

Natasha Stagg on practical thinking



October 31, 2017 - Natasha Stagg writes and edits criticism, fiction, essays, and celebrity profiles. She has published work in the book *Fear of Content*, and is a former senior editor at *V Magazine* and *VMAN*. Reflecting on her writing since her debut novel *Surveys*, which was published by Semiotext(e)/Native Agents in 2016, Stagg says, "I want to be able to do that again somehow, but it hasn't really felt that way since then. I don't feel unstable enough to dive into writing again. I need to have some sort of impetus or something."

As told to Thora Siemsen, 2990 words.

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

In your novel, *Surveys*, you write, "I liked to be interviewed, too. I liked filling out online dating profiles." What type of information overlap is there between what you'd want to communicate in an interview and a dating profile?

Well, I wrote that not really as myself, but I guess there's a little bit of me in all of what I write. I do like being interviewed the same way I like therapy. You discover things about yourself every time you talk. I have filled out online dating profiles, and I think that's really fun, but it's more exciting to leave out a lot, to experiment with how few words you can use to describe yourself. If it's accurate, it becomes attractive to someone. What do they see in that?

I don't know if that really answers it, but it's the same joy I get in editing my own work or editing someone else's work. I think it's fun to cut so much of something until it's just really what needs to be there. Maybe that can become a metaphor for dating, cause you're just showing up, and it's exactly what you want to present to someone and nothing more. You can't really do that much more, because then it's overworked.

"A survey, like a piece of writing, can never be completely finished. You can always ask more people to respond," you write, also in *Surveys*. How do you see an awareness of response get factored into your process?

I hope I don't think too much about how people perceive my writing while I'm writing it. I guess that quote is more about the way surveys can't end. That's a sort of scary thing when you're actually doing market research, because you can keep getting answers to a question forever so that the mean answer or the average will change, and then time will change the way people respond. Everything is a factor, so it's kind of more an anxiety I have about writing, in general. I'm writing this thing now, but what would I have written yesterday or tomorrow, and how would it be different and how would people respond differently?

Your book's protagonist, Colleen, experiences internet fame. What changes did your social media habits undergo while writing this book, if any?

I didn't have social media when I started to write it. I was very late to that. I was living in Tucson and I was in grad school. I had moved back to Tucson from Michigan. I went to college there, and then I started grad school wanting to write a book. I got in a Masters program and took a class called "Writing the Novel", and I wrote this novel there, or most of it. I really wanted it to be more about fame and artists, but not specifying what kind of art the artists made, or what kind of level of fame they are or who their audience was. That was tricky.

When I was editing the book, I went back and made it more about social media, because that was what was starting to interest me. I was new to it. I got Facebook and Twitter and then later Instagram and, like everyone, was just

fascinated by the quantifiable fame that comes with that. I guess that's sort of a layer on top of the narrative more than it is a commentary about social media interactions or my own personal experience with it.

It's another part of that metaphor of surveys, taking surveys and giving surveys, and how all of it becomes these numbers. There's a lot about money, too, that is sprinkled in. What the numerical value of money means to every person whose either trying to be famous, or trying to be recognized or have a job or go on dates. All the things that are part of the process of gathering. It becomes sort of about the attention economy, in the end, but I think that was sort of incidental.

You wrote parts of *Surveys* in Arizona, and finished it in New York. Did you maintain a consistent writing routine throughout both locations, or did moving to New York involve a recalibration?

Definitely it did. I did not stay consistent once I moved to New York, but it was a different kind of urgency. When I was writing in Tucson, I was in school, so I had a weekly page count that I had to turn in. I would be really consistent with my writing there. I moved here seven years ago, and then I went to a writing residency in Prague in the Czech Republic, and tried to write there. It was actually the worst for writing, even though that's what it was for.

It was a lot of classes and workshops, but then it was a lot of partying, a lot of sightseeing. All the people in my residency were younger than me, for some reason, so they all wanted to party every night and I would go out with them. I didn't get a lot done there. I felt really stressed, like I had to finish this book once I came back to New York. So almost as procrastination while looking for a job, which was the scariest part of moving here, I would just add to the book and edit it. I think I wrote more because it was what I shouldn't be doing. I should've been looking harder for work, and I was procrastinating by writing. I did end up writing really quickly, but it was not a routine. It was very spastic.

You're a writer and editor of criticism, fiction, essays, and celebrity profiles. How partitioned do these practices feel to you?

