

# On developing a distinct voice



Writer and filmmaker Brittany Menjivar discusses the beauty of parallel play, cultivating your own artistic community, and deriving inspiration from every medium

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As told to Madeline Howard, 2194 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Film](#), [Collaboration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#).

**How did all of your collected works come together to form [Parasocialite](#)? How long were you working on this collection?**

I've been fascinated by the theme of parasocial relationships for as long as I can remember. I think it's something that many people in my generation are naturally curious about, as we've been growing up online and forming so many relationships with people we don't really know, or might not know as well as we think we do. On top of that, I started doing music journalism as a teenager. Throughout that period of my life I was so fascinated and sometimes even a bit horrified to see firsthand the parasocial relationships that fans formed with band members. That was definitely one entry point into the themes that I would find myself exploring in my prose writing. Obviously, I consider myself a fan in a lot of aspects, but I think there is a dark side to forming an obsession with something that you don't really understand fully and can never fully understand, regardless of what that entity is.

I would say the earliest works in *Parasocialite* are stories and poems that I wrote in my first year of college, which was 2017. Over the years, a collection gradually started to take shape. Last November, I saw that [Dream Boy Book Club](#) put out a call for full-length manuscript submissions. I've gotten to know [Jonathan Blake Foster](#), the editor, pretty well since he's moved to LA. I knew that he was an editor that I would want to work with, and who might be interested in the themes that *Parasocialite* presents. As soon as I saw that submission call, I told myself, "I'm going to really kick it into gear and spend this entire next month focusing on paring down this collection and arranging the stories in a way that makes sense." I locked in and I'm glad that I was able to sort through all the rubble and create something coherent.

**In addition to the prose and poetry in *Parasocialite*, you also wrote the short film [Fragile.com](#). How does your writing process differ between artistic mediums?**

There isn't necessarily a certain time of day that I enjoy writing, or hyper-specific rituals that I practice every time I sit down to write, but I've always been a major fan of parallel play, broadly defined. I love going to a cafe and writing next to a friend, or typing away at my laptop while my boyfriend is working on something else in the same room as me. I've always been a people person, and I find that even just being in the same room as another person gives me a lot of energy and encouragement. It puts me in a better mood, and it also can help me focus if the other person is focused on a separate task as well. I always listen to music while I write, as well as make playlists for specific projects. I also like to introduce a degree of variety into my writing practice by working in different places. I have worked in bars before, coffee shops, the mall, the kitchen, the bedroom. I enjoy mixing it up for a change of pace.

My creative process is very different depending on whether I'm working on a poem, a story, or a screenplay. When I'm writing a poem, the process tends to be more impressionistic. Most of my poems start as a sentence that I've

jotted down, or a dream I had that I scrawled into my journal in the morning, or something that I typed into my notes app and then later revisited. Usually my poems are written over the course of a single moment. I'll just throw everything out on the page and workshop in one sitting then, of course, come back to it later to edit. But it tends to be a briefer process, and so my poems are pretty short form.

In terms of short stories, there's a quote about how writers should try to complete short stories in either one sitting or three sittings. Ever since I read that, I've never been able to find [the quote] anywhere, but I promise that I did actually read it somewhere. That advice has stuck with me. I don't always abide by it, but I find it best to at least spit out the first draft while you still have that initial burst of inspiration and excitement, and then workshop later.

Obviously screenplays are a longer form project. I tend to work less spontaneously for those. Way more planning goes into my screenplays. I always start with an outline. I typically have months and months of research. I'll make a playlist or mood board in a way that I wouldn't for shorter projects. I also tend to prefer having a lot more eyes on my screenplays than I do for anything else when I'm in the early stages of drafting, because filmmaking is such a collaborative process. I feel that it's really important to know what my creative peers think.

**How much of your writing is fictional? Does genre matter to you?**

There's definitely a lot of content in my stories that is inspired by real life. I feel like that tends to be true of most authors, even if what they're writing isn't what we typically call autofiction. I think it's very natural for authors to take things that have happened to them and hyperbolize or rearrange events in the process of crafting fiction. For *Parasocialite*, none of the narrators are me precisely as some of them are parodies or funhouse mirror versions of me. Or maybe, like, thought experiments where I take a clone of myself and drop her into a different environment, but there's always some modicum of distance.

I really enjoy playing around with questions like, "What would the worst version of myself do in this situation? Or what would my life be like if I found myself in this incredibly disparate set of circumstances, but I still had the same beliefs and hang ups that I do now?"

**I'd love to know more about your book cover. It asks readers the question: "Could you make it among the people who don't need to make it?"**

I knew that I wanted to have a line from the book on the cover, or at least some pithy, mysterious, or fun little statement. I was actually inspired a lot by teen book covers of the 1990s. I feel like most of them had a hooky little statement splashed on the cover that would catch your eye while you were exploring the library stacks. Then you'd flip through it and be further intrigued and end up taking it home. I definitely wanted something that would catch people's attention. I enjoyed that sentence in particular because it almost feels like a riddle the reader could puzzle over. Hopefully that curiosity would persuade them to flip back the cover and read.

