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On letting your work tell you what it wants to be

An interview with writer Douglas A. Martin

Over the years you've dipped your toes into nearly every kind of writing. Do you have a preferred mode of working?

My main thing is that I want to set up a situation where I'm learning something and ultimately the work becomes connected to the particular rhythms in my life at the time. I may have, as you say, dipped my toes in many different things, but I feel like I've learned something different in each genre or mode that I've moved into and my hope would be to move towards pulling all of those modes more closely together. Study and research is essential to me, more and more, especially with the thing I'm looking at now, a project around Elfriede Jelinek. It involves the kind of research that I did over Kathy Acker's body of work and how her voice and her style developed—and how the body of work developed—but there's also a translation element, so I'm always trying to add something further.

Jelinek is an Austrian writer who is probably best known here for The Piano Teacher. She began as a poet and then some things happened that made her abandon poetry. She's got two published volumes of poetry and I thought originally that I would do a straight-up translation on one of these volumes, but then I learned that what she was actually doing in poetry doesn't really translate here culturally, so I began working with the idea of how to build this novel or narrative around what she was trying to do in poetry. It's more about the sound things she's doing, which wouldn't work the same way in a straightforward translation.

Another answer to that question is that I moved from poetry to the novel because I like to sit at the desk for long periods of time. If I can have five hours at a desk, great. I prefer that. And that's almost impossible as a poet.

There were several books about Kathy Acker that came out over the past year or so, including yours. In a way, I thought your approach to her—which is a little bit slippery and kind of genre-bending—felt the most accurate for examining a writer whose body of work is also so slippery and hard to get a handle on. Was it hard to land on the right form to use when writing about her?

Yeah. The first draft was finished around 10 years ago. Figuring out what I would actually do with it took me... well, a decade, more or less. I mean, I wasn't actively working on it over the last decade, but that's how long the process was. I had to ask, *how do I present this outside of an academic context and still have it be readable? How can it still resonate and be in the frequency of her own work?* I tried to let her books teach me how to write it. So as I would learn things about her method, I would try to fold that into my own method. I knew that I wanted to quote very heavily from her because I wanted to have that voice with me. I wanted to learn about her life, but I also wanted to learn about her life as *she* was presenting it. If a proper biography had existed back then, I probably wouldn't have started writing the book.

Kathy Acker is everywhere in the culture right now. What do you attribute that to? Is it just a matter of

timing or is it maybe that culture has finally caught up with her?

I think that maybe we've finally caught up to things that she was the vanguard of. That's certainly what's happened with social media and the internet, that now there is really this kind of mobilizing of performance of the self. I think enough time has passed of her not being here that we need her again. I think we really, really need her again. That's another thing, I remember when, like shortly after she had died in the late '90s, there were these posthumous novels that were about to come out, her early novels, and someone remarked to me that they weren't sure how Acker actually made sense in that given moment. I was like, "For me, this is exactly what I needed." I think that's only intensified, actually. She makes more sense now than ever.

Did you read the Chris Kraus biography on Acker?

I did. For sure. I read it in galley form and I read it again very quickly as I was doing proofs on my own book. I write about this a little bit in my book, but it was actually Chris asking me to read my dissertation that made me feel like I had a lot of faith in what I had done. There are a lot of different spaces that these kind of books can occupy, a lot of different ways to approach someone's life and work. That's an interesting thing to consider when you're working on your book. Like, who is this for? What is the intended plan for this?

My book began its life as a dissertation. My approach was something like "I'm only going to write a dissertation in a particular way. It is not going to be far afield from my subject and it is also going to partake in poetic criticism, which is what I do. I'm essentially going to practice what I'm preaching in the work." After that I ran into a variety of roadblocks and differences of opinion about what it was and what it should do. There were people who would read this and say something like "This isn't going to help us understand her. It may make you feel her, but not necessarily understand her." That was an interesting distinction, between understand and feel.

But my way of thinking was that with someone like Kathy Acker in particular, is there even a way to understand her? So then you want to provide the space where you can sort of relax with her. Or be in different tensions with her. I definitely thought at times, "Okay, so what I'm really going to do is take the dissertation and refashion it as a kind of intellectual biography. But then I would lose all of the complicated movements between levels that I was doing in the book, and that seemed really wrong to me, and not interesting. So in the end I leaned more towards her methods and the book actually got cut up. I basically cut every sentence out of the original dissertation and rearranged it and created new patterns, and set up a mirror system. I begin to play those kind of games as way of getting into another draft or another version, the same games that she herself had played with her own writings. You just have trust that the work will ultimately tell you what it wants to be.

