

On writing the secret languages inside your head



An interview with writer Jenny Zhang

May 18, 2023 -

As told to Maura M. Lynch, 2104 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Adversity](#), [First attempts](#), [Success](#).

You write fiction, poetry, and essays. When you're starting a new project, do you know which one of those it's going to be?

It's really hard to break it down after the fact, but I think there is some kind of animal instinct. If I want to say something that isn't easily expressed by conventional language, it often becomes poetry. With fiction, it's usually because I want to tell some kind of story or because I have a character in mind. I find that with nonfiction, there's always the prompt; there's always a theme that an editor gives me first. Then, within those bounds, I can go crazy.

For your fiction and poetry work, is it stuff that you're working on constantly?

Whether it's poetry or short stories, [I'm writing] because I am really consumed with some question or series of questions grouped under the same obsession. I keep writing until I'm sick of exploring that question.

With *Sour Heart*, it was questions of family, of being born with a debt you have to pay off, how to even the score of love when you're born into the world, loved. Also questions of childhood, and how to form an identity when you're consistently battered with other people's expectations of your identity.

At some point, I didn't want to write about that anymore. I was sick of it. I didn't want to write about family. I didn't want to write about childhood. I didn't want to write about sacrifice. That's when I was like, "This project is done and I should look back on everything related to that and see if it has any kind of cohesive core."

I go through these phases of being interested in something, and they filter out into all these different genres I work in. I can always trace some theme to my poetry that's different from my fiction, but there are also overlapping themes.

When those questions start cropping up, how do you know that something's worth exploring?

It's very dramatic, but usually if I feel like it's a lifelong question. I think that every writer should have a question they can ask that there is no end to the pursuit of. Every writer should have questions big enough and pressing enough and multi-faceted enough and unanswerable enough that they occupy their entire life, however long or short it is.

You also go through different iterations of questions. Maybe I'm not as interested in how family is both crucial and detrimental to forming identity [anymore], but now I'm interested in women who don't want to start their own families or women who are pressured into starting a family and what that does to one's identity.

I'm still interested in questions of love. Not just love in the gooey, saccharin way, but love as an actual knife that can be wielded and used to draw blood. Right now I'm in maybe the fourth iteration of that question. It's more about figuring out when you've answered some tiny aspect of a question that's bothered you, and it's time to move on to the next part of that question.

I was re-reading your essay "How it Feels," and there's the part where you write, "Maybe it's humiliating to attempt anything." How do you move past that feeling, which could prevent someone from putting work out there in the first place?

I think the main thing is to let go of the idea of greatness. Wanting to be great is really limiting. Wanting to be great, wanting to be perfect, wanting to wow and to stun and to dazzle—letting go of that is the most important thing.

You have to both be incredibly willing to be humbled and also, at the same time, hold an incredible high level of delusion. The high level of delusion is what allows you to keep writing and to want to share it with the world. But you also have to accept that it might not mean anything to other people, or that you might be writing so esoterically or so privately that other people have no way of entering into your ideas. Everyone is constantly trying to articulate the secret languages in their head to the outside world. If your

language is too secret, then no one can understand; if your language is completely public, then there's no mystery. There's no longer the pleasure of decoding.

So how do you have both? I think it's okay to be embarrassed. Especially in the beginning. When I say "beginning," I mean when you're starting out as a writer. But also in the beginning of writing anything new; it should be kind of embarrassing. Because the secret, intimate thoughts in your head should be kind of embarrassing. They should be kind of intense. It's embarrassing to cry, but it doesn't make sense to not [cry] in your life. It's embarrassing to laugh really hard.

That's where you start from, and then you have to figure out how much of that you want to clean up and translate for public consumption. I think it's okay in the beginning for it to be really garish and wrong.

I want to talk about grossness, which is something that a lot of people have highlighted in your writing. I remember at a recent reading, you said something about "scatology being its own art form." I'm curious why it's important for you to write about these things that people sometimes pretend don't even exist.

I'm really interested in embodied writing. At least at this time in my life, I'm not interested in writing that's just a bunch of ideas floating independent of the human bodies who came up with them. I always want to remind myself and my readers that the corporeal aspects of these characters exist. I want actual squishy, wet, dried-up bodies to exist in my writing.

It's very American to not want to address the body. We don't want to see the moment of birth, and we don't want to see the aftermath of death. They're obviously profoundly important to life and humanity, but it's often covered up.

