

Lynne Tillman on what it actually means to be a writer



January 12, 2017 - Lynne Tillman is a fiction writer and essayist. She has written over a dozen books over the past thirty years spanning almost every possible genre. Her 2014 collection of essays, *What would Lynne Tillman Do?*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In describing Tillman's writing, Colm Toibin says: "Her style has both tone and undertone; it attempts to register the impossibility of saying very much, but it insists on the right to say a little. So what is essential is the voice itself, its ways of knowing and unknowing."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2771 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Anxiety](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Inspiration](#).

People love to hear writers talk about their routines and rituals. Do you have one? Are you someone who wakes up every day at a certain time every day to work or needs to use a specific kind of pencil?

I am sadly undisciplined. But I'm impulsive and overly anxious. What that means is that even in college, I could never finish anything. I'm so anxious. Or I would make a deal with my teacher: I wrote one paper, I got an A. I can't write this paper, give me an F, so it's a C for the course, okay?

So they balance each other out?

That's right. That's what I would think. That's what I would do. I was so anxious and insecure, for years and years, to show anybody what I was doing. When it finally came to writing for deadline I would always start early. If I know that something's due in a month or something, I will force myself just to get a few sentences down. I've never been one of those writers who got up and always wrote, but I do like to start in the late morning, like 11. I don't wake up early anymore. I sleep longer and longer. I've sort of, I've become a bear, hibernating even during even the summer. I love sleeping, except when I have terrible dreams. But there is nothing like a long sleep. Nothing like an afternoon nap. People always want to know about the writing practice, particularly those who are starting out. It's as if people think that if they just had this little bit of information, then they will automatically achieve something.

Like, "Oh, that's how you do it."

"That's how you do it. If I follow that, I'll do it too." It's just not the way I work. I admire people who have that kind of regimented routine that works for them. I just set small goals for myself. For instance, today I was thinking, "I have to get this column done because I'm going to do that interview later and if I don't get this done, I can't go." So, I push myself in those ways.

During these later years I generally don't have a deadline for my novels. I rarely have specific deadlines for projects now. The only deadlines I have are the ones I make for myself. That's a reason why doing things like going off to writing colonies is helpful. You have this finite amount of time set aside—say, a month or six weeks—and that's simply all the time you have. You set a goal for what you want to accomplish there and just make it work.

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You are someone who does lots of different kinds of writing—essays, criticism, and fiction. Do you find that the process feels different when writing fiction versus writing an essay?

I think writing fiction is much harder than writing essays. The way I would compare the two or contrast them is that, when writing an essay or writing about something I have this clear goal that I can focus on and try to figure out. It feels more fixed in some way. When I'm writing fiction, I don't have a subject outside of what the fiction is. In other words, there's nothing external to it. I'm creating the form as I go along. So that's harder to do. I have characters to deal with in fiction and they can be tricky. In the essays I'm usually trying to clarify an idea, but with fiction... a character can get confused. It's pleasurable to read and write about confusion because that's what we do as people. We are often confused.

Fiction allows for a level of ambiguity that writing an essay doesn't necessarily.

That's it. Still, I like to play around with that. I can deal with what I do and how I bring fiction to my essays, around the issue of doubt. I will bring doubt in where a lot of art historians or art critics might feel that they can't. Their job is to explicate or to interpret, and I'm not an art historian or art critic... so don't feel that same type of constraint.

Your 2014 collection, *What Would Lynne Tillman Do?*, was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award and became this very celebrated thing. Was it a surprise to suddenly have this new audience of readers nearly 30 years into your career?

Well, that's an interesting question. It's actually a little hard. One, I didn't think of it as celebrated, but when it was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award—in criticism—I was really surprised. I mean, I was sort of... astonished. I was in MacDowell working on a new novel that hopefully will come out next year, *Men and Apparitions*. I didn't expect it. I had absolutely no idea that this book would interest anybody in that way. Because it was so many different kinds of essays, so many different kinds of writing. So that was really wonderful. You know, my novels—and some other people's novels—are actually full of ideas. Often novels are read as if they're not. I lived through a period where people were telling me, "Oh, I don't read novels. I read for information."