Obviously, during that time you were doing a lot of other stuff—teaching, as well as other types of writing. When you have a project that spans many years, how do you maintain energy for it? At some point you must feel like "I'm sick of this, I'm not going to do it anymore."

Yeah, well for me, during the two summers I spent working on revisions, this book was the *only* thing that I was really interested in still doing. It was the only thing that I felt that I had enough of a back bone in at the time. When I wrote *Branwell*, I wrote the entire book in three months. I had this sense at the time like I had to hold this entire world in my head and I can't stay in that world for more than a few months because I will go crazy. The temperament that I need to be in to hold this voice I can only maintain for so long. It proved to be productive. It made me work at a certain clip, because I wanted to leave it behind.

It was a more exaggerated and extreme version of something I've always done with my writing. When I first began writing fiction or prose I would do what I call blind writing. I would just write and not edit myself at all. I would write every day for like a year until I had around 300 pages. Then I'd wait a year or so to go back and look at it and shape it. A lot of the time I was cutting half of the book away, but enough time had passed where I could see what was there. I think that year or two between books has become something more like seven or eight years now. The last novel that I finished began when I started taking notes for it in 2001. I'm not exactly speedy.

Do you think your perspective on your own work has changed over time? Are you more forgiving, or perhaps just a little less hard on yourself, than you might have been a decade ago?

I think that's right. That thing about not being too hard on oneself seems to be connected to always wanting a new beginning, to start anew. That's my thing, too. With each book I want to find a new way to think, this new way to learn, this new way to be. Sometimes I think maybe my writing practice will somehow go back to figuring out how to actually write a diary that would be published, with the goal of that actually. Something like that or something like the minor musings I have everyday, maybe I might just actually gather those and use them in some way. I don't know, but maybe I'll do something like that instead of it being like...you gotta do the novel or you gotta do the book of poems. Who knows?

Do you feel like you have a tendency to overcomplicate things? To take a simple idea and figure out a way to make it really difficult?

Totally. Yeah. It's one of the ways that I allow myself to get out of projects. Like, if you somehow manage to fulfill this, that, or the other then you're done. You've done your work. It's kind of like I set up a course that I then have to run though. And once I've done it, what more could be asked of me? But yeah, I definitely make things too hard. And that's been pointed out to me. With the last novel I wrote I could step back and ask, who would want to read this? Really, there are no characters. It's just about the movement of sound. But then I think as a writer you're there at the desk and you're like "What's going to interest me?" You just have to trust your own interests and your own voice, even when it's hard.

I feel like over time my prose has moved from what I felt like was a kind of photographic writing to a more painterly writing. By that I mean, it is just very abstract and expressive at this point. That's the kind of thing that gives me joy.

When doing that kind of writing you just work knowing that it's not necessarily going to be for everyone. At the end of the day, despite what some people might think, you have to let the writing be what you want it to be.

I feel like I've been in those situations, particularly early on in my career, where someone was like "Is there anything else you can do to pull me in? Can it be more like this or that, can you make it be more about plot, can it be more conventionally palatable?" And I'm like "No." It's not being stubborn, it's just that it actually doesn't occur to me how it could happen and how the integrity of the book could hold if I changed things in those ways, if I worried more about palatability. I feel like career wise I've just taken and accepted the consequences of that.

So when it comes to, say, editors or agents or certain publishers, I understand if you need to go work with someone else. I've been invited to leave time after time. But I think about the filmmaking analogy a lot when I think of my writing. I think, "I want to do in writing what Kenneth Anger is doing." I think of very particular French or German cinema that I like. Those are the kind of novels that I want to write. Very slow. I want it to hurt in that kind of way.

Douglas A. Martin recommends:

My Shadow Book by Jordan A. Rothacker

In the Wake: On Blackness and Being by Christina Sharpe

Anything by Annie Ernaux

The Vegetarian by Han Kang

The films of Xavier Dolan

Name

Douglas A. Martin

Vocation

Writer

Fact

