

February 13, 2018 -

As told to Mark Sussman, 2189 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Beginnings, Politics.



Hermione Hoby on writing as an act of generosity

You just published your first novel, *Neon in Daylight*. What does it feel like to put it out into the world?

It is a pleasure. To have people who aren't friends say to me that they love the book is wild. Because for so long I thought book publication was going to be an exercise in anticlimax at best, or abject humiliation at probable worst. I mean, I was really, really terrified. Obviously friends read it before it was published and said nice things. And it's not that I thought they were insincere, it's just that I know that they were viewing this book through the lens of their love for me. So they were instantly going to be looking for its goodness.

Were you worried that everyone was telling you it was good just to spare your feelings?

Absolutely. It's sort of disrespectful to them, because I'm sure you and I have friends who may indeed love us but are also fully equipped with functioning critical faculties which don't die in the face of love. You know, friends sent me pictures from bookstores and that's insane. It was this malingering Google doc for five years. And it's only been an object for like three weeks. My sense of reality surrounding it is much more grounded in half a decade than in two weeks. So it's this insane catch up. But it's lovely. Isn't that the point? To have someone read the thing that hopefully is better than you. And for it to mean something to them. I mean, that's just delightful. But I am astonished. Like I'm literally incredulous.

Obviously, I don't want to rob anyone of that reading experience or good feeling. But I also think I can do so much better. Because before the book was published, I kind of hated it. And then you feel like, is it slightly craven to be swayed into a more amenable attitude to your own book by other people's warm responses? When I do read the book, I'm haunted by the badness. The residual badness. And by residual, I mean not visible to the reader or the infelicitous phrase or the inadequate characterization at a certain point. It's such a weird thing temporally because I finished this book in my 20s and I feel so out of my 20s now. I mean, I'm 33, but it feels like longer than those years to be out of it. And yet I have to stand by this thing as a sort of testament to myself now. Even though for me it's ancient history in terms of my kind of concerns. I hope just at a level of craft I'm better now

I guess how do you get over this thing that you now have to go out and stage manage even though you have obviously grown just through the process of writing it?

I think the way that I'm going to find my way through it with as much integrity as possible is just by reminding myself that this moment isn't about me. It is about readers. The incredible, amazing privilege that is anyone reading this thing. And I think if I can keep that in mind, that to them this is a book, a new book, that will help me and that I am just a sort of conduit for it.

This was the first fiction I wrote. So it wasn't just the difficulty of writing a novel, it was like teaching myself how to write a novel, while trying to write this specific novel as well. And, [I'm] some way into what I hope will become a second novel, I'm feeling so great, which I don't think is purely down to confidence. I'm just a better craftswoman now. You know? I can turn a sentence more easily. But also I think nothing will feel as hard as the first one. So there's less doubt. It's like, "Well, you did it once, so I guess I can do it again."

Has the process changed?

I have that thing which I would hear writers talking about, and I would feel this combination of huge envy and also eye rolling, disgust, and contempt. I think often of this bit in [the J.M. Coetzee novel] *Elizabeth Costello* where she describes being a writer as being a secretary of the invisible, which has such a lovely humility to it. And you are just a conduit. I had a moment like that this summer when I was trying to go to sleep. I just had this voice in my head that was insistent. And it was like a first-person voice. And I just started writing. And it was one of those delightful experiences where it doesn't even feel instructed, it just feels like listening, just tuning in and dictating. And there it is and it's all happening. And it's like self-generating. And there's an excitement to it because it feels like something not of you. This first book felt summoned. I really had to conjure it. And it wasn't always there. It

wasn't always real. It didn't always feel authentic. And then it would again. And it was a long process. So it's exciting with this one to feel more that the book is sort of dictating itself to me. If that doesn't sound horrifically pretentious.

It's romantic to think it might be external and the muse and all that. But my experience with this moment, it's no coincidence that this voice came to me four days into being on holiday by the sea in Maine. I could feel it. It was almost like a mechanical thing in my brain, [and I switched] into relaxation, into that dreamy, associative, open state. And it was so good for me because [New York City] is not a place conducive to that state. Being alive in 2018 is not conducive to that state. Maybe being human isn't conducive to that state. And that state feels also self-indulgent, and like a huge privilege rather than anything necessary. But it was quite exciting to me to be reminded that I could even categorize getting into that state as a professional necessity.

How do you manage the sense that what you're doing is in some way indulgent?

Well, that was the huge challenge with this first book. And it was a kind of financial, practical challenge, as well as, like, "Am I a fraud? And am I just trying to write a novel?" I can try and write some made-up shit for two hours, or I can write a thousand-word piece, and only one of those will help me pay the rent. And only one of those is asked for. No one was asking me to write a novel. It's not how it works. You don't get commissioned.

