

# Scott McClanahan on making your own place as a writer



December 19, 2017 -

As told to Julian Brimmers, 3410 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#), [Anxiety](#).

**In *The Incantations of Daniel Johnston*, the graphic novel you co-authored with Ricardo Cavolo, you write that "There is nothing more amazing than the bedrooms of our childhoods, or the room we're sitting in right now." Where are you now?**

[laughs] You can see the Barbie Dolls over to the side, I'm in my kid's room, sitting on a princess chair. So blame that when the interview goes poorly and my answers aren't up to snuff.

But, yeah, think about your childhood bed and how much weird energy had been in that place. All your imagination. It reminds me of a Bob Dylan story. Apparently, when he's touring he likes to go to the homes of other songwriters. In Canada he found the place where Neil Young grew up. Imagine you live in Neil Young's childhood home and Bob Dylan stands on your front porch to see the bedroom. The owner said that Dylan just stood there and went, "That's where Neil Young dreamed all his dreams." I love going to historical places, too, like Walt Whitman's house on Long Island. Rooms and houses have this haunted energy to them. I guess that's what you're doing as a writer—you're trying to be the ghost of yourself.

**West Virginia plays a central role in almost all of your writing. What can you tell us about the area you live in?**

In Beckley, where I live now, it's all about coal mining. Rainelle, the place of my childhood, would be timber. The name comes from the Rain brothers, they were sawmill guys. They came there, cleared the valley and built the sawmill. They did that for 70 years. We had Route 60 there, so the town survived once the timber left. What's strange about timber towns is that guy after guy that I knew was missing a finger, or an arm. It's still an isolated place, which of course the internet kinda changed. Beckley is the company town where the coal bosses would have lived. 16,000-17,000 people live here—it's not even a city but a jaunt strip mall. It's a wild fucking place. It feels like the old West.

To me, one of the great themes of literature and film is coming from the country to the city. I love Fellini, his theme of the country boy from Rimini going to Rome. I guess we have that myth built into the United States as well. Little Eastern European immigrant Andrew Warhola who goes to New York and becomes Andy Warhol. It's also the story of the greatest poems by Scottish poet Robert Burns. There's an energy to a rural person who goes to the city.

**Do you feel the internet made that kind of story obsolete?**

Maybe. I wouldn't have been able to publish books if it hadn't been for the internet. I wouldn't have access to a cool New York City publisher. But I'm not an internet utopian. It gives certain people more access, but just as much shit gets created. You just have more opinions and more voices. My politics of 2017 is, I don't care about anyone's opinions anymore. That feels sort of radical. [laughs]

**Do you write with an audience in mind?**

I have no audience in mind whatsoever. I could care less about anyone's view towards it. I don't know if I'm getting grumpy but I'm at a point where I'm asking myself why would I even publish this? It seems so weird to me that someone would pick up one of my books and read it. My audience is me. I don't know if it's some Freudian compulsion that I have to write down these stories I imagine or have lived.

**And yet somehow you've reached a readership. At the end of *Hill William* you even directly address the reader.**

Exactly. I guess my audience is me, wanting a readership. Maybe there's a danger in realizing that you have an audience. It kills something. When you look back at these 60s bands—Ray Davies, writing music for The Kinks, for example, or Creedence Clearwater Revival, Phil Spector. They're connecting with the audience for only a couple of years. Those recordings started oftentimes in 1963/1964 and by '69 these bands were done. There was just a four-year point in time in which an audience discovered them.

I worry, once an audience discovers you, will there be any juice left? Some artists just get weirder and weirder because they try to box themselves off from the audience's reaction. It's a danger I've been weary off.