When I'm talking about "the people who don't need to make it," I'm talking about people who are already considered A-listers, or the glitterati, or it-girls. People who no longer feel like they have anyone they need to impress. More broadly and outside the Hollywood sense, I'm talking about people who started out with certain privileges, or people who already have a leg up. A lot of *Parasocialite* is unpacking this myth of somebody who's trying to break into this secret glamorous world, and what does it take out of a person to attempt that? What does it mean, at the end of the day, to break in?

**How would you describe your writing style and how did you develop your specific voice?**

I would say I developed my voice, first and foremost, through a lot of trial and error. I'm one of those people who has been writing ever since I could read. When I was, like, three years old, I would recite stories to my parents and make them transcribe them. I would take little pieces of paper and fold them into book shape and write my stories between the covers. Writing has been a consistent practice for me almost every single day of my life. Across all those years, I've tried out a ton of different voices. When I was a lot younger, I would lean toward

more stereotypical, less experimental structures. I broke out of that when discovering the greater alt-lit scene.

I also allowed myself to be inspired by other mediums and artists outside of the writing world. A lot of my conceptual inspiration comes from film, since I'm a filmmaker as well. Specifically, I love the films of [Atom Egoyan](#). They deal with a lot of the themes in *Parasocialite*: obsessive fixations, voyeurism, exhibitionism. Letting certain filmmakers and musicians influence me has been crucial in helping me develop my distinct voice and be open to inspiration wherever it may come.

Most of what I write is in first person. I grew up reading a lot of middle grade or teen novels that were grounded in the first person and the narrator's distinct consciousness, voice, internal life, as well as external experiences. I read a lot of [Madeleine L'Engle](#) growing up, not just her science fiction, but more specifically her coming-of-age stories and contemporary fiction. She helped me develop a good sense of working through characters' interiority.

Reading other first person works inspired me when I was a bit older. [Marie Calloway](#), one of the writers from the original wave of alt-lit, helped show me that it's possible to make even mundane experiences interesting or exciting to talk about if you inject your personal take into it. More recently, I've been inspired by writers who are willing to inject a sense of surrealism into their works. I think this is something that [Alex Kazemi](#) and [Ben Fama](#) do really well, and even [Gregg Araki](#) does really well in his filmmaking.

**You run your own reading series, [Car Crash Collective](#), alongside writer [Erin Satterwaithe](#). What do you think are the elements of a great lit reading?**

I wanted to host a reading myself ever since attending my first reading, which was at KGB Bar in New York. I love the idea of being a curator. As an artist, it's really important to balance your input and output, taking in as much creative work as you're producing in order to stay inspired and maintain a robust creative practice. I think being a curator is one way to challenge yourself to do that and continue seeking out new writers. It's also a great way to just get involved with the literary community.

Writing is so often described as a solitary practice, but I personally am a major extrovert. So I am always looking for new ways to build community with other writers and get to know other writers as friends. Car Crash has definitely helped me meet so many interesting and wonderful people. Getting to know other writers will also introduce you to opportunities, great books, publications, and so many wonderful people in their spheres. It's exciting to learn from other writers who are at different stages in their careers.

For Car Crash readings, Erin and I typically like a mix of genres. We like a bit of prose, poetry, and we've even had people read essays or criticisms before, which can be an exciting way to mix things up. We like to have at least one person who's new to the scene on every lineup, or somebody who hasn't done a ton of readings before, but maybe we've discovered them through a lit mag, or have gotten to know them through attending other readings. We also like to have one published author whose book we really enjoy on every lineup. We try to blend people. We don't just want every reading to be like the same crowd, we want to pull people who we might not know personally, but whose mission and writing we really vibe with.

For Car Crash, it's important to cultivate a vibe that's welcoming and fun and goofy. It should always feel like a party, or like a celebration, because we're celebrating literature, we're celebrating community. But we also want to show that it's not a party above a literary event. We really care about writing and we're really passionate about sharing both our writing and the writing of people whose work we're passionate about with the community. Striking that balance is difficult to do, but I think it's crucial.

**Brittany Menjivar recommends:**

Check out reading materials via the [Internet Archive](#)

Use [Kanopy](#) to stream films—it's free with a library card!

If you like someone's art, tell them. If you like someone's vibe, ask them to hang out

Don't be afraid to wear heels if you're tall. Towering is empowering

Be a completionist—challenge yourself to work through an author's entire bibliography or a director's entire filmography

Name

Brittany Menjivar

Vocation

Writer and filmmaker

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