

On the benefits of an interdisciplinary practice



Writer and musician Geoff Rickly discusses the porous boundaries between autobiography and fiction, literature and music, and our past and present selves.

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As told to Kevin M. Kearney, 2915 words.

Tags: Writing, Music, Process, Beginnings, Money, Multi-tasking.

Most people would assume a musician reflecting on their life would write a record, but you wrote a novel. What drew you towards a book rather than album?

If I was going to go the memoiristic album and write about my life, I'd probably put it in an album. But I've always loved the form of the novel. I love what it can contain... characterization, the way time works. It's a form that has so much possibility, beyond any other form of art I've ever seen or experienced. I knew I always wanted to write a novel, but I was never sure I had an idea that went past a Thursday song. I just wasn't sure if I had something that could carry me beyond a super-compressed form.

So, when I experienced the drug ibogaine firsthand, for myself, I thought, "Nobody really knows what this does and it's such an unpleasant experience that I don't think a lot of people are trying to find out about it." It sounds fictional. I could start making a fictional novel about a real thing that sounds fictional. How many times could I remove and play with the ideas of fiction and identity and reality and surreality? Even when I think about my own life now it sometimes takes on the surreal aspect of the novel I wrote. And it is a novel. It's not a memoir.

You credit the writer Wendy Salinger with helping you see "the tissue paper separating memoir from fiction." It seems that was a big moment for you. How did that advice change your writing process?

The book originally started with a hallucination section and I brought that into a writing workshop at the 92 Street Y, a memoir course with Wendy Salinger. Immediately I became her teacher's pet. [laughs] She took an interest in what I was writing. She was like, "I don't think you're trying to write memoir." And I said, "Well, I don't read memoir or like memoir." [laughs]

And she said, "Well, I don't really either, but I had to sell my book as a memoir even though I was writing a novel and it was completely real." So she started helping me understand that I really did want to write a novel. She said, "If you were writing this as a memoir you'd be able to sell it for a lot more money, does that bother you?" [laughs] And I said, "No." And it's not even because I wanted to make things up. The concerns of a memoir and the concerns of a novel are so different. I like character. I like subtext.

You've blurred the lines between memoir and fiction, but there's a lot of the details of your actual life here. You're using a lot of real events and real names. Were you hesitant to bring people from your real life into the book?

It's so hard to make characters out of real people. Or, as I say in the acknowledgments, use real people's names

for characters. This is the biggest problem I had, especially with [my partner]. When you know someone and you love them deeply, it's so hard to reduce them, to flatten someone out and make them stand in for a certain aspect of society. I've felt devastated at times that I would have to make someone comical or in some way not the complex, multifaceted person who's already gone on their hero's journey and has already developed character. With every person, I wanted to explore how amazing they are. Instead I'd go the opposite direction: I would make them a shadow of a person. Giving them limited characteristics felt so much worse than giving them no characteristics.

My amazing agent Monika said, "This is not a person. You're making them into nothing." So I had to pick some things. And it's so strange. I left out an entire member of Thursday because there's just too many white guys with similar names in the band. And each one of those guys is a beautiful person I love!

It's such a strange thing to have to use real names for what are, basically, fictional characters, even if some of their words are the same as some of the things they've said. Some people have even said, "You made me remember a thing that happened, I guess I just didn't remember it happening quite like that..." and I told them it definitely didn't happen like that. But now that they've read it that way, that's how they're remembering it. And that's such a strange thing about fiction: it does reshape the path behind you. Suddenly we all agree it happened that way because we've read it more times than it happened.

There's literature all over the book. Geoff is constantly reading and it informs his ibogaine trip. Something that keeps coming up is Ginsberg's Howl. What was it about the poem that drew you in and informed so much of the character's experience?

I think *Howl* is maybe the best song I've ever heard. It's got the best lyrics of any song I've ever heard. I know it's a poem, but I think it's more musical than so many songs. One of the first things I thought when I read it as a kid was, "This is what I want to do." Even though I knew I wanted to be a musician, it was *Howl* that I was going for, it was the feeling that I wanted: making the world come alive through musical imagery. There's something about that poem that music did when I discovered it, that heroin did when I discovered it.