They're partitioned by the assignments, really, or the editors that I work with. I start out writing everything from my own way of writing, or my own voice, and then once I slowly understand what somebody's looking for, it becomes very different. I've written a lot of really straightforward celebrity interviews that are total just fluffy, catering to a publicist, basically to keep my job. I worked for a magazine for four years, and a lot of that was just doing filler work. I didn't mind it. I think it helped me a lot, to kind of figure out what people want, what different people want from different types of writing. It also taught me that a lot of people don't read at all, and it doesn't really matter. I didn't get a ton of feedback from those profiles.

But yeah, it is funny, what people want from that kind of writing is sensationalism. There's another side of it where if you're too sensational, it can totally backfire in a lot of ways. It's this delicate balance. That's just celebrity profiles. The rest, I don't know. I haven't written criticism in a long time. I don't know if I'm really good at it. I like writing essays, mostly about fashion. I've never been super edited when I write fashion essays, cause I don't think there's a lot of critical writing about fashion out there. So everybody's just kind of happy with whatever I give them.

What are some characteristics of a draft that would really excite you as an editor?

If it was an interview, I would love some good quotes. I love a good pull quote, you know? I think that was something I learned from working at *V*. I would get a lot from different writers that had interviewed a celebrity or an artist. People are really, really safe. Not to be like, *I wish it was the good old days with magazine journalism*, but you read older profiles from *Artforum*, when Ingrid Sischy would edit, or old *Vanity Fair*. *Vanity Fair's* the golden standard of great celebrity profiles, because everyone back in the early days of that magazine would go on these long trips with people.

You read a profile of Courtney Love, where she just falls down drunk. You see it, and you're there. There's a lot of old profiles of politicians that are probably so much better than what anybody could write now, cause

everybody's way more aware of how their quotes reverberate, because basically only the pull quote will get passed around. It's exciting when you get a story where somebody's not afraid of something that could get taken out of context, but that's pretty rare I think.

This year you wrote the introduction to Courtney Love and Lana del Rey in conversation for *Dazed*, and identified some "irresistible institutions—Hollywood, mainstream acceptance and powerful men." How do you think the presence of these institutions surfaces in your writing?

Definitely in *Surveys* it does. It's something that I've been thinking about more and more because of our current climate, not just politically but the Harvey Weinstein allegations. More and more people questioning those specific institutions: Hollywood, powerful men, mainstream acceptance.

I mean, Courtney Love and Lana Del Rey, they're two of my favorite celebrities ever. I listen to their music all the time. It's not a guilty pleasure. It's almost a sadistic way of thinking about your relationship to the world. That's how listening to their music is, and it's probably how they feel about their own writing, I'm assuming, after listening to them talk to each other. It's this more realistic view of how men control everything, and how if you're going to live in the world, you have to accept that.

It's a sort of unpopular thing to think now, because there's all these sort of ways to feel like you're resisting or going up against those institutions. I just feel so cynical about it. I feel like the ways in which most people are protesting those specific institutions are subsumed by them. If you're really vocal in some social media platform, you're literally buying into a platform run by men. There's no way to become completely outside of any of those institutions, especially the media.

If you're trying to protest Harvey Weinstein, you're trying to protest Hollywood. That's what you're doing, because Harvey Weinstein is Hollywood. That's what the entire industry was built on, people like him. You feel very defeated after a while, and I think Lana Del Rey and Courtney Love both have made it into this kind of sick fascination instead of just a defeatist attitude that I really appreciate.

Are there certain topics you're more comfortable writing about than talking about with friends?

There's a lot of topics where if you talk about them with friends you can't fully think about your opinion before you say it. So anything that's really sensitive, I think I'm more comfortable writing about. I'm also uncomfortable writing about more sensitive topics that I'm not completely experienced in, because then I'm writing in this echo chamber of my own experience, and that's scary and dangerous. I don't want to write about anything that I have never fully witnessed, and I'd rather talk to friends who have. But yeah, I like writing about fashion. And I'd rather write about it than talk about it. I've found myself saying that I don't care about fashion a lot lately, and then I'll write a whole thing about the current season.

In a 2011 review of Tracey Emin's *My Life in a Column*, you write, "After nine years of almost non-stop workshopping, I assumed I would have nothing more to learn from a college-level creative writing class, but I'm somehow in one again." How does the dynamic of being a student in a workshop stay with you today?

