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As told to Elle Nash, 2560 words.

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# On creating new forms to contain new worlds

Author B.R. Yeager on sublime uncertainty, writing about subcultures, making use of magic, the stamina it takes to complete a novel, and why it's important to challenge yourself through art.

**In my mind, your first novel, *Amygdalatropolis*, is a cult classic. That's how I feel people are responding to it. It's cool to see how far it's gone, because it's such an indie book. It relays the experience of fringe and transgressive board culture. Over the last, I would say, decade, board culture has slowly made its way into mainstream language. 4chan is, to some degree, a household name. *Amygdalatropolis* plays with form and mental space relating to living on the net in a way I hadn't really seen before in books. What was it about this specific project that inspired you to commit to it?**

Before I had actually written it, I just couldn't wrap my head around working on a single project for such an extended period of time. I had only done short stories. I had made music. Usually making a record would take around maybe a year or something. You work on it every week or every other day, where as with writing novels it's a lot of working every single day. Booking that time and keeping that momentum.

The impetus behind the book came out of finding myself taking Adderall regularly. I would be sucked into a lot of boards, not 4chan but like 8chan and what was called Masterchan, which you could only access through TOR browsers. I was learning about the more illicit stuff that was happening in different corners of Chan board culture, and trying to understand the mechanics around it. I thought, "Okay, how do doxx campaigns actually work, how do people gather this information? How is it distributed?" I was trying to find out why; to understand the mechanics as well as the intention behind it. Writing the book came out of wanting to justify to myself the amount of time I was spending on doing all this. It was research with no real end or goal to it. Thinking, "Maybe I'll write a book about this since I'm already spending so much time looking into this and figuring these things out."

**Your most recent novel, *Negative Space*, rotates through three different perspectives. And *Pearl Death*, your piece from Inside the Castle, is a story written through object lore in a set of a hundred cards, much different from the way we traditionally experience and read fiction. With all three of these, did you plan the structure first?**

It was different for each three. *Amygdalatropolis*, the structure emerged really naturally. With *Negative Space* I knew from the beginning that was going to be those three rotating narratives and they had to be first person. Then, with *Pearl Death*, that felt very free. I was working on that on the side and I didn't have to worry too much about a lot of formal aspects because the form felt very intentional from the very beginning. There wasn't really any room or any need to deviate from the structure as it was already apparent.

**With *Pearl Death*, what inspired you to work on that explicitly?**

That came out of enjoying other card games, like Magic the Gathering. How that kind of rations out lore and world building. Or games like Dark Souls or Blood Borne and that where the entire narrative is conveyed through object descriptions.

**There's a part of me that wants to figure out how I can incorporate it into playing MTG. When I brought it home I was flipping through the cards thinking, "Can I do this?" I just actually want a game. I want to**

play the *Pearl Death* game.

I would love to work with someone who only really cares about the numbers and the candid aspects of things and then I just want to write all the flavor text. That's one of the dreams there.

**Negative Space and Pearl Death have themes of black or body magick, as I would call it, elements of magick practice that, in my opinion, WitchTok or Urban Outfitters witches would probably wrinkle their nose at. There's a lot of dark lore that picks at the edges of basic human existence because of the kinds of ritual present in it. What influenced you to include these themes in your work?**

I'm always really fascinated with practices that engage with the unknown or things that are beyond human sensations. We have extremely limited senses in how we encounter or engage with the world and reality and we don't tend to acknowledge what gets left out of what is transcribed by these senses. These practices actively try to engage with what is beyond that. I know it might seem like a contradiction talking about the idea of the divine and what is inherently beyond us, but I find it very, very intriguing.

**It's compelling, when you think about superficial human life, the stuff that just lives on the surface—magick peels back that layer, like peeling back a piece of skin and looking at what's underneath.**

Absolutely. For a long time I've just had a very materialistic and atheistic view of things. In the past five years that belief system has proven itself to be utterly insufficient. It's cracked and crumbled a little bit for me and with thinking about magick and other forms of mysticism and ritual, it seems like the most interesting gateway. That's like the most reasonable entry point for me into those paths of thought, as opposed to say, something that's more dogmatic or an organized religion. That's come up as a response to my own outlook I've had previously and realizing that. It's like, "Okay, no, I had long assumed this one thing was correct and you know, that has some dogma to it." That's just proved to be insufficient and it isn't describing the entirety of existence or the world.

**What was it that made itself insufficient to you?**

A big part of what helped was doing social work. I had done that for a while and was like, "Okay, this has a lot of great value to a lot of people." It's like that cliché thing of being around people that hold your beliefs who you respect and stuff. I guess I was a bit enclosed in my social circle before that. Then, I think I realized in terms of the sciences or in terms of rational thought, that I took for granted the idea of things being 'settled.' I realized things one assumes to be true for a long period of time aren't definitively true. I am not defined by my body necessarily. I'm not defined by my physical space, which I'm only interpreting, that my body and my sense are interpreting the world. Those experiences are not the world. It's merely an interpretation of it.

Science is a model for reality, so there's gaps in that model, inherently. It just kind of came to a head—It was me coming face to face with my own ignorance around some things, a lot of which is inherent ignorance or unavoidable ignorance, but I think acknowledging that there's those ignorances that exist can be really helpful and guiding, too.

**Do you think writing fiction plays into any of that?**

Yeah, because I think a big part of it is about empathy and understanding other people's perspectives and understanding uncertainty. That might be the biggest theme and one of the things that I enjoy most in fiction. This kind of sublime uncertainty. You have ideas about what is happening, but they aren't necessarily being confirmed. That's happening with all beliefs, listening to readers. It goes back to what we were just saying: that we only have ideas about how things are. Absolute certainty doesn't exist. That's not a real thing. We pretend that it is to allow us to go about our lives and perform certain tasks and functions of society, but it's kind of a myth in itself.