I was talking to Norman—he's in Thursday and Texas is the Reason and is one of the smarter people I know—and I said, "I really want to explore the positive side of drug use." One of the things they say in a 12 step program is that addiction is instinct run wild. These things on their own aren't bad. Sometimes you're after love, you're after things that are beautiful, things that are noble in a way. I didn't want to start with "Look how bad drugs are." I wanted to show this beautiful quest for meaning I think most people are on, in their own ways.

There's a lot of music throughout the book, too. I was struck by the prolonged section about Ink & Dagger. What is it about the band that's had such a lasting impact on you?

I grew up listening to industrial music and Brit pop. I liked really gothy, dark stuff. And then I saw the Bad Brains and overnight switched into hardcore and was just obsessed. I had a narrow view of what hardcore could be, but when I saw Ink & Dagger it brought it all full circle. Hardcore can be experimental, it can have electronic elements, it can turn off the lights and be threatening—not in a tough guy way, not in an "I'm gonna kick your ass" way. Instead, it was like: You don't know where you are, you don't *who* you are. The most vulnerable parts of you may not be safe right now. They touched upon something inside you that was real. That to me was a much more threatening proposition than "This guy's gonna punch me again." [laughs]

They really had a profound impact on me. I was a huge fan. It was also wild having them in our circle of extended friends. Sean [Patrick McCabe, the band's lead singer], I think, sold our TV at a basement show. It wasn't his, but he made a deal with someone. That was very Sean, very Ink & Dagger: kind of criminal behavior but also a prank to see what we would do. Losing him early, having him be our cautionary tale—that you could go from straight edge to being wild or doing drugs or whatever and then just be gone—I think he's always occupied a place in mind.

When you performed with Ink & Dagger, you were a bit of a character. Watching you in make-up, embodying Sean, made me think about you as a frontman throughout the past few decades. You're not usually playing a character, but you always seem to be interested in mirroring the audience and breaking down the barrier between performer

and audience. Writing is inherently more solitary. How did you navigate that change from being someone in front of audience and with a band to someone who's sitting alone at a desk?

The solitary nature of the book is something I found completely enthralling. I try not to be, but I am a bit of a control freak. With my bands, whom I love and respect, my greatest talent is that I surround myself with talented people and try to draw the best out of them. But that can go overboard sometimes and I tell them what they should be doing. And that's really tough.

With the book, that was the good part. I could spend unlimited amounts of time working without worrying about bumming anyone out because I'm pushing them too hard. I could also go for maximum effect when I thought something needed to be a certain way, without having anybody to balance me out. Those were all the fun parts.

The not-fun parts were I knew nobody was balancing out my worst tendencies as a writer and as an imaginer. There was no one to temper that. So, part way through I got really nervous that I was way out on a limb and no one was walking me back. I really had to trust my agent, who said, "Look, I'll be your band. I'll be your band, okay? Trust me. I'm gonna tell you." And she would. "The new 200 page part you wrote? None of it's good. You gotta go a different way. You lost the plot." And I'd be like, "Damn it." [laughs]

It was tough. It was really different. I had to imagine a bunch of different levels of reader. I just wanted to see what they were seeing. I wanted to understand what they were seeing. I knew at some point, when I had a handle on what the book was, I knew there'd be a certain literary audience that wouldn't get how exuberant the book was because it does read like a Ginsberg or a Frank O'Hara. It reads like somebody who's incredibly sensual, not restrained. One of my friends at PEN America said, "This is out of fashion: you use so many descriptors. I know you read Rachel Cusk, so you know that shit's out! People like restrained, tight prose these days."

But I'm trying to write from the voice of this character who is both me and not-me. And I can't do that from a restrained place. The character is already known as someone who likes a certain kind of imagery. In order to do the thing I'm trying to accomplish, I had to be aware of that voice and know when to employ it and when to restrain it. It's really easy to miss that that is the voice of the character. And that it's in the first-person present tense. And that he's more exuberant when he's super high. And that when he's in withdrawal he drains the world of all its color. What you were saying about all those mirrors...that's something I thought about a lot.

How did you learn to quiet the voices of all those potential readers and follow that path?

