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As told to Shy Watson, 2325 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Inspiration.

On trying to create something real

Writer Alexandra Tanner discusses dramatizing life, eliminating artifice, and the internet's ability to bring out our worst selves.

I couldn't help but notice that, in your acknowledgements, you thank Jess Tanner for "coming to stay and stay and stay." The narrator Jules's sister Poppy does the same. Correct me if I'm being presumptuous, but was this based on real life? And, if so, how do you go about life writing or auto-fiction?

Auto-fiction is such a loaded term these days. Everyone's doing it, and it has so many forms and boundaries. But yeah, *Worry is* based on my life. My younger sibling, Jess, came to New York for an internship back in 2016. I was living in the West Village in a little studio. They had student housing, but there was mold in the student housing. And they have chronic hives–with mold, not a good situation–so they came to stay with me. And at first I thought it would be a weekend, a week, and then it wound up being six months that we were living on top of each other. So that's where the idea for Jules and Poppy cohabitating together came from. I think they really are us.

The situation is different, the setting is different, the constraint of space and time is different. But as far as writing from life and writing whatever your definition of auto-fiction is, I think whenever you're doing that you're just sort of transfiguring yourself into a more loaded situation that's more dramatically interesting. So you're working to preserve the impulses of a real person and thinking about that person while you're writing them, or thinking about your own impulses while you're writing a version of yourself, but just sort of heightening the stakes a little bit.

Auto-fiction can be so hard because life itself isn't really plotted.

Anytime the book started pulling away too much from life, I would get anxious. Because what's interesting to me is capturing what a dynamic really is. But then, of course, in order to sustain a story that pulls people along, you kind of have to give life a narrative. There has to be drama, there have to be other people involved. Even though my memory of living with Jess is this really specific insular experience, it had to open up in order for me to tell the bigger story I wanted to tell, to explore the things I was interested in writing about. So dramatizing life is always…You feel like you're cheating, because life doesn't have the patterns that fiction has.

Yeah. But you got to.

You got to.

How did you know when *Worry* was ready?

I still don't know that it's ready. I feel like the beginning and the end were sort of easy for me to get into, and so determining when it was ready in the initial drafting was more about getting to a place where I felt that the whole middle had a rhythm and had the right measure of repetition, but also growth and also backsliding. So I don't know. I had to use my emotions in a way I hadn't before to gauge when things felt true and solid. So that led me toward pulling away a bunch of artifice, and anything that I was writing because I felt like: there's a scene that should be in here, so now I have to have a scene about this in here.

There's still things that I look at in the plot where I'm like: "Oh, I could do that better if I started over right now." So I don't know that a book is ever finished, except that it is, because you have a deadline from a publishing company. I think especially when you're writing from life, it stays with you, and the what ifs follow you a little bit more.

Now that *Worry* is published, are you able to let go of it and move on to the next project? Or are these

potential changes haunting you?

Throughout the editorial process, you still feel that measure of control, like: "Oh, I can still email my editor and say, 'Oh my gosh, we should do this. What do you think about doing this?'" For a long time, you have the manuscript, you're doing the copy edits, it feels like it's alive and it's with you. And there's a moment where they tell you, "Okay, it's done." And that for me is sort of when I felt haunted. I would wake up in the middle of the night and be like, "Is it right? Can I change this one line still, maybe on this one page that for some reason is coming to me at three in the morning?" I'm haunted but I have no choice but to move on.

At times, *Worry* almost read like a screenplay. How do you know when dialogue's working well, and how do you know when it's failing?

I did a lot of playwriting courses throughout my life, in college and in grad school, a lot of screenwriting as well. And a big thing that they have you do in those classes is like: "We're going to break for 45 minutes, and you're going to go to a coffee shop and sit down and listen to someone else's conversation and try to write it down. And you're going to realize that when people are telling a story, they don't fill in all the details for you, and they don't leave something off in a way that's easy to pick back up later."

And once you do that exercise a few times, I think it goes from feeling like those gaps are something that's frustrating about creating dialogue to something that's really freeing. I wanted it to feel very natural. So while I was writing the book I would pay that kind of close attention, whenever my sibling and I would talk to each other on the phone or during visits, the way we'd use language specifically with each other. How we'd defend ourselves or pick up on a memory or whatever. I realized it didn't have to make clear sense. I didn't have to package it to make sense to the reader. Because if the characters are understanding it and you as a writer are capturing a pair of characters' intimate understanding of each other in language, the reader's going to have that understanding too.

It takes a lot to make me laugh out loud. I'll think something's funny or whatever, but with Worry I was cackling in my office, worried my boss would hear. How do you use humor in your writing? What effect do you hope it has?

