

On facing yourself on the page

An interview with musician and author Viv Albertine

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As told to Jessica Hopper, 2691 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Inspiration, Adversity, Anxiety.

Are you always writing?

After the first book I was totally emotionally wiped out. I thought, "I'm not going to write another book, I can't go through it again." Then as the days went by I thought, "I've got to start writing a book because I desperately need something in my life that needs me." It's funny how a book sits there every day and it needs you to attend to it. Though it was not the most laudable reason for writing a second book, that's how it started. It was almost a practical thing. You come to a certain age in your life, you're not needed by anybody. I know it's a bit odd to say but that's what motivated me.

I started to write again and when I write, I write, say four hours a day, downstairs in my little studio. I sit there with this thing that needs me for four hours a day. I started and I didn't look back over my work, I didn't reread what I'd written the day before, I just wrote forwards solidly for three months until I had a book-length piece of writing. I was quite pleased with myself, but when I did come to read it back, it was *not good*. That's sort of pitfall number one in the writing of a book. There are always many, many moments like this in writing a book but every time you come across them it's like the first time you've ever encountered such a terrible obstacle.

You think the writing is excruciating, but the editing is truly the excruciating part. Sometimes they're neck and neck.

Exactly. This is the way it was, looking back at the 80,000 to 90,000 words or whatever, and thinking, "My god, it's absolute shit." And it was crushing. There's always one or two bits you can salvage. It was a good exercise for me to write forwards like that, unselfconsciously. Then I thought I wanted to try and write fiction mixed with nonfiction; I wanted to write a sort of fictional tale about a middle-aged woman who fantasized about murdering people because she was such an angry person. I wrote the fictional bits about this woman and the nonfictional bits about where I was living in East Hackney and tried to weave them together. It was a bit like psycho-geography mixed with a sort of a domestic-noir. I found the fictional bits harder and harder and harder to write. I started to realize that this middle-aged rage-filled woman was me. I thought, "Why pretend it's not me?"

That was my second stage of the terrible realization that it was going to be all nonfiction. I had to face the fact that I was this rather unpleasant woman. It's a very interesting thing to write about rage, which is considered so unfeminine, and the unpleasantness of who I was. I thought, "If I'm unpleasant there must be loads of women who are unpleasant and so frightened to say it and talk about it." Especially me, when I was brought up in the '60s and the '70s, girls were very much still supposed to be appealing and smile all the time. It's a very hard thing as a woman to actually not smile all the time, to admit to being unpleasant publicly, to having murderous thoughts. All of it. I faced that all down on the page really, so that's how it came about, the book.

When you're approaching that work, how do you feel? How do you come to it?

It's a constant lack of belief, really. When you're in it, it's painful! I think you have to have self-doubt.

Part of me suspends my knowledge of what the future is going to hold—that it's going to be published and people are going to read it. I suspend that and I attack the book everyday as if no one's going to read it, because otherwise I couldn't be as honest as I feel I have to be to get the truth out. Not glamorize myself or make myself sound nicer than I am. I couldn't do it if I really had an eye on it being published. I actually put that out of my mind when I write, and face my uglier self on the page.

Also, in doing that, you can't help but start looking at family and how they helped shape you and the environment and the times and to look so deeply at yourself. Shining such a strong light on yourself is not a pleasant experience. I don't write a book quickly. I might get the shape of it down in six months, but I'll spend two years rewriting and reshaping and restructuring. Writing makes you not like yourself very much, I'm afraid. I think anyone would feel the same if they'd looked that deeply into themselves for a couple of years. I'm having to rebuild that now, my acceptance and liking of myself, because I've so examined myself from so many angles in such an unflattering way.

Blindly diving in is a different sort of process than what you describe in your previous book, when you wrote about being how at the start of the Slits you'd have these long group meetings in the kitchen plotting every point and idea.

I did start to wonder after the first book, what on earth made me this young woman who dared to pick up a guitar in 1976 when she couldn't play or sing? And she was very poor, working class, didn't come from a cultural household, had never had a music lesson in her life. I was so shy and so lacking in self-belief, I couldn't believe I'd done it, in a way, when I looked back. The boldness of that was so out of it's time for a young woman in those days, and so out of my class. I traced it back to my mother, she made me an artist. I don't think she intended to, she intended to make me someone who stood up for myself and someone who questioned authority and someone who was not dominated by men. She intentionally set out to make me *not* those things because she'd felt so crushed, as many of her generation were.

The unwitting side result of that was that I had the nerve in 1976 to make myself part of that movement that was beginning, that burgeoning movement. I picked up a guitar when I had no role models to follow. A lot of the time when I go around doing talks, the first thing a male interviewer will ask is, "Well, tell us about Johnny Rotten, tell us about Sid Vicious." I thought, "Oh my god, I've lived all those years, all put down in that book, all those struggles, all those fights against the times that I was living in—which were very hard and quite violent to live through—and these men want to put it down to a couple of spotty blokes I knew for 18 months in 1977."

I was determined to find out what had made me that creative person against all the odds of my background and my gender. I do trace it back to my mother. She set me, not only on the path of being an artist without knowing it, but she set me on the path of being a truth-seeking, no-bullshit artist. In answer to your question, that she made me that person, she indoctrinated me like I was a little soldier she was bringing up. The result was that I became this little rebel against my nature, against my upbringing, against my environment, against my sex.