**You're afraid of being embraced too much?**

I know it sounds stupid, but I'm wondering if I need to go back to my hole to create things when that happens, or will I have matured to a certain point and be able to deal with it? I'm a grown-ass man, I'm 39. I'm not getting any richer from writing, that's for sure [laughs]. So I don't even know if I could get comfortable with a big audience. Most of the literature I love feels dangerously personal. For instance, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, who is not widely read in the States. Probably because of communism and being on the wrong side of Stalin she wasn't really read in Russia either, but she's one of the finest Russian poets I can think of.

Another music example: I love the Replacements. There is a power to them. There's a great anecdote in the *Trouble Boys* book. The Replacements were booked in this cool jazz and rock club, where in the dressing room the artists would autograph the wall. And the Replacements show up in '82/83, and there are all of these signatures by Little Richard, Miles Davis, Chuck Berry, and they go out and buy wallpaper and put it over all of this amazing history. That's the story of art-wanting to insult your heroes. You wanna be nasty and angry.

**That goes away, doesn't it?**

Yes, I don't feel angry anymore, to be quite honest with you. I felt angry for a long period of time in my life. That wasn't necessarily fueling my writing, but now I feel almost enlightened in comparison [laughs].

**Being unfair to previous generations is a privilege of youthful art, no?**

I think so. It's incredibly ego-driven, too. Think of the amount of books upon books that exist, and here you are adding your two cents. Take Georg Büchner—when I read *Woyzeck*, written by this young guy—that play you can't kill! It's gonna be amazing in a thousand years from now. Late period Thomas Mann, I can appreciate. But do I need it? I don't know. Maybe when I'm 70 years old.

If you'd asked me at 25 when I was starting to write these books if I thought of writing novels at 40 or 50 I would have been appalled by that idea. My heart was full of angst and tragedy. Maybe I need to figure out an interesting way to die, that's also a way to enter the canon, right? [laughs] But at this point in time I only drink soda and chew Nicorette gum, that's about it. Maybe I can be the first author who kills himself by drinking way too much diet soda.

**Well, I'm happy to hear you're doing good.**

I used to think it's all bullshit, the youthful artist image of Romanticism. But the Ancient literature I love has that, too—Sappho, Catullus... I hate to be a stereotype but maybe I am a little bit a stereotype.

**Do you feel it's necessary to romanticize your life in order to write?**

Probably. St. Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, have a romantic angle to them. Or Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, which is a great first-person text, too. When you're interested in myth and story, then you are romanticizing in the same way that I romanticized my life and my family and the things that I've seen.

If you'd known me at 24, I was a bookish kid. A little nerd who loved music, movies, books, and talking about those things. And you can't really write about that; it's just not that interesting. So I guess I have thought about readers and imagined myself as a reader all along. I wanna see something explode, I want drama and emotion and that shit. In order to get that, you have to create a romantic angle.

**Is it important to create complicity between the reader and the author? Why else would I care about the *Sarah Book*?**

There is this saying, "God looks always out for babies and old fools." I've always felt like an old fool in my life. I teach college-level composition and there are essays I simply don't wanna read. I don't wanna read your molestation narrative about your cousin touching you. But, I wrote a book about it. I don't wanna read about your dead grandma—but I wrote a book about it.

It's less about subject matter, and more about the thing in between the sentences and the chapters. A structure that works as some weird sort of spell. It's a seduction in a way, you pull people in by sheer force of a written personality that can get a hold of a reader. Peter Handke, or WG Sebald—why do I read those books? They're oftentimes about nothing, but you can open them and find an entire world that's compelling, even in translation. Subject matter can be thrown out the window sometimes.

**I'd like to talk about stylistic strategies in your work: one is repetition of thoughts. That's something you do a lot.**

That's basic parallelism. Not that I'm comparing myself to these individuals but Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*, the opening to it is nothing but an exercise in parallelism. Taking one thought and then twisting that thought. You have the same thing in the *King James Bible*, The Old Testament. Hebrew poetry is completely based around those notions of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, this is the way it works when you have no rhyme scheme, meter, or beat. I grew up in the church and read the Bible, so this is still amazing to me. But the repetition of sound within a sentence, that's also a Lish-ian thing. Gordon Lish, the great editor of the later half of the 20th century. I try to do it simple enough that you don't notice it. But even our greatest American poet, Walt Whitman, does it. It's just this accumulation of repetition that would then build to a catharsis.

