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As told to Linnie Greene, 3208 words.

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On the value of curiosity

Journalist and critic Molly Young on the importance of curiosity, strategies for writing an effective magazine pitch, and what it means to create open spaces for dialogue and engagement on the internet.

I'm impressed by the many rabbit holes that you follow online—books, obviously, cooking with flowers, the show *Frasier* and interior design. What role do you think that curiosity plays in your work as a writer, and how do you find and follow those different through lines?

Curiosity is everything. And I think for me, it's less about finding and following the through lines than trusting that they're worth following, by which I mean that I think often of... well, I recently found that my parents kept these books of things, cute things that I said when I was a little kid. And they did the same for both of my brothers. Actually, cute things is the wrong word. It's more like weird things that we said. And if you look at the books, it's from when we were between three and five years old, and there's just a blueprint of each of our personalities.

I was looking back at my book and realizing that I have not changed at all. I've just gotten physically larger. And the books are all very different because we're all very different people, but one thing that they had in common was this affinity that all children have for every single thing that surrounds them. I think part of the sadness of growing into an adult is that you become trained to spend less time distracted by things. And what I try to do is re-access that ability to be interested in things, and then to not ask myself why I'm interested in them, but simply to explore them and trust that the reason will eventually become clear to me.

Along those lines, how do you winnow that focus, or narrow the field of your interests when so much is interesting in the world?

Well, it happens naturally. I think about one of my favorite places in New York City, the Thomas J. Watson Library. It's actually a great resource to know about for anyone who lives in New York, but it's a research library that's tucked inside the Metropolitan Museum. And it's free to join. You can get a card online. And it's free to enter. So you walk in, you put all of your belongings in a wooden locker. And you can request books in advance and they'll bring them up and put them on a shelf with your name on them. And then you can page through them. The range of available materials is mind blowing. They'll have codexes from 1400, collections of international embroidery, and books of Swedish typography from the 1750s.

What I love doing is going there, and I'll request maybe 10 books. There's a limit. I forget how many it is, but it's maybe 10. And I'll just put them in a stack next to me and sit with them. Inevitably, two of the 10 will be more interesting than the others. And those two will have indexes, and I'll look in the indexes, and those will lead me to other books. Eventually I will notice that time has passed very quickly, and I'm getting hungry. I will get an RX Bar that I keep in my purse and go to the bathroom and I will eat the RX Bar in the bathroom stall. And then I will return my books and spend the rest of the day there.

So what I'm saying is, I think it just happens naturally. But it is a skill. It's almost like a mindfulness practice where you have to pay close attention to what you're interested in. And then have the discipline to pursue it, rather than allowing it to slip away.

It also strikes me that there's something about this that's very tangible and physical—a quiet room without technology. What role do you think that technology has played in your career and your creative process?

It's such a fraught topic. I kind of love and hate social media. And I struggle with it a lot. It's undeniable that it has helped my career and it has made me more visible. I have gotten work through venues like Instagram. I guess that is a positive. But I don't think that social media has had any good effects on my character or my habits. It has had zero good effects on either. And that's something that I and a lot of other people struggle with. I think it requires an incredible amount of willfulness to not let social media into your life, or to harvest the benefits of it without falling victim to the many, many, many pitfalls. I know a lot of people who have that force of will naturally, but I don't. I often wonder whether it's worth the amount of effort I expend upholding it.

What are some of your best tips for interviewing both famous and non-famous people?

I think it really all comes down to the skill of listening, which is really an active skill and not a passive one. I do interview celebrities, but I also interview all kinds of people. And the metric by which I choose who to interview is always the same, which is that I love talking to people who are really good at their jobs. And I like talking to actors because acting is a skill that is about as far away from my skillset as I could possibly imagine. I have always had so many questions about how one becomes an actor.

For example, one thing that fascinates me is the fact that most actors have acting coaches, which would be like if most doctors had doctor coaches. There's no other profession I can think of in which the training is quite so ongoing. So I always wonder—who are the acting coaches? And if they're so good at coaching acting, why aren't they just the famous actors themselves? How do you convincingly perform an emotion that perhaps you yourself have never felt? What I'm saying is that I can get interested in any job, in the details of it and the finest grains of it. And if I can find somebody who's really good at that job, and if I can be paid actual cold, hard cash to talk to them about that, there's nothing that's more interesting to me.

