

On sustaining freedom in your creative process



Writer Claudia Dey discusses the intimacy of the sentence, rebelling against distraction, and knowing when the project is done

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As told to Shy Watson, 2347 words.

Tags: Writing, First attempts, Beginnings, Independence, Promotion.

What, to you, makes a good novel?

It's a quality of aliveness, that the book itself holds a kind of sentience and originality. That I can sense the providence of the book and that it's only that specific writer who could have written it. Aliveness, originality, and then propulsion is really critical for me. Beauty in reduction. As in life, I would never be drawn to a decorated thing, so I want an undecorated novel.

You mentioned propulsion. I read *Daughter* in one sitting, except when I got up to feed myself. I found it very propulsive. What makes a propulsive read for you and how do you employ propulsion in your own writing?

I am very aware of the idea that a book is a mechanism and you have to plant something on each page, so that the page will turn. Otherwise, the mechanism is broken. For *Daughter*, I think the shifting points of view created a lot of momentum. Also, where you begin and end a scene is really critical. Like Didion's flash cuts or, I talk a lot about this lecture, Celine Sciamma's BAFTA lecture about the making of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, in which she talked about how every scene has to be a desired scene. There are two kinds of scenes, needed scenes and desired scenes, and she says that to know your desire is to know your project.

You very seamlessly switched from one POV to another, and I found it interesting that *Mona's* was the only one written in first person. All the others were written in close third. You say it was a surprise that happened while you were writing, but how did you come about it? How did you decide to stick with it? What did it activate for you in your writing process to make that choice?

I think it gave me breaks from *Mona's* mental loops. I could enter other chambers, like I could enter other weather systems. I also strongly dislike a hero/villain narrative. Life does not work like that, and I don't think fiction should work like that--especially if you want it to feel close to life. It's a false dramatization. I'm really interested in how a person is built from their experience and their interface with their world. So, for example, a character like Cherry, who we meet as a cold and spiteful stepmother, we come to know granularly by the end of the book. Paul, who presents with such magnetism and confidence, we come to understand in a more compromising, more microscopic way.

It was very seductive to write those other POVs. I think it just made the book more visceral. Actually that's another qualifier for me. I want a novel that enters my body. I want it to be like a song, like a bodily experience, and the shifts in the POVs did that for me. Everyone was close third while *Mona* was the one seeing it all, and who knows if those POVs are proper POVs that belong to those characters only or whether it's *Mona's* perceptions and that kind of inescapable question of "How am I perceived by those in my orbit? How do they see

me?"

The family dynamics in *Daughter* fascinated me. The way you capture Cherry's jealousy and Paul's self-destruction were spot on. What is it about family dynamics that make you want to write about them?

It's the crowding of family, the claustrophobia of family. It's the compulsion of family. That family, like a faith, is such an addictive and defining force in our lives and that family can keep us stunted. The revolutions that take place have to come from within. They won't be granted. I wanted to look at those kinds of very fundamental personhood questions as they're posed and answered inside a family dynamic. It's also mythic, iconic, operatic. Like *Succession*, like *King Lear*, I wanted to dramatize those major hurts and those minor hurts that only family can wield.

Now that I have some distance, some altitude, I think of the book in sort of a black box theater setting. A small cast of characters all in relationship with each other, confined to a single space. Those POV shifts are sort of like Paul exiting the melee, breaking the fourth wall and delivering his monologue directly to his audience. What's happening behind the eyes of Paul? For this book particularly, the beginning was the most uncomfortable I've been in terms of writing fiction, because it began with the image of a father and daughter meeting secretly in the back of a darkened restaurant—it looked so much like an affair. I saw that I wanted to examine the shadow side of a conventional relationship—where it turns dangerous and where it blurs codes.

Speaking of black box theater, I read that you also have experience with playwriting. Does that inform your prose or vice versa?

Definitely. I wrote my first play when I was 12, and then after I did my degree in English Literature, I went on to study at the National Theater School, and then I was playwright-in-residence at a theater in downtown Toronto for almost a decade. Eventually I moved into prose. My teachers at the theater school always whispered between them that they thought I was more of a fiction writer than a playwright, because my stage directions were so long and involved. It was as if I just wanted to be inside sentences. There's such a privacy and an intimacy to a sentence as it is experienced between the writer and the reader.

A more obvious formal choice in *Daughter* was the lack of quotation marks and separate lines for dialogue. It's so opposite from playwriting. What effect did you hope it would have on the text?

I was getting tired of how fiction looked. I knew that if I wrote well, it would be totally clear. I am never after any kind of obfuscation; that doesn't interest me. I want things to be direct to the bloodstream—so that you can read the novel in a day, only to break for a meal. That's what I'm after, always. So I think I just felt like readers are smart. They'll figure out what's spoken and what's internal. I didn't want the page to look decorated, engineered... I wrote *Daughter* in the pandemic—looking back, I was outside of my socially legible, dutiful self, and that psychology entered the book. It was as if all of those conventions that I've upheld in my own way seemed utterly beside the point. I went for an end-of-world grammar and punctuation.

Anytime I read work where there's no quotation marks, it feels more, like you said, "straight to the bloodstream." It feels like telepathy.