I mean, I don't feel guilty anymore, I guess. And I would love to say that that is part of my own self-belief as an artist, and nothing to do with the fact that I have a novel now. It's a physical thing. Because one thing I'm really wary of is getting any sense of creative self-esteem or confidence from anything external. And that's completely naïve. Because I exist in the world. I mean, I haven't read any reviews. Except the *New York Times* one.

I was going to say...

I don't know if you've ever had really good news and it feels like a catastrophe. It's so curious how they share the same somatic profile. It's like terrible news and great news both feel cataclysmic, just horrendous. Because the stakes are higher. I interviewed Rachel Kushner ages and ages ago for *The Flamethrowers*, which, as you know, was received rapturously. Dumb child that I was, I was like, "Doesn't it feel great?" And she's just so wise and gracious. She said, "If I believe that, I have to believe the bad stuff, too." And I just don't want to co-opt any sense of myself into external somewhat arbitrary indications of my worth. I mean, that sounds quite high and mighty. I also just think it's creatively so unhelpful. Whether they're good or bad, reviews aren't for me. They're literally for everyone but me. I'm so truly at peace with the idea that people will hate it. That doesn't hurt my feelings. I think it would be strange, like, if Mike Pence read this book and loved it. That would be horrific. I don't think he can read. But you know what I mean. It's not that you want everyone to love your work. That would be insane.

The first reading I did, at McNally-Jackson [bookstore], this lovely woman who was there randomly was like, "I never read fiction. I only read non-fiction. But I'm here." It was so cool. She said, "What do you want the reader to take away from your book?" I hopefully answered in a way that seemed less flippant than the answer I'm going to give you, but I was just like, "Anything." That's the point. Anything. That's why it's fiction and not a didactic essay. Because I want there to be so much space. Reading fiction is a... it's like a mutual construction. Which is why, for example, I didn't want to describe the physical appearance of any character too closely because you want the reader to meet you halfway, and kind of build it themselves.

What keeps you writing in moments where you feel doubtful or feel distracted or anxious? How do you keep yourself sitting in the chair?

Well, I guess at a certain point you believe in the thing you're creating enough for it to then carry on. I think [novelist] Tom McCarthy said something about this. Once you've got enough traction, then you get momentum.

I think the thing that kept me going is just those moments where I would be so in it, but it would almost be terrifying. I remember having this image of deep sea diving, going down a really deep ladder. It's this weird feeling completely removed from my life, like I didn't love the people I loved because I didn't know them. I was just completely far away and in this world. I mean, not every hour of writing was like that, thank god. And that was both exhilarating and kind of scary. It's like a form of willing madness. I'm going to live in this made-up world in my head and on the page.

How do you get yourself out of that feral state when you have to take care of social obligations or go to the grocery store or whatever?

Well, as a woman, I'm socialized into coming out of feral states very quickly. Alas. I'm being facetious but also not. I'm in the world with people. I mean I would kind of love just to be fucking feral. Just live for my work and nothing else.

There's this weird thing about writing in that it's both an act of great selfishness and great selflessness. Because for it to be good, it can only come from yourself, I think, and from some sincere part of yourself. But also for it to be good, it has to be kind of an act of generosity and something other than ego or beyond ego. But then just practically, you need time and total seclusion. You need to tell everyone to fuck off, so you can be in your made-up world. And I just think the ability to tell

everyone to fuck off is maybe harder for women, who often fall into the role of making sure everyone's okay, keeping things together whether or not they have families. I don't have kids, but I still feel like I have huge emotional responsibilities for the people I love. And I'm glad I have those huge emotional responsibilities because they make life worth living. I do not resent caring for people. It's enriching for me. I love to care for people. But when all you want to care about is the people in your book, that's really tricky. Because these made-up people can feel just as demanding of your care and attention and time as real people.

I hope this is changing, but I do think there is such a cultural precedent for sanctioning male creativity, and men being allowed to take their own space and make their art. But women are so often judged as self-indulgent or narcissistic if they do that. I hope that's changing. There's this weight of history. But let's try and surmount.

Hermione Hoby recommends:

Jennifer Higgie's Instagram account of late great female artists, their work and lives

The music of Julius Eastman

Bodega roses

Larry Levan sets on YouTube

Marilynne Robinson's essays

Metrograph

Rachel Kushner's new novel The Mars Room

Cecilia Corrigan's satirical beauty-blogger web series Le Balm

Name

Hermione Hoby

Vocation

Writer, Novelist

Fact



Photo by Nina Subin

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



1