

Tao Lin on why he writes



August 16, 2017 - Tao Lin is the author of the novels Taipei (2013), Richard Yates (2010), and Eeeee Eee Eeee (2007), the story-collection Bed (2007), the novella Shoplifting from American Apparel (2009), and the poetry collections cognitive-behavioral therapy (2008) and you are a little bit happier than i am (2006). He founded and edits Muumuu House and has taught a class on the contemporary short story in Sarah Lawrence College's MFA program. His next two books are a nonfiction book titled Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change that will be published by Vintage in May 2018 and a novel titled Leave Society that is in-progress and will also be published by Vintage.

As told to Willis Plummer, 3228 words.

Tags: Writing, Anxiety, Process, Focus, Mental health.

Is writer's block something you've experienced? Or, if not that, is there a comparable thing that you've run into that makes it harder to write and produce?

I imagine people with writer's block feeling unable to think of something to write about. I haven't had that problem, but I've had something where I have too many things I want to write about and I feel unable to focus on one for sustained periods, and it feels like writer's block in that I feel stuck. I keep becoming interested in one of the other things and my motivation keeps changing or disappearing and it usually takes something major from outside, like a book contract, for me to finally focus on one thing.

Your fiction has always been personal, and driven by autobiographical experiences. With the latest book it's been clear (partially from your Twitter reading list) that a lot of research was required. How does research fit into your writing process? Is this a new approach for you or has research always been a part of how you've worked?

With my poetry and fiction, I did little to no research on facts about the world, but I researched my own life. I researched my Gmail account, behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and history. With my next book, my first nonfiction book, I researched both my own life and other things more than I've ever researched anything. I read ~150 papers from scientific journals and ~130 nonfiction books and I researched a file in which I've typed 400,000+ words of notes on my life and other things since 2013.

Research on this level is new for me. I liked it because it gave my writing process another aspect that I could switch to working on each day. I also enjoyed research because it feels satisfying and meaningful to me to publish nonfictional information that is accurate, or that is more accurate than what is already out there, and because I like learning. I've increasingly learned that learning seems to never end—I can keep going deeper into topics, reading one paper or article with one perspective, then multiple papers/articles with different perspectives, then an entire book, then multiple books, and so on, and keep increasing my understanding in ways that make my previous understandings seem vague or inaccurate or wrong.

Your work has always had a distinguished aesthetic approach with dramatic stylistic differences between books. How do you develop the style you choose for a specific work?

For me, style develops out of editing. Maybe 90-95% of the time I spend on writing is spent on editing, on refining and clarifying and embellishing and rearranging and pruning and shaving and buffering and experimenting and exploring and tweaking. With *Taipei*, I started out with hundreds of thousands of words of diary-like notes that I typed quickly with many stream-of-consciousness-seeming sentences like this sentence that I knew wouldn't be published but were just notes. As I edited the notes into a draft of the novel, a style developed and I began to consciously choose aspects of the emerging style that I wanted to keep or abandon. I kept the efficient, I

felt, newspaper technique of conveying someone's age by writing "Paul, 26," and abandoned the word "perhaps" for "maybe." Sometimes I changed back and forth and reminded myself to stay calm, that I was just still undecided. Then, maybe 70% into my work on the book, the style stopped changing as much, and I created a guide to organize my thoughts on Taipei's style; from then on, I referenced that guide, in which I also kept lists of themes and motifs.

In your fiction, how do you decide names for characters?

I've tried to keep it simple and clear. I've tried to avoid reusing names I've already used so that it's less confusing and so I can pair a name with a character better in my head.

I'm interested in the style of note taking that you've been doing on your own life. Do you take notes every day? What types of things do you try to focus on or what types of details have you found useful when you look back on them later? How do you organize such an extensive archive? When you revisit your notes, do you usually know what you're looking for or do you just browse them until something sticks out at you?

I've been taking notes every day since October 28, 2013. From then until May 1, 2015, I typed notes only on my phone in the Notes app. Then my phone broke and I moved my notes to a file on my computer in TextEdit called notes.rtf that is always open on my screen. In the past year, I've used the file probably an average of two hours a day. I've let the file evolve, in terms of what I type in it. I'd like the file to keep changing in whatever way that will help me. I see that on the first day I typed three small paragraphs and the first sentence was "Cried again last night on eaten weed."

At some point, I began noting every time I used any drug, the amount I used, and when I used it. My notes helped me control and better enjoy and use caffeine and cannabis and to decrease my use of other drugs. I've also used my notes to plan how much caffeine or cannabis I'll use each day for weeks into the future. For around a year and a half, I've used the file as a to-do list, writing what I want to do each day and moving items around as my plans change. I've known since 2015, I think, that my next novel will use notes.rtf as source material, so I've also been typing material for my next novel directly in the file, things like scenes of me and my parents interacting. I printed notes.rtf recently because I'm going to read it with a pen and circle parts to consider using in the first draft of my next novel.