I love that.

Another technique you really mastered is the flashback. It never felt put on. How do you make them so seamless?

I think it's like how real your boyfriend's dream was when he woke up this morning, the one you told me about. I wanted to write in that way. There's no framing around it—while your boyfriend had exited his dream, his dream was real. He relayed it to you as real even though it had passed. I wanted to mirror the way the mind actually works. When we have flashbacks, we experience them as real. We might be outside of time, but fiction needs to convey, as precisely as it can, the way the mind bends and operates, how it engages with or even erases time. Here we are in the present moment; however, our minds are escaping into other incidents or events. They're like

rooms in our minds. We go into them and they feel very real. I wanted the writing to feel like that too.

It does.

No framing. No commenting on it. Again, the quote marks almost feel like commenting on the comments. I didn't want anything to interrupt the transmission.

How do you start a project?

I was about to answer cheesily, "It starts me," but it actually does. I search. I put in a lot of time reading, taking notes, writing in that grasping way that feels mostly wrong. Usually it begins with an image and then the voice comes. Once I have the voice, the book presents. Annie Ernaux talked about it as channeling, and I don't want to over romanticize it, because there's a lot of bodily discipline that goes into the making. But I do think that, for me, that's how a first draft feels. It's like just keeping up with the voice in my head, being true to it, clinically so—like a pact. I love that first draft, because it's pre-scrutiny, pre-analysis.

How do you know when a project's done?

I'm a classic Scorpio obsessive, so I know it's done once I begin to lament. Once there's lament, I exit the project. I don't want to tinker. I want to preserve that aliveness. So when I've been sitting with it for a week or so, I've done all that I can do, I've made all those final micro decisions. Then it's like I have to hold myself back. I definitely entered a very blue state when I finished *Daughter*.

You learn a lot about yourself as a human being, but also as a writer when you complete a project. I felt like this book really reordered me as a human being, and I was sad to leave it, but also the people were so real for me. They were as real as you are right now. They were in my head for a couple of years, and we were in constant conversation. I knew that I would miss them in a pained romantic way. But it passed. We forget this, because we work so privately and so intensely and outside of civilization for a couple of years, but then books have their own magnetism. You put it out into the world and so much comes back to you.

What happens after you finish the first draft?

I take a break. I need some distance, and then I start getting edits. Generally they're pretty macro at the beginning. I work with an editor here in Canada and another at FSG. They're truly brilliant, and they pose the initial questions, again, on a macro scale. They pose, I mull, and then basically re-enter the work and try to... I keep talking about aliveness, but I realize that's the central point with this book. It's like I try to preserve the aliveness while engaging with their queries about what can be built out, what might not be as clear to the reader as it is in my head. All of that very subtle, hyper-intelligent work that editors do, the way they inhabit the work and illuminate it for you—it sounds like an act of mercy which on many levels it is.

I also try to write freely, to stay inside the mindset of having created that first draft without any self-consciousness. Just being true to the project. Like, this is the book where I just do whatever the fuck I want. Trying to stay true to that impulse, what feels like a rebellion for and unto yourself. Then I get very micro and precise and fine, and I read a lot aloud to myself to test the material, to make sure that a sentence gets to stay, a scene gets to stay. But mostly, I try to work with a sense of liberty from within.

Your rebellion is really inspiring, especially when "marketability" seems so central. From what you've said, you really push against that and are bored by more commercial fiction. Has it been difficult for you to be able to market your work? How are you able to break into the bigger conversation with such experimental and rebellious work?

You have to know what you want to do. You have to be conscious of not getting swayed. You have to know what kind of writer you are and what kind of writing you want to do, what you want to publish. You never want to publish a book and then feel regret at having compromised or forfeited something central to yourself. I do read a ton of

commercial fiction. I'm an omnivore. I'm super interested in understanding the circuitry of a book that sells to millions of people. I'll go see the *Barbie* movie.

It's not like I'm a niche artist with cultural snobbery. I'm a curious person, and I like to understand how other people work. We're a different species, different animals, and I'm like, oh, what's their habitat like? What are they stalking? Jenna Johnson, who's my editor at FSG, felt like *Daughter* was at once my most literary work, but also my most commercial. I thought that was really interesting, and it's definitely played out that way. So it's a happy reinforcement for the argument of just doing the thing you most want to do and trusting that's the thing that will hit. If you do a premeditated thing, anyone can imitate that. You've become your own AI monster.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on being an extrovert. The fall has been this prolonged period of extroversion, but I've loved it. I've loved it so much, so now I'm just reading and taking notes again. I'm back in the lonesome hinterland of being between books, but not being so afraid of that state. In fact, needing it—knowing the notes count, the reading counts, and whatever strange, searching writing I'm doing will end up becoming something real and consuming. It's like I'm in a confessional, trusting that soon someone on the other side of the heavy curtain will start talking.

Claudia Dey recommends:

La Force Band

Billy-Ray Belcourt's forthcoming short story collection, *Coexistence*

liquid vinyl

diner breakfast

nature

Name

Claudia Dey

Vocation

Writer

□

Norm Wong