

On clarifying your creative work by clarifying yourself



Writer and teacher Claire Donato on psychoanalysis as a literary practice, championing uncommon forms, and gaining a deeper understanding of one's life through fiction.

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As told to Anastasios Karnazes, 2184 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Mental health](#), [Beginnings](#).

The first question I have about your book *Kind Mirrors, Ugly Ghosts* concerns your relationship to yourself through the vehicle of the text, but also through psychoanalysis as it runs through the collection. Would you say your writing practice is also a way of considering yourself through different means?

When Archway Editions and I first started thinking about how to market *Kind Mirrors, Ugly Ghosts*, my editor Naomi Falk and I came up with this term, *fauxtofiction*, like autofiction, but fake autofiction. There's various Claire avatars in the book. There's also a voice that my colleague Christopher Rey Pérez generously characterized in an email as feeling "close to the self" that I think a lot of the stories maintain. But the stories, even when they contain actual memories, are fiction. Memory is always a form of rewriting, and therefore a combination of experience and fantasy.

As I wrote *Kind Mirrors, Ugly Ghosts*, I was in a six-year psychoanalytic treatment. That treatment involves refining and sweeping my unconscious. Pretty early on in the treatment, I said to my psychoanalyst, "You're going to write a book. It will be called: *Kind Mirrors, Ugly Ghosts*." My psychoanalyst is also a writer. I posited that my book would be her book. And now six years later, her book is my book.

Regardless as to what that Claire avatar does in the stories, my unconscious—the unthought known—guides the prose. I trust that my unconscious is more clarified than it was before I began the treatment, and that I'm more in touch with it—however in touch one can be with that unconscious wilderness. My namesake also means *clear*, and that etymology arises in some of the stories. I hope the *clarity*, or the *claire-ity*, of the work is autobiographical, if nothing else is.

Please speak more to the emergence of clarity.

Clarity doesn't burgeon from knowledge for me, but from listening to the gymnastics of thought: the peculiar back flips and balances that thoughts do as I'm writing. As I've gotten to know myself more, I trust those impulses or those thought-gymnastics, and am less afraid to transcribe them to the page.

When I began to write, there was so much unprocessed within me. A lot of my early work possessed a kind of opacity. Some of that opacity has, I hope, fallen away. Again, that's come from sweeping the unconscious, really trying to re-narrativize and understand my life. It has also come from sitting with a lot of pain I hadn't sat with when I wrote my first two books. I've been watering myself crying, becoming.

Kind Mirrors, Ugly Ghosts is rare in its form insofar as it is composed of a series of short stories with a novella at the end. Could you speak to the overall shape of the collection?

I didn't begin writing *Kind Mirrors, Ugly Ghosts* with this shape—a series of short stories with a novella set during the COVID-19 pandemic (called *Gravity and Grace, The Chicken and The Egg, or: How to Cook Everything Vegetarian*) at the end-in mind. It was only late in the revision process that I realized what I thought were originally two separate books were one. Perhaps I was unconsciously influenced by my late peer Mark Baumer's posthumous anthology, *The One on Earth*, which also takes the same shape, and for which I wrote a foreword.

The novella is a maligned form, in ways, though of course there are people obsessed with the novella who devote their lives to the form and teach classes about it. And there's presses that do a beautiful series of novella publications. But there is still a resistance on the part of the large corporate publishing machine to really risk publishing novellas, for the most part. Maybe they're too feminine, too nebulous. I appreciate the Deleuze and Guattari essay called "Three Novellas, or 'What Happened?'" wherein the theorists posit that novellas are consistently overshadowed by a question of what has happened, and therefore "[play] upon a fundamental forgetting" as a form—an amnesic form perfect for ruminations on the COVID-19 pandemic, a time I can barely recall.

Short stories are also a kind of maligned form. Historically, they're hard to sell. Putting together two forms that are hard sells, and trying to interlock them, trying to make them something that's greater than the sum of their individual parts—that is one project of *Kind Mirrors, Ugly Ghosts*. I hope my maligned forms interlock into something novelistic. The *Gravity and Grace* novella builds so much on the preoccupations of the short stories: images crop up again and again within the short stories and the novella, as do themes, and there are set of selves and references to artworks that to run through that longer work. The novella is also the digital breakdown of the book. It feels a little bit like Claire is a glitching computer by the end of the book.

My interest piqued when you were talking about maligned forms within prose, and I'm wondering, is there a desire to sort of flout the broader cultural rules about writing prose that directs you rebelliously towards the maligned?

Perhaps not consciously, but maybe also consciously. At the time I was a student in Brown University's MFA Literary Arts Program, from 2008 to 2010, the program was always referred to as "experimental," a place where maligned work was often being made. I remember my work being referred to around that time by family and some friends as being weird or too difficult to understand. I was very young and insecure in my writing practice, and I internalized a lot of those descriptions. I don't think my work is necessarily that difficult, whatever that means, but I think I just took some of that on and over-identified with it. Of late, my work has been more so described as deeply upsetting, chic, and somehow good-humored.

