

On writing the thing no one else can write



Writer Blake Butler on crafting sentences, not wanting to please himself, the explosion of revision, why language is like witchcraft, and how consumerism kills art.

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As told to Elle Nash, 2682 words.

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What makes a good sentence for you?

It would be one where there's some purpose to it, but I don't know why. I approach it from logic first. I write a sentence I don't know what to do with and then I try to figure out what to do with it as I write the next one.

Like it raises a question.

It at least stirs something in my mind to be like, "Why is that word there? Why is this the noun here? How does this connect to something else?"

Is that as important as the sound that a sentence makes?

About 10 years ago I would have said sound was the most important thing and I didn't care about anything else. Now, I think that that's only one of a pallet of things a sentence can do. I like when a sentence is hairy logically, or misusing senses or misusing direction in a way that makes it complex on a level that's not just word play. When you read something that's really florid on a sound level, you can lose the propulsion of it and it can end up becoming word salad. Language is art, but language is also trying to put ideas across and what I'm looking for is to make ideas that aren't represented by other sentences elsewhere.

You're saying you moved away just from sound because you wanted to create a little bit more stability in the text. I get that—sometimes you can get lost in it a little because the imagery or ideas coming across don't feel as concrete in a way.

Right.

Why do you think you moved away from that?

I think I got sick of reading musical prose.

It's hard sometimes. It's like eating candy.

Yeah, it can be a little empty in that way. That's one component of great writing and I got really obsessed with the Lish school when I was at my MFA and I was like, "Oh, yeah, you don't have to know anything. In fact, if you

don't know anything at all that's the way to really write something no one else has written before." Which I still think is partially true, but you can also go so deep into that. I try to use sound and parts of speech play as a secondary part. I'd rather have momentum from an idea. There's so many ways to say a sentence, you don't have to go way out into bananas-land to make an interesting sentence anymore.

I think we got obscured by people being bored with reality and trying to vaguely disguise reality by making musical sentences. I'm really not interested in a lot of reality. But I am interested in finding the way reality touches the gibberish a bit.

There's this idea that our brains are like radio tuners and we're picking up on signals, trying to express them in a particular way. Do you feel like some art is like that?

I think it is whether you want it to be or not, especially if you're allowing yourself to take a removed stance. The sentence is coming through you and it's coming through your sensibilities and interests naturally, but when you allow yourself to let some of the reigns loose, you can't help but tune in on other voices and other things. I found the more I let my hands go from things, the more I feel overcome by something like that. I have been recently opening up to the point it almost works like a planchet. I'm just typing whatever words come into my mind and try to use my brain as a translator to make it not just gibberish. To turn it into forward motion.

Why did you choose art as a vehicle for your most recent novel? Specifically the destruction of art?

To me art is supposed to be immutable. People die and their art survives them. Art has been this way to tell the story of humanity over time and we can look at a painting from a different time and see a lot of things about that time that are in the painting, but they're not laid out. It's more like a feeling or an atmosphere of art. That's the real history book; to go to a museum and look at what people were making and what they did to try to tell their story in a way that wasn't language. When you have those things they end up becoming valuable because of that and they end up in a corporate system, they end up becoming invaluable and then they have this weird economic value that has nothing to do with the historical value.

Watching that happen creates this double standard in your mind where it's both an object of consumerism and a historical document. So, how do we critique that? How do we pull this apart? I want to see pain inflicted upon it, letting a corporation take an object that's supposed to transcend time and space and making it their bitch. Destroying it because they can, because consumerism is more powerful than art at this time. What happens? What happens when you do that? We watch the woman, the Alice Knott character, she's been being destroyed, but really she's just a part of a system that's been destroying everything it can get its hands on.

I hate the word "content," I really despise that word, but as a person who creates any object other people consume for feelings or entertainment or whatever reasons people consume art, it's hard not to think about how those things will be received. It elucidates the idea there is always going to be a market. Do you ever think about what the market wants?

I'm with you on the hating "content" word. It's so demeaning. It's almost like saying, "I'm going to make something I don't care about." I've done a lot of content creating for money, but when I'm writing prose, money and reception are the last thing I'm really interested in. In fact, if I could figure out what people wanted, I would make the opposite of it on purpose just because maybe I loathe the process in the first place. I think the last thing I'm ever interested in is giving anyone, any standard, what it wants, including my own. I don't want to please myself. I want to write something that breaks all those things up.

Writing is the one place we get to not follow those rules. When you're writing content for the internet, you have to follow rules, especially now. All we create now are headlines. If you can get someone to click something, that's really all anyone cares about these days. That's the saddest bullshit I can think of, because the whole purpose of language is that it can do anything at any time. If I'm failing to reach the possibility of that in making something, then I'm failing as a person.

I want to speak in a way that I don't know why it's being spoken that specific way, and my job as an author is to figure out why it has anything to do with anything. I'm always baffled by people who get into writing and say, "I want to write the thing people want to read." If you're wanting to do that, I don't know why you don't do television. Books seem powerless compared to television if your idea is to give people what they want. The whole point of language is that it's almost like witchcraft.

It's called "spelling" for a reason!

It is.

There's this story about where runes come from, the idea Odin went into this void and he came back with them. When he came back he said, "This is the thing that will make me immortal." When you think about making something immortal, it's immortal because the idea, the person, is still being spoken about. I think writing is witchcraft. We "spell" a thing to manifest it. It's very practical. It's not this woo-woo type of thing. It's a very realistic practice to manifest and share what's in here, outside. You know what I mean?

