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As told to Sophie Kemp, 1318 words.

Tags: Writing, Sex, Process, Inspiration, Mental health.

On creating a place outside your everyday

Writer Elle Nash discusses investigating the darker sides of the human psyche in her fiction, finding inspiration in the mundane, how writing is like a puzzle, and the page as a safe space.

What does it feel like when you access language as a writer?

It's like freedom, honestly. That sounds really cliché but I mean, I think I am a person that is constantly putting limits on myself. I think it's just my nature in a way. I'm used to denying myself things and being really disciplined and acting out of fear and not doing what I want a lot of time. With writing, when I'm in a project, it feels like a world that I get to live in where there aren't any rules. It's this puzzle that you can put together. It's a place of focus and flow. It's a place outside of my everyday world.

Something that I really enjoyed about *Nudes*, your most recent story collection, was that it feels specific aesthetically and tonally to me. You create space in a really interesting way. Where do you go when you are working on those stories? Often you write stories set in places like motels and the lighting is really bad. Or your characters are in a shitty house or they're in a parking lot. How do you access those spaces?

I've experienced those things. I've stayed in shitty motels and have stayed in shitty apartments and sometimes you just meet people and certain elements of them stay with you. I'll hold onto details until I think maybe I want to put some kind of detail in a story.

Aesthetically, there's this part of me that really loves that stuff. Maybe just because I've lived it. It seems mundane, it's *Fly Over Country*, but when you look at the details, they're actually really interesting. I like the imagery and maybe just want to keep it in my mind, because I travel a lot. So I will put them in my stories, like I've taken Polaroids of them or something.

Your work is often about the weird relationships people have with all sorts of kinds of sex. Can you tell me about that?

I definitely am fascinated by all elements of sexuality in the human psyche. It's fascinating to me how people will attach to certain things and not others. Some paraphilias are attached to childhood and how we

were brought up and what we're trying to relive, or whatever. But at the same time, I don't think it's entirely explainable. I think some people just like what they like. I find all that stuff super interesting to explore both in terms of how people feel shame around it or how they refuse to feel shame. I think a big thing is just wanting connection really badly and then not being able to obtain it or not allowing oneself to reach out to have that. I think for a lot of people, sex is just a huge motivator just in terms of how they even organize and structure their lives.

It's not really that people are sex obsessed, but think of the very typical heterosexual, straight couple, right? The husband is like, "got to get the job, got to get the wife, got to maintain the house to keep the wife," that's his mentality. *Got to maintain the job to keep the wife, got to fuck my wife, got to have the baby*, all of that is driven by this need. I find it fascinating because I'm always wondering "why?," and what people's motivations are, and what we're aware of, what we aren't aware of, what we're driven by.

I think intellectualizing sex is such a fun exercise because it's literally something that almost everybody on the planet does. I feel like most people have a really fraught relationship with it, even though it is something that can be really amazing. What was an example from *Nudes* that sticks out to you as an exploration of sex being a weird, fascinating thing to you?

In "Satanism," there's a situation in which the narrator is having sex with her partner who is a really harsh person. They're thinking about getting rid of their dog, and they're in bed. And he's like, "Well, I could just kill the dog," and she's put off by it. And then later on, she thinks, "I wish he would look at me, look me in the eyes."

I was inspired, too, by *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramovic. How long can you stare at each other? And what kind of emotions does that bring up and how the partner refuses to participate in that.

And so she feels wounded by it. And so, that I think is one of those elements where it's like, yeah, she really connected with this person, but then she doesn't. Towards the end of it, she does this harsh and cold thing because he suggests it. So it's kind of like, she doesn't get this connection from him that she wants, but she's still doing what he wants to attempt that connection. I think it was an interesting dynamic to explore.

Does it ever feel scary or jarring, or off putting to enter those spaces that you're writing when your characters are in these situations?

No, I actually like it a lot. I think maybe when I was younger and first writing, I was afraid to put my characters into conflict. And maybe sometimes I still struggle with it because I struggle trying to imagine sometimes what certain conflicts can look like, but I like exploring it. It's like creating a little room in my head, and it's a safe place to explore those kinds of things because there's no consequences. And I think there's always this part of me, I'm always curious. I'm like, *what is the depth of someone's darkness?* I'm always curious about that. And fiction can be a way to explore or imagine what that kind of depth can look like without the real life danger.

I feel like you can go further with fiction than you can go in visual media.

You can in a way, because you can make things very obscene without the graphic nature of it. You're creating conceptual imagery inside of a person's mind. So it's up to the reader how they engage with it. You can't control that. Through language, there is just so much that you can do. There's stuff in books that you can do that you could never pull off in a movie, not just structurally, but also within the limits of obscenity and morality. Also, film is so vivid, so much more vivid. Whereas with fiction it asks you to engage with it. So there's kind of a responsibility on the reader too, in terms of how they experience it.

What is special to you about going as weird as possible in your work?

I'm just interested in weird shit. I'm interested in how weird people can be, how fucked up they can be. I'm interested in the psychology of violence. I'm interested in the transformation of someone's mental health and what would happen if that person slipped through the cracks. And what does it take for a person

to begin to break so many boundaries that they then find it completely morally okay to hurt another person? What does that look like? And what does that mean? And how would the people around that person react? That's the type of stuff I really love exploring. At least now. Maybe it'll change in the future, but it's that kind of stuff that interests me. It's definitely not the wine mom book club fiction that exists.

Elle Nash Recommends:

Lion's Mane mushroom powder

Isabelle Nicou's *Genesis 0 and Paresis from Amphetamine Sulphate*

To Be Magnetic's guided meditations

Bruce Lee's *The Tao of Jeet Kune Do*

phlebotomy school

Name

Elle Nash

Vocation

Writer

Fact

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