long, notorious history as a "dangerous" book. But from a writer's perspective, it is dangerous in an entirely different way. *The Satanic Verses* should come with the warning "Do Not Try This at Your Desk" because Rushdie pulls off the impossible feat of very real, tangible love stories inside a series of extremely magical, supernatural, and perplexing arcs. For any other writer, the leaps in voice, time, and dimension would have been laughable. Here, in Rushdie's prime, it is a masterpiece of invention and emotion and seriousness (that does have purposeful laughs too).

• *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene. I'm a sucker for novels in foreign ports, which might explain 5-percent of why I'm a sucker for most of the works of Graham Greene (including his "entertainments," which I often admire more than the serious novels). *The Quiet American* is among his very best because in true Greene style it offers up a very simple story in pre-Vietnam War Saigon that still contains the immense, conflicting social, political, ethical, and personal forces running just under the surface. I think of Greene as a wisdom writer: not many fiction writers can get away with a sharp, bracing lesson packed at the end of a descriptive paragraph, but I believe every truth he delivers.

• *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf. You know how you sometimes read a novel when you're too young to understand it? And then those other novels you arrived at far too late, and a younger you might have valued more? *The Waves* is one of those experimental magic spells that you could read again every year of your life and get something completely different and essential out of it. It has a life running through its pages that I've never encountered anywhere else in fiction. Woolf sees life, that I am sure of. She sees and grasps it and finds a way to get it down. I hope I'm on my deathbed at 90 asking for one more time at The Waves.

• *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*. Yes, it's been a while. And maybe most of the dog-ears and spine cracks in my copy occurred in my teens and early twenties. But give me a glass of wine and two hours alone with a Plath collection and I will proclaim her the best 20th century poet. She marries sound, rhythm, visions, and word play until they rise before you like haunted castles. And then you make this shocking discovery: she died at 30. This unbelievable work all came from a young poet. How is that possible?

5 things I miss most:

• My father [1940-2012]
• Smoking
• New York in my early twenties. Or my early twenties in New York.
• The woods behind my childhood home in Cincinnati, Ohio.
• My apartment in Venice in the summer of 1999

Name
Christopher Bollen

Vocation
Writer

Fact

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