You're also a renowned teacher who won Pratt Institute's 2020 Distinguished Teacher Award. How do you support students who have similar desires to find their own non-standard forms of art making in the classroom?

In the Writing Department at Pratt, where I've taught since 2016 and where I currently serve as Acting Chairperson, we try to celebrate myriad successes and don't emphasize one modality of what success might look like for a writer, which I think some programs do. As a teacher, I try to cultivate a space where students can experiment across forms and media. This means approaching the classroom as a kind of laboratory where we're trying things out without the pressure of an end product.

I place a lot of emphasis on generative making and process. Of course, institutions also give us rooms. A lot can happen in a room if we don't let ourselves be limited by the expectations of what should happen in the room. A stanza, too, is a room.

It's one thing to have this space constructed for you as a student in a classroom. Is there departing advice you give to students when they exit school and enter the real world?

Two pieces of advice come to mind. I try to impart that the communities my students form at school may be really, really, really important down the line, and to cherish those communities and to continue working together. Of

course, that may not always be the right advice for every single student, but I think there's resonance for many students who carry their undergrad communities forth into the world, lean on them, let them organically expand, et cetera.

The other piece of advice is that to be a writer, you need to be really obsessed with what you're making. And again, a book is not necessarily a measure of success that everybody desires or wants to achieve, but to write requires a level of obsession and dedication and devotion. You have to make the time to do it. Sometimes there will be deadlines, but for the most part, that work is going to be self-motivated.

Finally, it's okay to fail, to come up against rejection, to not publish, to want to keep things private. And it's also okay to want to be seen. A lot of writing practice resembles doing nothing, or waiting for something. And some things that seem antithetical to formalized writing training are also important lessons.

It strikes me that if, say, when *Kind Mirrors, Ugly Ghosts* is published, the United States government bans you from writing, you would not cease to be a writer.

Let me explain. As I've observed you over the years, I notice you bring a writerly attention to everyday activities. You are highly skilled at creating connections between and illuminating events of daily life. How much of your self-identification as a writer means sitting down and typing on a computer, and how much does it mean an attentive approach to life?

In a percentile breakdown?

Yeah. Maybe you start off with the percentile.

I think it's maybe like eighty-twenty, wherein eighty is daily life, and twenty is actual writing. [laughs] That's just off of the top of my head. I need to think more about it.

In your own words, could you describe the eighty percent?

Deeply inhabiting a day in such a way that I'm able to understand how my breakfast plate connects to something I see on the sidewalk as I am walking to the bus, to a conversation I overhear when I get off the bus and am looking at overpriced candles in a shop that I've decided to enter because it's hot and I need access to a brief moment of air conditioning, to the dream I have at night wherein an image from the day recurs. I'm always looking to tie up these moments or looking for reverberations between moments that might braid into something greater, and that something greater doesn't necessarily have to be something that gets taken to the page, though it may be. It can just be something that delights me or mystifies me or raises questions or raises questions that raise questions that I later take to the page.

Were you always capable of drawing the thread? Is this something you've done since childhood as a coping mechanism, or is it something you've learned?

It might be a deranged response to the pain of living in the world, or it might be a totally unproductive form of clinging to memory. I do think I'm writing when [my boyfriend] Nik and I make up goofy songs, which is all of the time. I regard it as a form of writing or when we make our troll dolls practice nonviolent communication with one another. There's lots of ways to write, and for me, they always involve play.

Your apartment comes up several times as a kind of character in the book, both as a miniature reproduced for "The Analyst," but also in a variety of other ways as an environment. What do you think about the space in which you live as a kind of literary character within your own life?

I've always liked the word *apartment* and the separation it denotes. In terms of the book, the apartment space is sometimes that which makes characters or selves feel lonely or distant—or maybe feel a healthy sense of solitude, on a bright day. So the apartment becomes a space of affective resonance, right?

Describe that, what that means.

It's a space where the character can come a bit closer to herself. But also the apartment becomes this alienating thing by the very nature of it being an apartment. So it's her apartment, but it's its own entity, its own separate force from her, even though it's hers. I don't know that I particularly imagine or project my own apartment into any of the pieces in the book beyond *Gravity and Grace*, *The Chicken and the Egg*, or: *How to Cook Everything Vegetarian*, which concludes the book. That novella does feel distinctly set in my own apartment. And the existential apartment was, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic. And it so happens that the apartment in which I currently live is the apartment where I survived the pandemic in New York, so that's imprinted here too.

I'm thinking extemporaneously now. There's so many valences in my own apartment, as there are for many of us. Several relationships that took place here are ghosts in the space. So much has happened. As with memory, and with writing, there are imprints atop imprints atop imprints.

Claire Donato Recommends:

Bootleg YouTube videos of Joanna Newsom's unreleased songs, performed at The Belasco in Los Angeles circa March 22, 2023

Jamieson Webster explaining Freud on Jesse Pearson's Apology podcast

Fortunes (Tivoli, NY) for the best dairy-free ice cream (and enchanting summertime patio dining experience) of all time

Wine blends produced by the Sisters of the Cistercian Order at Monastero Suore Cistercensi in Vitorchiano, Italy
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Name

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Vocation

writer and teacher

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