Your novels with the exception of Eeeee Eee Eeee are explicitly autobiographical. I feel like you'll say no but I'm curious if you would ever consider writing an entirely made up narrative? Do you think that it's even possible to do so? What about fictionalizing your own experiences appeals to you compared to something like memoir?

Thank you for noticing that my novels are explicitly autobiographical except for Eeeee Eee Eeee. I do consider writing entirely made up, in that I view language and life as two entirely separate things, with different properties. For example, characters exist in books and are made of language and never change and all the information about them is public and knowable and discussable. People, though, exist in the universe and are made of matter and can't stop changing and are unknowable by others. I agree that my novels except Eeeee Eee Eeee are explicitly autobiographical, but I still view them all as equally fictional because, to me, nonfiction doesn't recreate dialogue, combine characters and scenes, or make up characters and scenes—things I've done in autobiographical fiction—but is strictly accurate, using verbatim dialogue and real names and specific dates. I'm interested in both fiction and nonfiction, but so far I've published (in terms of books) only fiction, maybe because it was fiction, which was mostly autobiographical, that inspired me and made me excited about writing first so that's what I focused on first.

Regarding the strictness of nonfiction, if all language is equally distant from life why bother attempting to be adhere to actual events and conversations?

I try to adhere to actual events and conversations in my nonfiction because I feel that by labeling it "nonfiction," readers, including friends and family and researchers, will expect actual, non-fictionalized events and fact-checked, researched information and that is what I want to give them, in part because I view my

nonfiction as a platform for future discussion and I want to be accurate so that those discussions, building on what has been learned, can be productive and lead to new ideas and behaviors. All language is equally distant to life, but people enjoy spreading both factual information and made-up stories (with shades in between), so, depending on the situation, both adhering and not adhering to consensus reality can be useful and desirable.

I really like what you said about the unknowability of people compared to the knowability of characters in fiction. Do you enjoy when other people are able to speak about the choices of one of your protagonists based solely upon the factual evidence provided in a work?

I do. I think it makes for a more productive, less confusing discussion, because everyone can reference the same source material. When I started reading and writing, it felt right to just refer to autobiographical characters as the people they were based on, to treat both as the same. But at some point I began to not like that. I began to want to keep the two separate, in part because it was more accurate and less reductive. When I talk about a character now, I try not to think about the person it's based on. I try to focus on the world the character literally exists in which is the world of the book. When I talk to other people about autobiographical characters, I don't allow myself to earnestly connect information about the character to the person. When I meet people who've written autobiographical books, I don't allow myself to connect information about the character to them, because they called their book "fiction" and because it seems better to learn about people by interacting with them instead of coming at them with possible misconceptions.

Does your work help you to understand life more? Do you still write to feel less lonely or have other goals surpassed that for you?

I still write to feel less lonely. I also write to learn about myself, to learn about my relationships, to catalyze changes in my life, to join the conversation happening with authors over decades talking to one another through novels and short stories and poems and essays and memoirs, to communicate in depth and at length with friends and family, for financial reasons, for fun, to amuse and move myself and others, to do something in which I can use all of me, to do something creative and open-ended and long-term, to play around with language and ideas, to create new sentences and phrases and words, and to create culture as a means to replace other culture instead of complaining about that other culture or being absorbed by that other culture.

What types of strategies and routines do you employ to keep yourself disciplined and motivated as a researcher, reader, and writer?

A long-term strategy I have for staying disciplined and motivated is to keep learning about the ways in which my mind and body have been damaged from trillions of dollars of advertisements, thousands of synthetic compounds, multigenerational malnourishment, an unnatural microbiome, and other things new to the human species, and to continue increasing my understanding of what I can do to heal myself gradually years and decades. Focusing on this long-term strategy, I can rationally remain optimistic in a painful, confusing world. Which increases my motivation levels, because then I'm in a better mood—I feel less helpless and more empowered—and so things seem more worth doing.

Writing my next book, I got into a habit of going to sleep around 10PM and waking around 8AM (I've been sleeping a lot) and drinking caffeine soon after waking and smoking cannabis in a controlled, strategic manner throughout the day. I did that consistently for 17 months. There were a number of days where I kept unwittingly getting too stoned to write or edit, but I used my notes to help me regain control and stop doing that.

Can you say more about the relationship between the damage to your body and writing? What kind of damage are you referencing? How does your work help you to recover and heal? Or what is the connection there that makes you optimistic?