**Do you ever use magick in your creative process? What is that whole process like for you, ritualistically?**

One of the formal practices that I have used a lot of times, is doing Tarot as a way of guiding. A way of getting insight into what I should be doing and/or what I gain insight into aspects of the writing process that I wasn't necessarily cautiously aware of. It feels sometimes like having a reading group or a workshop there, like when someone gives you feedback about something that you hadn't thought of before or you hadn't considered. Tarot will help trigger that. It's like, "Oh, maybe I should examine this aspect of the narrative." I think it's a bit cliché. I guess I think I see art as a form of magick in that you are making the internal, external. You're creating a physical manifestation of your interior life. Because it's not just about writing words or people seeing sentences. Ideally, it can be about transferring your consciousness to someone else. You aren't just reading about it, ideally you're feeling some of the same things that the creator was feeling. You're maybe even having visualizations of the creator and they're mingling with your own dreams and your own experiences. At its highest I think that art-feel is like sharing consciousness with each other. Your memories are mixing with the author's memories and creating something new that doesn't exist for maybe anyone else.

**As the author you're putting your will onto the world, right? That whole "Do what thou wilt" type of mentality. When it comes to horror, the key element is that it's afflicting people. It's creating a certain level of discomfort. It's not just that there's tension and suspense, but there's a skin crawliness to the work. When it comes to afflicting readers, what is the end goal when we're trying to make a reader uncomfortable? Why are we doing that?**

There's something kind of thrilling about it. I mean, I think about that, too. Like when you're reading something that makes you really uncomfortable or even challenges your values, it's exciting. I think that we've both experienced that and we seek that out a little bit, speaking for myself definitely, where there's the aspect of catharsis. That's great and everything, but I think it's very primordial. It tickles something. There's this conflict that's going on. There's disgust as well as ecstasy happening there. I love when a book or a movie can convey that. I seek that out. I try to immerse myself in that. It just kind of comes in and out of that. That's something that arguably, I want to do, too.

**The last book I read was *Frisk* by Dennis Cooper and when I got through it I was like, "Whew." What are some things you've read that have really afflicted you, that you would recommend?**

Just to talk about *Frisk* a little more, it gets really rough. It encapsulates what we talk about, that disgusting, long side of the sublime or the disgusting becomes the sublime that you have to be taken through, dragged through the gutter and dragged through hell to have that kind of release at the end. It's amazing that we can do this. This is like we're able to dream of anything that we want and we're able to convey that. We're able to communicate that. We're able to create our own world. Even to have those instincts. Yeah, that just blew my mind.

One of the early books that kind of got me hooked on this was reading *American Psycho*. I was 19 or 20, and I read it over the course of a few days. It felt like being in a fever. It was so good at getting into my head. When I wasn't reading it, I felt the narrative continuing. I felt the way I was perceiving the world in that narrative and in that prose style, that really helped unlock the door. I realized "Oh shit, this is what a book can do." It can be a psychedelic experience in that way.

Though stuff that's very obviously provocative or like Splatter Punk stuff, I tend to find that very boring. There has to be sort of like a mixture. I'm really attracted to the spectacle of provocation, but if that's the only thing that's being offered, it gets boring very quickly. I love the books that lure you in with that, like *Frisk*, and subvert themselves but kind of the opposite of what we typically think of subversion. Instead of taking something that seems very friendly on the outside and doing something that's actually very dark, it's like doing the opposite. Presuming something relentlessly dark, relentlessly bleak, but actually has something more universal to say.

**Let's consider the opposite of a happy ending, an ending without closure. Why is that necessary in fiction? Why do you feel like it's necessary for you to seek out?**

I think because that isn't the standard. It's easy to find lots of fiction that wraps everything up cleanly or that presents a happy / happyish ending. It's so prevailing. I guess it's like the same reason why I seek out anything that feels like it's doing something new or different, because it feels a little bit more exciting. Different from what's just all around you. I'm perfectly fine with books that are there to comfort or to be cozy with. I enjoy that a lot as well, but what really sticks with me are books that decide to go somewhere else...And the ones that leave me with questions are the ones that I keep on thinking about and keep on returning to because they're provoking or invoking something, an ongoing conversation that you might be having with yourself. The book is starting the conversation and you have the opportunity to continue that by reflecting on it. That makes it something you can bring into your life as opposed to something that's clean where everything is explained and everyone gets what they technically want.

**What is it that you hope to leave readers with?**

I want to write fiction that serves as a document for that period of time. Fiction can be just as much a testament of what things were like during a certain era, as with non-fiction or essay. With *Amygdalatropolis*, that felt like something worth documenting. I'm seeing now as those sites get closed down and occasionally catch threads of people on 4chan discussing *Amygdalatropolis* like, "This guy doesn't know what he's talking about. You're not even allowed to do that on the board." It's like, "That's because I was on very different boards than you were on." I see it as a full documentation. Trying to capture the feeling of certain events, some of which are very personal, and trying to just use intuition to guide me there. With *Pearl Death*, I was not expecting to release that into a global pandemic, but that's how it worked out. It happened to be a book about a pandemic.

B.R. Yeager Recommends:

Burial Grid - *We've Come for Your Flesh*

Lindsay Lerman - *I'm From Nowhere*

Armand Hammer - *Shrines*

Mika - *PSYMORTAR*

Christopher Zeischegg - *The Magician*

Name

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