**You mostly achieve catharsis through those transcendent paragraphs you often end your chapters with.**

I hate that I do it, but all of my chapters end like that. I wish I was a better writer and had more tricks, but that is one that I found and that has always worked. The Ramones are great because the third album is just like the first album, I guess. There's something wonderful about simplicity. It's set-up and emotional pay-off, like a magic trick. These are my tricks. It's that simple.

**How important are setting and context here? It gets emotional but rarely corny at the end of your chapters, partly due to the stories' bleak backdrops and the sometimes shocking deeds of the characters.**

That's another trick, too. 19th-century Russian literature does it. Dostoyevsky tells you how horrible a person is, but then looks at it from the opposite view. You have the coldness of the action that takes place, but if you can flip that person and allow the reader some sympathy... that's the writing that always works for me. This person is a monster, but I'm a monster in myself. The key to me has always been being able to love everything. Truly love everything. Which is this stupid, almost sociopathic view. You can't do that in a regular, orderly life. You have to make judgements. And you have to decide, "This is wrong, this right." Within fiction, the best writers accept everything. Nothing human is alien to them, to use the old Roman notion. Those are the novels that I love.

Maybe in our internet culture we're losing this more and more. Everybody is judged good or bad. I pity the poor writers of the next 50, 60 years who will have to deal with that.

**You rarely leave West Virginia in your stories.**

I think our best American writers are regionalists. But those regions they're describing only exist in their brain. Willa Cather's Nebraska, as well as her Pittsburgh, are creations of her mind. A pop song needs to be so broad that everybody can attach themselves to the emotions, but really the best pop songs are those that feel so specific that it allows you to attach your own specificity to it. West Virginia as a setting might be a bit unusual for readers who look for airport literature. But it's my place. Like Shane McGowan's Ireland, or Nick Cave's Berlin. I don't know if that Berlin ever existed, probably not, but it surely feels like it did.

**So regionalists include urban writers as well for you?**

We always attach the regionalist tag to a certain kind of literature, which is a disservice. F. Scott Fitzgerald is regional—he talks about a specific city, specific socioeconomic groups—and that's the power of it. He's a Minnesota kid who comes to the city but understands the slither of his subject matter. We need to rebrand the regionalists in some way.

Mostly you need to realize that you make your own place as a writer. You make your own New York, your own Beat Hotel. Look, your friends are amazing! Just look at them, you don't have to become famous and hang out with cool friends. Your mom is much cooler and more complex than you can even imagine.

**How do you know a character, or a piece of personal history has literary significance?**

Most of it is instinct. Feeling, right? The books I've written come from stories that I tell my friends, or the person I was dating. Stuff to entertain someone. Entertainment is holy. To make someone laugh, cry, or gross them out is holy to me. I've chosen little nuggets that made me laugh or that I found interesting. But you have to tell that counter-myth, too. It's weird to think that Nick Cave was somebody's little boy once. That's the counter mythology to his persona. He was just somebody's baby boy and had sisters. So it's myth and counter-myth—but mostly it's dumb memories.

**Do you feel you're a realist writer?**

I don't think that I am. There are weird things happening in my books—chicken wings talking, little boys having visions of Batman...

These terms made no sense in 1850 and they make even less sense today. Take European Realism in the tradition of Flaubert, these

writers turning their backs on Romanticism. But Flaubert's novella *A Simple Heart* ends with this weird hallucination of a woman seeing Jesus in a pear. All writing is realist writing, every writer is just showing the inside of their brain and what reality feels like to them, using whatever technique. Kafka was a realist writer to me.