When it comes to pitching monetize-able work, do you have any strategies or tips about how to do that successfully?

My main area of experience is pitching to magazines. I have a few really concrete tips, which is if you're cold pitching somebody that you don't have a previous relationship with, it's always good to start out with a short email asking if you can pitch them rather than sending them the full pitch, which might be overwhelming. So just a an email like: "Hi, this is who I am. I hope you'll excuse the unsolicited email. I had a story idea that I thought would be perfect for X publication. Would you mind if I pitched to you?"

And of course you can include a sentence or two explaining, or linking to previous work that you've done if you have it. And then once you get a response, which you should if you write the email politely and if the editor is a decent human being, which not all of them are...

Yeah, big caveat.

Yeah, huge caveat. *Then* you can send your pitch. The ideal pitch email is really short, around two paragraphs. Paragraph one is why the story is perfect for the magazine. And you want to have done some research and made sure that the story hasn't already been written because magazines don't want to look like they're following on some other publication's coattails. And then paragraph two is why you're the person to write it. That could be because I have access to this particular person or thing, or because I have expertise in this area, or because I'm from this area, et cetera. But keep it short and tight and polite. And definitely follow up after a week if you don't hear back.

When you approach book criticism, what questions are you hoping to answer? Or how do you find a way in as a critic?

My first question when I knew they were looking for a literary critic [at *New York Magazine*] was when I was talking to the editor. And I said, "To be honest, I don't really read book reviews. I don't find them that interesting." There are a few people out there who write really excellent book reviews, but on the whole, I don't read a lot of them. My question was, if I'm not reading them, who is? So basically when they wanted a literary critic, I said, "I love that idea, but I don't want to just write book reviews. I want to write essays that are about language more broadly, about how language functions in the culture." And sometimes that means books, and sometimes even tweet threads, and sometimes it means weird bits of slang that gain or lose currency quickly. And sometimes it means memes and all sorts of things. They were okay with me taking that on as my beat—this very vague, amorphous language-related beat.

When I approach a book, the first thing is that the role of a critic is to be super, super subjective. Sometimes I get emails saying, "Who are you to say whether this is good or bad?" Or, "I totally disagree, I thought this was bad and you thought it was good", or the opposite. And my response to that is like, "Yeah, totally." The role of a critic is to have a really subjective opinion and to express it as beautifully as possible, period. Why would you want to read somebody who pretended to be objective? That's insane and totally untrustworthy.

So when I approach a book, I try to figure out what the author is trying to do and what their intention is. And sometimes it takes me a hundred pages to figure it out. Sometimes it takes me 300, sometimes it takes me 10. But if I am not enjoying a book, I will keep reading until I can figure out what I think the author is trying to accomplish, because I can't evaluate a book unless I know what its intention is.

In the ecosystem of book publishing, why do you think critics are an important part of that world?

I think at their best, critics can illuminate corners of the industry that are under-illuminated. One thing I feel really strongly about is sharing a lot of books that are from small presses, from people who might not otherwise get a wide hearing who definitely deserve to. So I think that's one of the good graces that a critic can accomplish, the panning for gold, the role of surfacing the shiny nuggets that might otherwise not be found by the general public. It's basically a critic's job to think in public, which is a scary thing to do.

I think the best critics are those who approach the job with intense curiosity and intense candor. I think it probably helps if you don't care whether or not you're liked, which... I care whether or not the people I know in real life like me, but I don't particularly care whether or not a random person on the internet likes me. So I think the critic's job is to think in public, to be fair, and to do a shit load of work in rooting out those hidden gems that are out there.

I was always struck by how your newsletter, Read Like the Wind, feels like something organic you'd share with a friend, a conversational email between people who like books. What sort of importance do those less monetized, informal conversations about art have in your life?

Well, the thing about a conversation is that it's opt in, right? If two people are talking, they're both choosing to talk to each other. And that's not true of most things that are on the internet, which get blasted at you. So I did want the newsletter to feel like a conversation. And the fact that it's sent often, and that you have to sign up for it really furthers that because it removes the temptation from me to think to its lowest common denominator, or to cater to somebody. It really reminds me of making a zine, where people who don't want to read it will not go to the trouble of getting it. And the people who do go to the trouble getting it are people who are interested in reading it, which is great.

There's this other thing that I've started doing, which is really fun. So the newsletter moved to *New York*, and it was an interesting process to talk about. How do you adapt this zine-like thing to a media company without removing any of the things that make it good in the first place?