I'm thinking, "What do you think novels are?" You know, I read all sorts of books, whether it's Henry James, or... oh, I don't know. I read a lot of stuff, but I feel like novels are just as valuable as anything else. There's all sorts of ideas in there. There are ways in which Kafka talks about time so much more resonantly and so much more accurately than an essay might, you know? In some ways that's hard for me because very few people but academics read novels very closely. It's an odd thing. Academics are always shat upon. And I understand that, too. But if an academic takes up your work, or a very dedicated intellectual, that person will read

your work so closely. They can find things in your work that you had no idea might be considered. It's not that you put them there; it's about the interpretation. I know when I re-read a novel, I'm amazed at how much I missed last time. I was surprised that it was *What Would Lynne Tillman Do?*—and not one of my novels—that would garner so much attention. I actually think a lot of it had to do with the title, which was not my idea. What did you think? Did you like it?

I liked it very much, mostly because of what you mentioned earlier—it contains such a diversity of ideas, lots of different flavors of writing. For people who might not be familiar with your work, it's a great introduction to the way you think. Often artists who've been working for a long time get unfairly looked over simply because they are no longer new. The cycle of attention is always so focused on debuts, emerging voices..

Oh, I think of myself as new. [Laughs] You know, I feel like I'm in some very strange circle.. I don't think it's hell, but I'm in some sort of strange place. I'm not a sensation; I've never been a sensation. I've never been a sensationalist. I go about my work and I have a sense of what I feel I want to do or need to do, in terms of writing, and I do it. Honesty is important to me, and I don't mean in telling the truth. What I mean is honesty in the writing..and that's hard to explain. It's not a moral position. But it's trying to find ways to bring something into the open to allow that thing to exist on the page. In my novels, I don't want to support protagonists who might be confused with me or considered to be "good" in a moral sense. I'm not interested in that. I'm really not that interested in myself on the page at all. In fact, I have a horror of that.

You would never want to write a memoir?

Oh, I am writing something, but it's an anti-memoir. Because I think memoirs are, except for a rare exception, generally pretty specious. There are some really great memoirs, like Paula Fox's *Borrowed Finery*. That's a brilliant book. But if you read it, you'll see Paula Fox doesn't make herself into a hero. Or into someone neglected or victimized, or whatever. Her next book that was a kind of memoir, *The Coldest Winter*, is about the year that she was a reporter in Europe, going to places right after the war, the Holocaust. It's not about her. It's what she observed. That, to me, is admirable and powerful. I mean, *everything* is not about you or me. Right? It's just not.

There seems to be some kind of demented—What is it? Narrow?—incredibly narrow idea of what writing is in our culture. What is the impulse to write? That's a big question. Why is one writing? I remember one woman saying to me, after she took a workshop I did, "I've written some poems, but can I call myself a writer?" I said, "Why is that even a question? I mean, you're writing. You wrote something. You're a writer." The whole "Can I call myself a writer?" question I found so odd, as if it's some sort of identity that is separate from the actual act of writing. It's very, very strange to me. There is no secret password to being a writer. There is no secret code. You just do it. People would like to imagine that the work involved is not just the writing itself. There's serious work in writing. It's not something other than that, really.

As someone who lived and worked through the darkest times of the AIDS crisis—and who has been very publicly vocal about your feelings during this particular election cycle—what is your perspective on what this all current turmoil means for art and writing?

A lot of bad political art will be made. It's really hard to figure out how to say this, but people make things in a particular time. You're living in a moment, you're responding to it in some way. It's conscious and unconscious. But if you try to very hard to respond directly, you will most likely not be successful. Very few people can do it. I think of George Oppen, a poet in the 1930s. He was a communist and didn't want to change the kind of poetry he wrote, so he stopped writing poetry. He didn't want to write political poems that would follow the communist line. He didn't write poems.