Just through drafts. At least 12 drafts after I got an agent. I rewrote the shit out of the book. I would decide every plot point was going to be the same but I was going to change the style. And I'd rewrite it. And I'd see what was wrong with that and what was right with it, then I'd start making deals with myself. What's worth it for this section? Tightness? Rhythm?

Are you sitting down every day to work or is it only when inspiration strikes?

I believe inspiration strikes if you're already working. That's my work ethic. So I do five hours a day, at least five days a week. I do them as soon as I wake up. People think, "Five hours a day?" But, I'm done by 10, 10:30.

And you feel incredible the rest of the day.

Oh yeah. And it allows you to walk it around a little bit. If you hit a wall and you're like, "I don't think that thing works. I don't know what to do, but I don't think it works." While you're walking and you're doing other stuff you suddenly think, "Oh, I know why it doesn't work."

Your subconscious is working through the problem.

100%

I know you talked about potential readers. One of them is someone who's in recovery. Geoff's therapist tells him towards the end of the book, "There are going to be a lot of people out there who can relate. They just need someone to say it out loud first." So, you've said it out loud. What do you hope someone in recovery will take away from what you've said?

I hope some people can laugh about it and not feel alone. There's something [Chelsea Hodson](#), who owns [Rose Books](#), told me. She showed me this great bookstore where she lives. And I said, "That's so awesome, do they know they've got one of the more influential young writers in the country living here?" And she said, "They won't stock my book. I brought them a copy and they said I wasn't a good feminist, basically."

So, I thought: there are going to be some people in recovery who read this book and say, "That's not how you stay sober. He's doing it wrong." And that's fair. This is a novel. It's not a Leslie Jamison "this is how you recover" kind-of book. And I like Leslie Jamison, that's not a critique of her. But I don't want it to be confused with something that's supposed to help people get sober.

When you "qualify it" in an A.A. meeting, people say you can't do it wrong because you can either be an example of how to stay sober or a great cautionary tale about what happens if you're doing it wrong. There's no getting it wrong. You can't say anything wrong. You'll just be one of those two things.

Geoff Rickly Recommends:

I recommend reading obscene amounts of fiction while trying to quit drugs or drinking. When I was counting days, I couldn't stand to be left alone with my own thoughts for too long. I needed someone else's words to flood in and take their place. It was like a mantra. Reading became a deeply meditative experience and it was a great relief to free myself from the tyranny of my internal monologue. Specifically epics like *My Struggle*, *In Search of Lost Time*, *Satantango*...they were a place to be.

That being said, avoidant behavior can only get one so far. When I finally needed to face my feelings, I did it in small doses while listening to [Title Fight's Floral Green](#). "[Numb But I Still Feel It](#)" and "[Leaf](#)" were exactly the soundtrack I needed to be able to actually let go and cry again. But the number one moment on that album that got me through the hard times was the chorus to "[Like a Ritual](#)":

And it's your voice in the back of my head-
wishing things could be quiet.
And your voice, murdering the silence-
consistent like a ritual

When getting clean, I found all my senses woke back up so I began connecting with arts that concern sensual pleasures: perfume is a great medium that most people don't think of as art. Perfumes are composed in three stages in the classical model: top, heart and base notes. The top is comprised of the most volatile compounds that burn off fastest, the heart is the often-floral middle stage of the perfume and the base is where all the resins stick around after it seems like they should be gone.

There are so many great people to read if you're thinking about jumping in: [takeonethingoff](#) by Claire V is funny and dazzling and easily accessed online. Rachel Syme and Helena Fitzgerald both contributed a hipper take to the canon with their newsletter, [the drydown](#). And of course Luca Turin's [The Guide](#) is like a Bible for learning about the best perfumes in modern history. If you really want to nerd out, join [fragrantica](#) or [basenotes](#) to argue with Fragbros and randos about what's a masterpiece and what's a scrubber. It gets surprisingly aggressive at times but it's also often very tender and personal.

I recommend checking out my publisher [Chelsea Hodson's](#) immaculate essay collection, [Tonight I'm Someone Else](#). I read it in a single sitting and reread it again the next day. I was so obsessed I started a book club to read her book during lockdown. It's a dream that she released my book, but I was a fan long before I knew her.

Name

Geoff Rickly

Vocation

writer, musician

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Liza de Guia