It's definitely with me all the time. I was in so many workshops that it started to feel like an AA meeting or something. I was dependent on feedback. Even if it was negative feedback, I would eat it up, because I wanted to know someone's immediate reaction, which is completely not a sustainable way of getting into your own work, or really making something good. It's an easy addiction. You need to sit with your own thoughts for a while before giving them away. That's the thing about workshops, you really do have to turn something in immediately after you write it. There's not time to think about it and turn it in a year later.

Chris Kraus, who published *Surveys* on *Semiotext(e)*, has said of the authors they publish, "There's a great line from Deleuze... which is, 'A friend is someone who lets you see their crazy side.' We feel that everyone we publish, we kind of know their crazy side. It manifests in their work and that's why we like it." What drew you to sending *Semiotext(e)* your manuscript?

I needed to find them in the way I did. It was years ago when I was in college. I had a really good friend who moved to Berlin, and he still lives there. I think he moved there 12 years ago, so it was probably that long ago when I visited him in Berlin. He had moved there for a girl, and the girl I knew, too. She was working at a bookstore, and I didn't know her super well, but I wanted to say hello to her. I was like, "Oh, a girl that lives in Berlin." I just felt cool knowing someone.

I went to the bookstore and saw her there, and she was really almost flippantly just like, "Here's a book that maybe you would like. It's a misprint. There's a mistake in the way it was printed, so we would just throw it away anyway." She gave me a copy of Reena Spaulings by Bernadette Corporation, and I took it on the plane and read the entire book on the plane ride back to Michigan. I felt so changed by that book. It was literally a piece of garbage, because she was going to throw it away. Also, it was attached to this girl who I thought was so cool. She reminded me of Nico from the Velvet Underground. She was just this cool, tall blond, German girl who had this book.

I think of Semiotext(e), in a way, based on that. And then, of course, discovering Chris Kraus and all these stories about all the authors that they publish, and how they're sort of friends of the family. They're also weirdly obsessed with the anti-status or the anti-clique-ness of the literary scene. But in becoming that have become a very clique-y seeming place that is just the cooler clique to be in.

I sent a different manuscript to Semiotext(e) when I was very young that will never be published, because it was horrible. It was a collection of stories that I wrote in college, and I thought I was amazing. I read it now, and I was so awful. I tried to get in touch with them then, and they just never responded. Then, I was trying to get this book published through way more traditional routes, and I had made a friend who worked in publishing. She'd worked at a bunch of bigger publishing houses. She was trying to help me, and it was taking forever. Years.

I was asked by this magazine to interview Chris Kraus, and I was sure she won't respond to my email, but then she did. I interviewed her, and we became kind of pen pals after that. I sent her this, and she just immediately was like, "We have to publish this." I was so incredibly blown away, just from all of the letdowns I had with it, and with my thoughts about Semiotext(e) before that. This is the coolest thing that could ever happen to me. I'm so happy those big publishers turned me down. Semiotext(e) barely touched it, so it's the way I want it to be.

You had an advice column for *DIS Magazine* called Ask Natasha. If you would be so kind to briefly re-assume this role, what advice would you give someone starting a career in writing right now?

That advice column was so fun, because I was so unaware of how it could be read. I wish I was still that naive. But to answer your question, advice I would give a writer... I think if I was assuming the old Ask Natasha character, it would be something like: don't write because you're my competition, and there's enough writers out there. And writing is really narcissistic, so it's unhealthy.

Natasha Stagg recommends:

Perfumes: The A-Z Guide (2009) - This book by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez has some of the most inventive writing I've recently found.

Talk Hole - I've only missed one or two of these comedy nights in Chinatown since it started, I think.

Bladerunner (1982) and Bladerunner 2049 (2017) - I know the Bladerunner worlds are oppressive to women—I thought that was the point.

Marble Hornets (2009) - I watched all 92 episodes of this amateur Slender Man web series and all of the accompanying spooky videos. It's pretty.

Unicorn (1969) - The whole album by Tyrannosaurus Rex (later known as T. Rex), but mostly the song, "Cat Black (The Wizard's Hat)."

Alice in the Cities (1974) - Really, everything by Wim Wenders.

Pretty Wild (2010) - They definitely could have been the Kardashians.

The Odeon - I get steak tartare, fries, and a martini, even though it's too expensive.

The journalism of Christopher Glazek - This scoop about the Sacklers and the Oxy industry is great.

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Vocation

Writer, Editor

Fact

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