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There aren't that many Muriel Rukeyser's. There aren't that many W.H. Audens. I mean, Auden's poem, "September 1, 1939," is an amazing poem, but not everyone can do that. So, being an engaged person, being a public intellectual, being all those things, I don't think that there's a particular program that you can follow. I don't think writing bad, enraged poetry is necessarily the way to go. I think remaining conscious is important, is significant. I don't think that all of our work has to be dedicated to politics.

I'm going to do certain things; you're going to do certain things. I think about Preston Sturges and all of those great films that he made. Remember *Sullivan's Travels*? A movie director thought that he should stop writing comedies because they weren't really profound, and then he ends up in a Southern jail with all these prisoners, many of whom are black, and he's white, and he's watching a comedy and laughing and he realizes the importance of laughter? You know, human beings are connecting in not just one way.

So you're not a fan of the "just think about all the great art that will be made" line of thought? A lot of people cling to that as a kind of silver lining.

That's so disgusting! I don't think it's true. But more than that, I don't think it's a productive way to think, really. It doesn't really understand art. It just doesn't. It really just doesn't.

Do you find that you are a better writer now than you used to be? Or that the more writing you do, the better you get at it?

I don't want to put it that way. I want to say that the person who wrote *Haunted Houses*, my first novel, is not the person who wrote *Men and Apparitions*. I think we do what we can in the time we do it. And I think that's fine. I don't abandon any of my little creatures, these things. I think that what does happen to writers is that you recognize more and more the choices you're making. You become aware that you have many more choices. Hopefully your craft gets better. I could not have written this book, *Men and Apparitions*, or *American Genius*, a Comedy back when I was first starting. You go through changes, you develop something. It doesn't necessarily mean it's better. It's different.

What do you think when you look at *Haunted Houses* now? Do you have a fondness for it?

Oh, I do. I think *Haunted Houses* is one serious, in-your-face novel. Which, when it came out, hardly anyone recognized. You know, it's interesting, quite a number of gay men took it up. I think one of the reasons is because it's written in a very tough way. But also one of the major characters is a gay man. It's about Grace's

friendship with him, Mark. One of the things that interested me, when I was a budding feminist, was my friendship with this guy who was a budding gay man. Gay boy. We were the same age. We shared so many of the same concerns, and I just felt like I was very identified with him, and he with me. So, Mark and Grace were the characters. I had never seen in print a book in which that relationship was explained or celebrated or explored. I think it holds its own. Could I write it now? No. That's because I don't need to write it now. It's like Gertrude Stein said, composition is explanation. She wrote what she needed to write. That seems like a good thing to consider—what do I need to write? You don't always know when you are doing it though.

We're always sort of working things out and making meaning, even when we don't realize that we are, often in ways that we don't realize.

That's right. And you really do feel something when people tell you they're reading it now and that they find meaning in it. You know, it's so incommensurate, your life as a writer and the way people might read you now or later. Or never. That's why writing isn't just some kind of free expression: *Oh, we should all do it, it's just great!* We should all do it? No! It's hard and often it's awful.

I'm only sort of kidding. You know, I've had lots of different students over the years, and I'm not discouraging. I've never told somebody, "You should not be a writer, you're not good enough." But if people want to ask me, "Can I make a living as a writer?" I might say, "Probably not." I mean, if you do a certain kind of writing, maybe. Copywriting, maybe some kind of commercial writing. But if you write what you want to write? Probably not. But don't let me stop you from trying.

Lynne Tillman recommends:

Toni Erdmann

Pierre Chareau exhibition at Jewish Museum

Arthur Jafa's film *Dreams are Colder than Death*

Justine Kurland's photographs in her first book, *Highway Kind*

A good Nebbiolo

Name

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Vocation

Writer

Fact

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Lyndsy Welgos