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On taking the long road

An interview with writer Sarah Nicole Prickett

When did writing start to feel tenable, if ever?

It feels tenable now. It was always *plausible*. I'm the oldest of five children from the same two parents, and I benefited from being the oldest in a number of ways—primary among which was that I learned to speak and read, and consequently write, early. My mom was born to German immigrants in Niagara-on-the-Lake, so she spoke both German and English. She and my father taught German to me first, knowing I would pick up English on my own. It's a funny first language to have. I wonder if a sort of muscle memory of the tongue causes certain tics or problems with my writing, with its density or convolution at times.

Anyway, by the time I was four and a half, I could read *Anne of Green Gables*. I wrote stories and poems also from the age of five or six. About the convolution—the first short story my mother remembers me writing was called "The Long, Twisty Road." It was about a long, twisty road. That seems emblematic.

How do you conceive of having a home for yourself and its importance to your work these days?

Writing is all decisions. Putting one morpheme, one word, one clause and one sentence and then one paragraph in order. I can be decisive to the point of judgmental about movies, novels, which car to buy, who to befriend, but in my writing I feel terribly, constitutionally indecisive. That's maybe why home relates so strongly to writing in my mind, because home is a decision having been made. That's how I felt about getting married. I felt that I should have this one thing decided.

I didn't think New York should be permanent. I thought of it as doing high school, but as an adult—embarrassing. I thought four years, and then I'd be done. I would live there long enough that I wouldn't have to live there, because I would have enough of a name and a knowingness about what to do, and I would know enough people. The worst was the fifth year, like a victory lap—which obviously is the ironic term.

It feels very much like a home [in California], but it's not mine, it's rented. What I have here is the *sense* of home, a routine forced upon me by the scarcity of options and things to do.

Are there patterns in your writing now that you attribute to your upbringing?

There are certain lifelong motifs. When I was a child, I liked twisty roads, as I've said, and spiral staircases, chandeliers, waving fields. I grew into liking a sense of magnitude. Remembering one's own small size. I like having the skyscrapers in New York, and I like having the mountains around me here. I always liked water towers. The white wind turbines that look like synchronized swimmers. Radio telescopes that signal space. These sort of white skeletal things that are like fossils from the atomic age.

Generally I'm attracted to glamour, because I had a totally unglamorous childhood, which I deeply resent.

That reminds me...Courtney Love once said, "I will never, ever forgive [my mother] for not being glamorous."

Really? That could be something that I gleaned and buried, and then dug up from the recesses of my mind without knowing its provenance. Or it could be synchronicity. If it's a coincidence, it's a coincidence that makes me happy.

How old were you when you started seeing writing as work? I guess in that question I'm asking about keeping your heart clean as you write.

Keeping your heart clean, yeah. That is the difficulty—to write for a living, and not to become a professional, or at least to struggle with *being* professional. I like being in the middle of something much more than I like starting or finishing it. There I can really indulge my tendency to overcomplicate, or I would say to present things exactly as complicated as they are. I loathe being accused of overthinking. I guess because the accusation often comes from men whom I think are *underthinking* things. Anyway, my preference is to work on things forever, very sporadically.

Fran Lebowitz, who is one of the great interview subjects of all time, said in an interview that she once thought that she hated writing, but what she actually hated was working. I feel that way.

What's the worst advice you've ever gotten?

"Don't write like a girl." It was bad advice not because the opposite is necessarily better, but because advice depends so much on the giver and why it's given. It was bad advice given in bad faith. I think, generally, a lot of advice about being nice and behaving oneself was either wrongly given to or wrongly taken by me.

Then there's the general, generalizing advice for writers, like "never write for free." I'm glad that I sometimes wrote for free, because in the best cases that meant I had a compensatory measure of freedom. Most things I wrote for free were not very good, but they allowed me to make my own mistakes, which is good. Almost everything that I don't like in writing, I learned to dislike by doing it, and regretting it, myself.

What were some moments when editors showed particular care for you as a writer?

I remember a very lovely, generous editor, Stuart Berman at the now-dead *Eye Weekly*, once saying in regards to... Well, I can't remember what I wrote, but it was hardly the first time that I was considered provocative or controversial, and I didn't really understand why. Commenters could be quite mean, and certain people always have been annoyed by me, because I'm so vain and stylish and a bit mean myself, in addition to being a woman, and being from nowhere. What he said, which I have never forgotten and have sometimes found occasion to pass on to other temporarily embattled writers, was, "As Kris Kristofferson said to Sinéad O'Connor, 'Don't let the bastards get you down'." I just thought that was so wonderful and cool. Such a cool thing to say.