It seems like when you're driven to make a thing it seems to present itself with real purpose and urgency. It's just coming out. You have no choice. The muse shows and you attend to it.

I have no choice. The thing is if I don't feel that feeling I just take to my bed and do nothing, and that can be for years. That's the funny thing, I'm either dormant or driven. It has to have purpose and a meaning so strong for me that it works against my laziness and my ennui, my age or my background. It has to be so strong in me that it propels me through all that. I'm not saying it's a good thing, but I find it very difficult to compromise in any aspect of my life. Writing's great if you can't compromise because you don't have to have a team you work with, you do it on your own. You can do it in your own time, and it doesn't really cost much to do, material-wise. You still have to be able to afford to eat and live but it's not as big a layout in terms of materials or equipment. I'm so glad I found it even if it was quite late. I'm glad I found writing because it suits me.

What do you have to have, to write?

A kitchen table is all I need and a computer, really. I like silence, I absolutely could not possibly play music

when I write because the sentences and the paragraphs and the chapters... It's very much a rhythm, and I see them very much like I visualize a song. In a song I might visualize the size of the verses and the chorus and then a bridge. Now, I do the same with writing. I slightly visualize as I'm going along with the rhythm of a sentence. I might take a long time over a sentence, sometimes just to get the rhythm right. Certainly the pacing and the rhythm of the words is important. I want to take people up now, and now it's time to take them down and now I'm going to hit them with something. It's all about pacing and timing and rhythm .

At what point in your writing process do you show things to other people?

I have a first reader, Sally Orson Jones. It's strange because she worked with the Slits back in the '70s, she was just a young girl around the office. We had a little office because our manager managed us as a pop group and she was like the little office girl. She's gone on to be an editor, which is great. She's very, very forgiving, I think. I trust her and I trust she knows where I'm coming from. She's my first reader. It will still be about a good year, probably, until I would show her anything.

The worst thing is to show someone something before you're sure where you're going, because then they can derail you and start putting doubts into your head. By the time I know where I'm going, I know the shape of it, I've written the book, and it's the right length or longer than it should be. That's when I'll start showing it. I'll probably have done two or three rewrites as well before I show it to my first reader. I'll probably do about—and this is because I feel insecure about how educated I am—I'll probably do at least 50 complete rewrites and edits of a whole book before I share it.

That's a lot!

I think if I started writing 20 or 30 years ago I wouldn't have to do 50 rewrites. I only read fiction when I'm writing nonfiction because I want it to have the pace and the intrigue and the page-turning ability that fiction has. You've really just got to be really motivated to turn each page. That's my number one requirement for myself from the book, that people want to turn the page.

It's all so new to me. I've come to it late. People say, "Oh, it felt so natural." But it takes years to sound that natural on paper. They say, "Oh, you write like you speak." But I started off trying to write like I spoke in my first book and I realized it's a whole different thing. You can't just put down how you jabber away in real life on the page and have it look nice and natural. It doesn't. It's a skill to make it look like you are just talking to someone on the page. It takes a load of editing, a load of rhythmic work. You have to hear it in your head very clearly.

There are diary-esque aspects of your works. Are you a diary keeper?

No, never. I've never kept a diary past when I was about 12 years old. From about the age of 13 onwards I've lived life so hard. I have been out every day and night doing stuff, exploring, and living a very street-oriented life. And then punk. I never had the time to keep a diary. I always felt diaries are more for people who don't do stuff. If you're doing absolutely 100%, doing and living, how can you keep a diary?

I've completely relied on my emotional memory, which means much as I try and reach the truth in my work, it's still totally biased. If all I remember is what's implanted itself in my memory it's because it was very painful, or very happy, or very unusual, or very humiliating. Psychologists say that you remember humiliation more than you remember love. It's something that never leaves you. I think lots of my books are full of that because that's the things I remember. Not that I've led a completely humiliating and embarrassing life, but they are the things that have stayed with me a lot.

I have to make notes. I used to be just like, "Oh, I'll remember that." And I actually could. Now I'm forced into a notebook.

I've got a terrible memory. I've taken drugs in the past, which has messed with my memory. There's certain things that never leave you, and when you start to write they come back.

Is writing part of processing these things for you?

Definitely. I work it through on the page. People often ask, "Is the writing about little traumas or big traumas—is it cathartic?" I wouldn't say it's cathartic in that it expels that trauma or makes you feel okay about that trauma, but writing certainly helps you understand what happened. I think that's about as close as a human can get to really making peace with bad things that have happened to us.

By the end of the book I didn't feel anger towards my parents or my sister, all of which were difficult relationships. I understood them. I think if you can understand anyone—whether it's a criminal or your family, or a lover who's spurned you—if you can understand where it's come from, it can't hurt you the same way anymore.

I don't write the book from the point of view of someone who's made peace with the world and understands their family and is all magnanimous. I am a little shit in the book, and things dawn on me in the book. I ask questions of myself and work things out on the page for the reader to see. They see the journey I'm struggling with. I didn't know whether that was the right thing to do or not, but in the end I went with it. I didn't know whether to let them see me working things out and my doubts on the page, but I've gone with it and thought, "Yeah, let them see that journey that I'm going through, trying to understand why I am like I am."

Viv Albertine recommends:

Brutalist architecture 1950s-1970s. I'm currently living on the Brutalist Alexandra and Ainsworth Estate in North London.

YSL Top Secrets All-In-One BB creme

Yoko Ono

Pine trees

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Name

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