I often hear the criticism that something was disgusting, as if it's something done to [the reader]. But wouldn't it be more disgusting to close up your asshole? Keep all this stuff inside you? It just doesn't make sense to me. That's something that every human has to deal with, the disgusting.

I'm more disgusted by the covering up of disgusting acts. Whether they're everyday things that we have to do with our human body, or whether they are actual violations that humans do to each other. When you cover it up, you can't do anything about it. You can't change it.

It's important to me to not cover up, to not deny, to not pretend. I guess that's why I write about the body. As I said, it is a form of literature. Scatology is a literary form, just as metaphor. Writing about the body literally and symbolically is part of the richness of literature and the richness of creativity. It's a shame to leave it out.

Being a writer is a private and solitary thing, but there's also a performative aspect to it when you have to give a reading or do an interview like this. How did you develop that performative side of being a writer?

I don't think of myself as naturally inclined towards performance, but it was something I developed almost like a permanent scab. I realized early on that when you're a young woman reading poetry, you're seen automatically as fragile, and tethered personally and emotionally to your poems. I don't think most people are able to see emotions as intellectually rich as they see concepts and ideas. It became too much, because I didn't want people to treat me like my poem. I wanted to be independent of what I was writing about.

I don't want a person who saw me read for five minutes in a bookstore to feel like they can have the same level of access to me that people who I've known for 20 years have. So I needed to develop some kind of persona, some kind of performance, so that afterwards, if someone did mistake an intimacy with my writing with an intimacy with me, then I could still be the performer having an intimate moment, rather than just me. It would be very disturbing for my psyche if I were intimately connected with every single person who connected to my art.

I don't think that's a skill that every beginner writer needs to cultivate. But I do think, as more and more people connect to your writing, which I assume most writers want, I think it is something that might develop naturally.

Like a lot of younger writers who have books out recently, you shared a lot of your early work on Rookie. How did that shape who you are as a writer?

Rookie was really important to me because I hadn't really been published [previously]. I didn't know what the responsibility of writing publicly meant. Rookie was where I learned that.

I came from these ancient institutions where my teachers told me to never write for the internet, to only write for publications that are archived by the Library of Congress for all of eternity. They were very biased by a lifetime of institutional support, and also speaking from their experiences of being white men who had had a certain kind of writing career. Rookie was so important to me because the writing career of white men never worked for me.

When I was starting to write for Rookie, I realized that there was another way that people could write, that young women could have a writing career. That was really important to me. To realize that there was a platform where I could write a sentence in all caps if I

wanted to; where humor was encouraged, not discouraged; where I didn't have to be so oppressed by ancient rules of literary writing.

How do you think people can seek out a supportive community like that?

Reading widely and being bold and reaching out to writing peers that you like, and that you connect with, is great to do. As a million people have said before, the internet can be such a double-edged sword, because on the one hand it's a great place to meet other writers, but it's also a great place to be fooled. It's always good to verify IRL who people are. So many writers that I really admired on the internet, when you meet them IRL, are just really different.

Be wary of people who are either too supportive or too discouraging. Find people who are balanced, who are neither non-stop cheerleaders of everyone's work, nor non-stop dragging everyone's work.

My closest writer friends are the ones who have been reading my work for over a decade. It's okay for them to tell me if something that I wrote didn't work for them or didn't land for them. I like it when they tell me that they expected more from me. I also like it when we genuinely like each other's writing. We can criticize each other, and we can support each other. We can also support each other without having the exact same aesthetic framework. Allowing for dissent in your writing life is important, but [so is] allowing for genuine encouragement.

It's like when people ask, "How do I get married to the love of my life?" I don't know. You just have to keep doing it and hopefully, over trial and error, you'll encounter someone who is the right size for you, the right flavor. It's about finding writer friends who are the right size for you. It's the same thing with dating: there are some people who are really flashy and at first it's very intoxicating to be around them. But the intoxication will fade, and it's about finding steadier people. Those are the people who end up being your writing community.

Jenny Zhang recommends:

Water spinach stir-fried with garlic, or prepared Malaysian style (kangkung belacan)

Dorothea Lasky's new book, [Milk](#)

Faye Wong covering "[Dreams](#)" by The Cranberries in *Chungkung Express*

Carmen Machado's [Her Body & Other Parties](#)

Steamed momos

Etel Adnan's [Arab Apocalypse](#)

All the gas expelled in Ozu's [Good Morning](#)

Name

Jenny Zhang

Vocation

Writer