However, I do see a lot of writers who try to write a book that somebody else has written already. A certain type of book that will get translated easily and earn stickers that win awards. This seems so silly to me. A publisher would be better off just buying a bunch of those stickers to just put on the books [laughs].

**You kinda did that with *The Collected Works of Scott McClanahan Vol. 1* by mimicking the Penguin cover sleeve.**

Yeah, and we did it before Morrissey did the same with this biography! He's been ripping us off [laughs].

**How does having a day job shape your writing routine?**

I teach English 101 and English 102 at a Community College. I've done it for over a decade now. It's allowed me to stay here. I don't make as much as a normal college instructor would but I can live my life here, which has been important for me.

I get into a writing routine when I'm working on a book. On weekends I work hard, in the evenings I work for an hour, too. But teaching is so important for the megalomania of the artist. If I ever write a dissertation I wanna write about those who taught in the public school system. You have students who are physically, morally, and intellectually superior to you. But the nature of that interaction is you tell them to take out a sheet of paper and they do it [laughs]. We want to be ordered around. When you realize how simple people are, you are either the person giving or taking the orders. For instance, Lenin was a teacher, Chairman Mao was a librarian, Ho Chi Minh was a tutor, LBJ was a public school teacher. Mick Jagger's dad was a teacher. That's how you create a Mick Jagger [laughs]. Now it's easy for him to boss around an audience.

**What's your lifeline when you can't find inspiration?**

I wanna be a great reader, maybe even more than a great writer. And I would have smacked myself for saying that when I was 22. [laughs] But there is this Pablo Neruda poem I often think about that goes: "I learned about life from life itself, love I learned in a single kiss, and could teach no one anything".

I always run back to life. I think I like books more than life, but that said I've always felt like going back and just being a person for a certain period of years helps enormously. Hear people's stories. Listen to people talk. Finding characters in your life. Dialogue in real life is as good as a Tom Stoppard play. If you're tuned in, rather than cut-off from the world, it helps.

I love movies too. I always try to think of my writing in cinematic terms. Short chapters, propelling someone through a narrative. I love Sam Peckinpah, German new wave guys like Herzog, Wim Wenders, Fassbinder, Murnau. But also John Huston and Hitchcock. Those I loved because my mom loved them.

**When everyone uses their own life as source material, how does one avoid mediocrity as a writer?**

In my head I just went, "I am mediocre, though." [laughs] Don't get me wrong, genre fiction can be personal, too. My answer would be: don't write so much. Some people have to do it in order to learn it, but first of all you have to have taste and be able to choose things that mean something to you. Avoid jumping into something just to produce or chase a dollar. Most of the artists are chasing dollars or acceptance. I'm not saying I don't do that, but you must be able to say "fuck all that" because you're gonna be dead one day and all you had was the energy you put in these little things. You wanna leave behind the maximum, non-watered-down amount of energy. Also, don't be afraid of being hokey or sentimental. Essentially you're dealing with your own enemy, which is your brain.

**Country songs of my childhood that NY lit-scenesters just won't understand by Scott McClanahan:**

Porter Wagoner "Rubber Room"—Probably the best country music mental institution song next to Wagoner's own "Committed to Park View." Wagoner was also supposedly the most well-endowed country music artist.

George Jones and Tammy Wynette "Golden Ring"—Sort of "the" perfect "performative" song about a divorce by artists who are divorced and singing to an audience who have paid money to hear about said divorce. A masterpiece of exploitation and pain.

Skeeter Davis "End of the World"—This song will unleash the apocalypse and put us out of our misery. I'm sure of it. Go ahead and turn up the volume.

Buddy Knox "I Think I'm Gonna Kill Myself"—Most cheerful suicide song in music. Jennings covered it a decade or so later. Also see Wynn Stewart's "I'm Gonna Kill You" for a completely joyous death poem.

Patsy Cline "She's Got You"—Perfect encapsulation of the early 60s Nashville aesthetic.

Name

Scott McClanahan

Vocation

Writer