I had many conversations with the editors about that. One of the things that was a sticking point was that I wanted to send the email newsletter from my email address so that people could respond directly to it. And for various complicated newsletter client reasons, they couldn't make that happen, and the newsletter had to come from some generic *New York Magazine* email address. So my response to that was to make this Google Sheet, which is open. At the bottom of every newsletter, there is an invitation for people to recommend me a book, because people are extremely active respondents to the newsletter. And there's so many wonderful weirdos out there who are eager to tell me what to read, and eager to respond to my recommendations. Just a true cast of oddballs, but it delights me to see that in my inbox. So what has replaced that is this Google Doc, which now has 400 suggestions in it of things that I should read from anonymous people.

New York was quite worried that this open, anonymous internet sheet would devolve into a land of abuse and perversion, but it hasn't. It's been completely self-regulating and delightful. And I've found dozens of really great book reviews from anonymous people who have really cool taste.

You mentioned that a characteristic of a good critic would be not investing too much importance in random people's opinions. What's that line for you between engagement and making yourself available for conversation?

I think it has a lot to do with creating landscapes on the internet that encourage good faith engagement, even if that engagement is critical. So for example, the Google Sheets seemed to be self-regulating. I have had some testy dialogues with people on the Google Sheet, but nothing that has been remotely abusive or unpleasant, even. Just challenging in an interesting way. So I think it's really about creating spaces with rules and constraints that encourage the kind of engagement that is truthful and not demoralizing.

You're also a crossword maker and co-designer of the Periodic Table of New York Trash. Is there a kind of work that you find most nourishing, and then a kind of work that you find most difficult among your creative practices?

The crossword puzzle is most difficult for me. There are two parts of crossword construction. There's the verbal part and there's the spatial part. The verbal part is totally fun for me. And the spatial part is so hard that it physically hurts my brain. Like, I can feel the outlines of the dew in my skull curdling as I'm doing it. That's the hardest thing I do.

Like seemingly any creative these days, I have to do work with brands and with clients and I find that very difficult because the kinds of challenges that I meet are challenges of salesmanship and pitching and client management. And those are skills that I respect immensely in other people, but they don't come naturally to me. And they're also not skills that I'm particularly interested in building. I don't know if it's the best use of my time and I don't think it produces the best work on my part.

So anytime I can create a product or a piece or an idea that I have control over myself or where, better yet, I'm collaborating with somebody, that is where I'm happiest. Something like the table of trash was a perfect example of that. I made it with my husband Teddy, who is a fabulous designer. It was born out of us walking around in New York all the time. Like any human, our brains are tuned to pattern recognition, and we started noticing some of the same pieces of trash appearing often. And in different neighborhoods, this species of trash would change, but there would be patterns.

So we started just taking iPhone photos of the trash and then arranging it in categories that made sense. And we spent weeks coming up with different categories and trying to see what made the most sense before arranging it in this form that... I didn't know if it was going to be possible to make dozens of photos of garbage look beautiful. But my husband, being the genius designer that he is, made it possible. And now we have the artifact that hangs on my wall. It reminds me of all the things I love most, which are walking, and noticing, and observing and finding beauty and patterns where you wouldn't expect them.

The beautiful arrangement of trash sounds like some sort of creative metaphor, at least for my own practice...

Yeah, yeah. Story of my life.

If you could envision any sort of creative life for yourself with no capitalist constraints, not worrying about click-through rates or assignments or anything like that, what would it look like?

For me, the big thing is geographic constraints. Because I am happiest when I'm surrounded by nature, and yet I've chosen to live in New York City, where nature is very hard to come by. On top of that I've chosen to live in a place that is prohibitively expensive and often incredibly stressful, noisy, and ugly in every sense of that word and... limiting. My dream, if I were unconstrained by anything at all, would be to somehow transplant all of my friends to a location in which we were surrounded by nature, and had all the resources we needed to create the things that we want to create, which is of course the oldest fantasy of utopia that has ever existed. So I'm not unique in that, but that's how I feel.

Molly Young Recommends:

Ruthie Baron's newsletter about scams

Propagating houseplants

Disabling time-suck websites on your phone (Settings>Screen Time>Content & Privacy Restrictions)

The Next Next Level: A Story of Rap, Friendship, and Almost Giving Up By Leon Neyfakh

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