One form of damage is glyphosate. Glyphosate is the main ingredient in the corporation Monsanto's product Roundup, which people use to kill "weeds." Monsanto began selling it in 1974 and now it's the most used pesticide on Earth and is probably in, I've estimated, more than 99.99% of people in the United States and is in most food and in water and air and rain and cigarettes and vaccines. Glyphosate makes plants and microbes unable to make

three amino acids, including ones that mammals use to make opioids and dopamine and serotonin and DMT. So, because of glyphosate everyone is deficient in endorphins and other opiates and dopamine and serotonin and DMT and other compounds. Since I ate food that contained glyphosate for the first 30+ years of my life, if I avoid glyphosate from now on I'll be better able to make endorphins and dopamine and hundreds of other compounds. With more endorphins, etc., I'll have more energy and feel less depressed and be able to spend more hours per day writing with more creativity and focus. I'm optimistic on a personal level because, by avoiding damaging things I've habituated to in the past, like glyphosate and thousands of other things found in modern society, I can expect to feel better—less depressed, more motivated—over time.

DMT like the drug?

Yes. DMT is made by many species of plants and most animals and it's made from tryptophan. One thing glyphosate does is it makes plants, fungi, and microbes unable to make tryptophan.

How pronounced has your experience of personal improvement been since you started consciously avoiding glyphosate? How do you benchmark improvement? I've always found efficacy of long-term self care like antidepressants to be hard to track based on the incremental process of improvement.

I've found long-term self-care difficult to track also, in part because there are so many things happening at the same time. At the same time that I'm trying to heal my body and mind, my body and mind are also continuing to deteriorate and break in small and cumulative ways, for example whenever I go outside in NYC, I breathe in various kinds of toxic fumes and see billboards and advertisements of sexy people being unnaturally sexy for the purpose of selling me products and I think even if I consciously resist those advertisements, they make it into my subconscious and dreams. So I try to view glyphosate as one out of many layered and interconnected things I consciously avoid. I don't try to track my improvement specifically with glyphosate. I just try to trust, based on what I've learned about how glyphosate physically interacts with me, that avoiding it has helped me to some degree. By avoiding it, I'm also causing less glyphosate to be made and sold and glyphosate is sold almost entirely or entirely by corporations and so by avoiding it I'm reducing the power of corporations which helps me mentally to some degree because I feel productive and meaningful to affect the world in this manner.

I remember reading that while you were writing *Richard Yates* you were drinking a lot of iced coffee and raw juices. Then in an interview about *Taipei* you described a somewhat bleak seeming cycle of Adderall and Xanax.

I wrote immediately after drinking caffeine for my first six books, though I would edit on paper while not on caffeine. *Taipei* was the first book that I used non-caffeine drugs on. I used mostly Adderall to help me write *Taipei* but also wrote on other stimulants and on opiates and benzodiazepines and LSD and others. I felt terrible and depressed most of the time while writing *Taipei*, so I used drugs to move my mood up to a level in which life seemed interesting again for however many hours. I used drugs just to increase my mood and energy and focus, basically, so that I would be able to work for an amount of time. With my recent book, I used drugs in a regimented manner most of the time. My goal was to create a steady, reliable state of consciousness within which I could work 6-13 hours a day, unlike with *Taipei* which I wrote staying up 2-3 days working and then feeling unable to do anything for like 3-10 days. I get much more work done with a daily schedule than with the bleak method I used with *Taipei*.

So you were writing while high? What do you get out of being stoned while writing or how is your approach to writing altered while under the influence of cannabis?

I wrote the first draft of the book in 11 months high on cannabis and caffeine, smoking and drinking caffeine within an hour of waking probably 98% of days and smoking throughout the day and night and working on the book all day and night. I didn't smoke cannabis regularly until late 2013, so when I get stoned I feel significantly in a different state of consciousness. My memories and associations and feelings are different. I feel more in a state of mind open to learning new things. This was helpful while writing my book because in it I examine things I've learned in the past five years that have changed my view of the world—like the prehistoric Goddess religion, the details of MKUltra, the safety of LSD, and the toxicity of glyphosate. I could contemplate these topics better stoned because, stoned, I had less of my public education and other culture from my first 29 years in my

head.

Does your understanding of things other than matter tie back to the way that language/writing/art and the material world are two separate dimensions?

It does, I think, in that in the past few years I've become increasingly interested in the idea that "the imagination" is a place that is realer and larger than the universe. Terence McKenna theorized that maybe death is a release from the universe into the imagination. To explain this, he pointed out that, to a person looking down into the lower dimensional world of a book, characters are not free—their existence is determined, we know everything that happens to them—while, to a character in a book, people in the universe experience an unimaginable degree of freedom. In the same way, maybe from the after-death state we will be able to look down into the lower dimensional world of the universe and realize that, from our perspective outside time and matter, people are not free, though they feel free while alive. I find this theory—that the after-death state is to life as life is to literature—exciting and it's only possible to contemplate if one views literature and life as separate and different, one being a higher-dimensional form of the other.

Tao Lin recommends:

Sorry to Disturb the Peace by Patty Yumi Cottrell

The Others by Matthew Rohrer

Judy Wood's research on 9/11

Anthony Samsel & Stephanie Seneff's six papers on glyphosate

When God Was a Woman by Merlin Stone

Name

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Vocation

Writer

Fact

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