Exactly. I think of an author as a person who is made to speak a way that no one else can. I want to read something that no one else could have written except that person and that totally speaks to what you're saying there. Where you can lean into the spell-side of yourself, instead of the narrativizing-side of yourself—which is really just a construct of capitalism in my mind. There's a narrative in everything you do. So pretending that there's some grand narrative that controls the whole thing is a capitalist view.

I've been reading a lot of Carl Jung lately. In *The Red Book* he talks about how gibberish and the language of god are side by side. Gibberish is the closest thing to the language of god. I had never thought of it that way. A text that captures the unknown is more powerful than a text that captures a portrait of reality. I would rather write from that perspective and let the story emerge from the spell rather than the spell emerge from the story.

So often writers say, "If I write a great story the writer will be spellbound in my story." That's the narrative dream. That's the "Art of Fiction"—John Gardner—process that to me destroyed the process of books. Now it feels all narrative-driven, or a lot of it anyway, at least at the highest level. If we can get back to the idea that narrative comes from spells, not the other way around, we're in a much more fertile land. There's so much more to be discovered from a book that opens doors rather than shows you a door and then walks you through it.

I've never read that book, but I know what you're talking about because one of my teachers who was a student of Lish always talked about specific rules for that landscape. They were helpful to me starting out because they did give me a pathway, but I definitely think it's flattened the landscape because people think "this is what's marketable." It's good to have those naturally defiant types who are like, "We're going to break the rules because we want to play with it and see what happens."

Someone made those [writing] rules up and has been holding them in place. People in academia's job is often to make sure they don't grow outdated. That's why those rules seem true to people who are trying to pass on their own lineage. But really language is still young and storytelling can go any different direction. It's really cutting your own hands off to believe if you don't establish in the first sentence time and setting, then you're fucked. What bullshit is that? Every first sentence of every book has to establish time and place or it's dead in the water? As soon as you can state a rule clearly, it becomes a tool of control rather than a tool of exploration.

Do you ever feel like you're stuck and if so, how do you deal with that?

I have famously, in my own mind, never believed in writer's block or running into a wall just because I can always open a fresh document and just start talking until I see what happens. That's changed for me in the past few months just because I've gone through some hard times and I now all of a sudden find those walls really high and I haven't been able to find my way back in. I always thought I would never run out of ideas and I think ideas are easy to come up with. But finding an idea that makes you want to live with it for three to five years... maybe I've been walking in the dark for a long time and assuming I could find my way out and I've relied on my ability

to do that. Hitting this wall recently with emotional trauma to the point I can't feel free in my own mind anymore has locked that down.

I'm looking for the thing that burns me through that. I don't know what that will be anymore. In the past it was always just like, "Well if this idea doesn't work, jump to the next idea and keep forward motion." To me, every time you write a book or a story you learn. I try to look at failures as opportunities to grow. Sometimes it's just an exercise or a perspective that doesn't have to monopolize your life.

Do you have things that push you forward when you are focusing on a project?

I have extreme anxiety about my work time. I've always wanted to live the same day over and over again until the past few months. Usually I try to write in the morning when I wake up. I get up and if I don't sit at my desk for five hours, that would put me in a bad mood for sure. Even if I don't know what I'm going to work on, just allowing myself to have that space to go back to everyday has been very freeing and assists you when you're willing to throw things away and you're willing to write without purpose. You're going to end up generating a lot more stuff than you end up doing anything with. I probably have 10 times as much writing on my hard drive as I've published.

Another thing that's really important to me is thinking of who you are at a time in your life. Who you are and what you're writing now is very different than who you'll be in a year or five years, 10 years. That's why writing a fast first draft and forcing yourself to be there everyday helps you enter worlds that might disappear. The world I can go to, to write this morning won't be there in a year. If I don't go there and write and find what's there and take ideas away from it, then they'll dry up and change and they'll become something else. There were times where I was like, "I'm not that person anymore. I can't write it anymore."

But there is some magic there, too, where it's finding this [older] manuscript that contains this kernel that's unreachable to you now and yet, as a person who reads a lot and likes the editorial process, I think you can find a channel there. A lot of revision is finding little nexuses within a thing that are like, "Oh, this is an idea that was waiting to be popped open."

William Vollmann would say he likes to go back and work a sentence over until it explodes like a kernel of popcorn. You have the kernel and when the popcorn pops it has all these ridges and surfaces to it that weren't there until the proper amount of pressure and heat was applied. I've always loved that, both on a sentence level and on a manuscript level where it's like, "I want to beat that thing down and fuck with it and play with it until it takes on a life of its own and it's no longer mine, even though I was the blacksmith of it." I could never have predicted what it exploded into.

Blake Butler Recommends:

1. [Mighty Plugs Natural Ear Plugs](#), the World's Finest Sound and Water Blocking Earplugs
2. [Marpac's Dohm Classic Original Natural Sound Machine](#)
3. The Ultimate White Noise Generator's [Design Your Own Color](#) (Infra setting)
4. [The Saddest Thing is that I Have Had to Use Words: A Madeline Gins Reader](#), edited by Lucy Ives
5. [HIVE1](#) by Tyondai Braxton

Name

Blake Butler

Vocation

Writer

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Blake Butler