Because this book is so much about the texture of my relationship with my sibling and the texture of our humor with each other, that's what I was looking to throughout the writing. I wanted to write something that would make this one specific person, who I think is the funniest person in the world, laugh. So what I've learned about humor is that the funniest memes you see online, or the funniest videos are the videos that people made for one specific person, the memes that reference one really specific event. I guess the key to humor in writing is specificity. Again, the same thing as with dialogue. It's about not being afraid someone's not going to get it, but trusting that if you build in the emotional secret behind it, the thing you want is going to come through.

I read that you were a MacDowell fellow and also a fellow for the Center of Fiction. Have those experiences helped you develop as a writer?

What's been most important for me about those experiences is that they've legitimized me to myself. It's so easy to feel like, "What's special about me? What's special about my work? Is this worth anything?" And I think both of those fellowships came at a time when I was out of grad school wondering, "How serious am I going to be about this? Am I going to have a career?" With those really scary, big questions, getting just a little bit of validation from an institution gave me the ego boost I needed to keep going. So that's the big thing.

And then once you get to those places and once you're in community with other writers, you realize that that's what really helps you grow. When you're at MacDowell, you're with amazing people working in all different disciplines, and they feel frustration in their work as well. You come to dinner every night and talk about what went wrong and what went right in the studio. The thing you're working on, whenever you're a fellow or in-residence somewhere, the material becomes so secondary to having that experience of being in community and feeling like: "These other people are here and they're doing this, and I'm here too, so I must be able to do this."

I agree. Jules is very obsessed with social media, particularly Instagram. Why is she drawn to these Mormon mommies and all their conspiracies?

Jules is really without a center. She's lonely. She's both self-obsessed and full of self-hatred. So I think for her, the mommies are a way to feel like she's constructing some sense of self based on what she's not, that she's building herself up in relief against these people. I think she even says it at one point, something like: "I like feeling better than anyone." They're a way for her to feel superior about her inner life, which is all she has. And of course, using social media that way, from a really cynical and hateful point of view, it can put a bandaid on whatever you're feeling in the moment. Watching a crazy ass skit video that someone you hate made can let you be like: "Isn't this so embarrassing? I can't imagine being this embarrassing person." That feels good for a second. But you're not doing anything to improve yourself in that moment. You're giving into your lowest self.

I had my own journey of following Mormon mommies, and I still don't totally know why, but they drove me crazier than anyone else on the internet. So when I wanted to write a really internet-heavy book, I thought that giving them to her as her challenge would rupture something in her brain even more than it

was rupturing mine.

Writing something really internet-heavy—was that an intention that you had going into this?

Yeah, I really wanted to try to capture the internet in prose, just because I was noticing I was spending so much time on the internet in 2019, 2020 while I was writing this. And I found myself not being able to remember the reasons why a particular post drove me crazy or what the experience of encountering a piece of content that had a big effect on me had felt like initially, so I started wanting to use the power of narrative description to hold onto that unconscious monologue you have when you're scrolling. I felt in this book, description would be wasted on a tree or a building, and it would be more interesting to stretch that muscle by using really ornate descriptions in trying to get at what about a post was so uncanny or so funny or so sad.

Jules' miserability, how she's so irony-poisoned and judgmental, felt really real to me. How do you approach digital spaces? What's your relationship like with social media, email, and other online distractions?

I have control over it until I don't. I'll often feel really scarily gripped by my phone or really gripped by scrolling, just to encounter other people's thoughts. And then I'll have a moment where I'm like, "Okay, but I'm not being present in my own life." It comes in waves. In times of uncertainty, whether it's personal, professional, global, you want that chorus of people that you're looking at, to live inside someone else's thoughts for a second.

Aside from money, what are the rewards of your creative practice? What do you get out of this work, and what has it taught you about yourself?

I feel most authentically myself when I'm writing. I feel safe and really at peace when I'm writing. And when you're creating a character, what that gives you is this ability to reflect yourself and the people in your life back to yourself. I feel very, very mesmerized by that challenge, it makes my brain feel really alive. I feel out of time, but also connected to something. The whole ego journey of writing as a career and thinking of yourself as an artist falls away, and it's just about trying to create something real and interesting.

What is your writing process like?

I want to say I don't have a process, but I know that I do. And I think it just involves creating a setting that feels boxed off from the rest of the world. I sit, I put on music, I light a candle, all these little creature comforts that just help me feel present in the moment. But I don't really have a codified structure to my writing time, because I'm very work avoidant. When I have the sense that this is a job or that I have to work within a certain timeframe or certain parameters, I get really freaked out and angry and have authority issues with myself, even though I'm the only one setting those boundaries. But I like to write in bed. I like to write at night. I like to write when I feel really unseen.

Alexandra Tanner Recommends:

Adania Shibli's novel *Minor Detail*

Brett Story's film *The Hottest August*

This soba tea

This thyme candle

Papa Steve's protein bars (sponsor me, Papa)

Sasha Fletcher

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