It's better to write for editors in particular than publications in general. My editors now are simply the best. Without David Velasco, I might not be writing at all anymore. He's saved me over and over again. He truly loves writers. Generally speaking, it's been better for me to work with women and gay men, who have tended to feel that I could be better. With straight men I've often felt like I had to prove myself repeatedly and unnecessarily, that is to say not just because I make the same mistakes over and over again.

How often would you say you know your conclusion when starting something new?

In something long, never. That's usually why it's so long. There was a time when I internalized this notion that one doesn't think off the page. This is something Didion said, and Sontag, and either Dorothy Parker or Dawn Powell. Now that I live in an extreme quietude, I go places, driving, and think. I have a flip phone because I don't need a smart one, I'm not missing anything and I don't want to care about the whole world when I'm going to buy cigarettes. I mean I do have the internet at home. I have not gotten myself to a nunnery, as it were. But when I leave my house I can feel myself having thoughts. I'm now more able to think through a shorter piece before I write it. I can think of the beginning, and sometimes the ending, and then the middle.

You have a recent fiction piece for the book, *C-A-T Spells Murder*, edited by Sam McKinniss and Alex da Corte for the latter's show at Karma Gallery. Do you write fiction on your own regularly?

Not really. I think that fiction is embarrassing, or at least the first attempts are bound to be embarrassing. It's like telling someone your dreams, but worse, because these dreams are your fault. Anyway, because I never finished my undergrad, I can't exactly get my MFA. Without that degree and that proprietary knowledge, it's hard to get in the game and perhaps it's unwise. You have to be really a genius to come in as an outsider, I think.

I do sometimes, like when I want to write but don't want to do my work, try writing stories that are essentially pastiche, imitations of Daphne Du Maurier or David Markson's crime novels—which ironically he wrote for money, but I do them for myself. It's good to do things in the dark that will never, perhaps, see the light of day. Maybe this is the answer to your question about keeping your heart clean.

That thing was written for an old-ish male painter who wanted an unconventional piece for a catalog, but was horrified at his likeness in the story when I sent it to him. I had also sent it to Sam McKinniss, because I never publish anything without giving it to at least one person who knows me well. I want them to tell me if I'm failing my own standards or ethics, or if I don't sound like me. When Sam was putting together this book, he remembered it and wanted it, and so I revised it for him. Durga [Chew-Bose] talks a lot about writing to a particular person, and rewriting for Sam made it better, cooler, and funnier.

What advice do you have for someone looking to be a better reader?

I would say to be catholic. We had so few books in the family home—there were the collected works of Shakespeare, and the *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, and a book of Olympic records, and many versions of the Bible, and some C.S. Lewis books. Everywhere I went, to school or to sleepovers or to the dentist's office, I'd pick up and read literally whatever was there. I was indiscriminate, or what someone else would call voracious. But this helps you to become eventually a good perceiver, to ignore strata and categories and get taste of your own. William Gass says it was for the same reason—the forbiddenness of so much reading—that he became a speed reader, reading before it could be taken away. He redeems the embarrassing skill.

I used to skip over things that I didn't understand, and even now, if I come across a term, a word that's unfamiliar, I write it down and look it up after. But when it comes to the paragraph, I really try to metabolize before going on, and not allow myself to think I understand because I could pass the basic comprehension test, not to mistake a recognized syntax for the greater, real meaning.

The bath is where I absorb books best, as if the water makes me a sponge. I try to read on paper first thing in the morning, rather than on my iPad as I otherwise sometimes do, so that I'm not immediately alert to the whole buzzing network, the connections that are all too possible and too many, all the news that's lying in wait to apprehend my imagination and fill me with various horrors for the rest of the day. I also try to write distracting thoughts in a notebook. Then I feel more devotional, as well as calm and alone.

The rumor is you're working on a book. Do you have certain ideas about where you'll be in life before you finish it?

Well, when I was 20, I saw *Basic Instinct* and immediately felt that what I really wanted to be was the age of Sharon Stone in that movie. I thought that when I got to the age of 34, I would be perfect, and not a day sooner. I have some time. I have, in preparation, recently dyed my hair blonde.

Sarah Nicole Prickett recommends:

Date shakes

Rhodia notebooks

Nancy Wilson's version of "Free Again"

Espiral vinho verde (the one that sells for \$4.99 exclusively at Trader Joe's)

Galbanum in perfumes

Guy de Maupassant's *Alien Hearts*

Nina Menkes's Queen of Diamonds

The Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary

Radio Garden

Prism Lites lightener (bleach) in violet

Vogue (the cigarette brand)

and...

<http://aaaaarg.fail/>

Name

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Vocation

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Fact



Photo credit: Amy Prickett