

On the power of doing something you don't know how to do



Writer Gideon Jacobs discusses the catharsis of confession, the joys of being a novice, the difficulties of collaboration, and using social media as a means to an end

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As told to Shy Watson, 2398 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

How did you and Brad Phillips come up with the idea for your exquisite-corpse novella, Murder-Suey?

I met Brad interviewing him for a magazine and that's actually a whole story in itself that I can maybe tell the spark notes of...I suggested that we go to a museum and see some art because I was supposed to talk to him about his book and about his art practice. But somehow I ended up in an Airbnb with him watching him and helping him smoke DMT. DMT helped him quit smoking. Then we ended up talking for many hours and we just hit it off.

In short, we became friends. I don't remember exactly how the idea came about for the serial novella, but I think we wanted to collaborate. True collaboration is underratedly difficult. I think for me and Brad, maybe impossible, just because we're pretty particular about our work.

This was a way of doing something together that felt collaborative, but still allowed us to go off into our own corners. I really didn't read what Brad was writing until it was posted on the site. It was a really goofy project. I say goofy because I think we really didn't take it very seriously in a way that we were both very grateful for. It was extremely light and we weren't really sure who was following along and we were just doing it for each other.

I know you also worked with Lexie Smith on Landing Pages, your short story project for LaGuardia passengers. Considering this, Murder-Suey, and also your past as a child actor, I'm wondering how you feel about collaboration in general?

I'm a writer who definitely is not well suited for the writer's life. As in, I don't think I actually do great in isolation. I don't think I thrive in isolation. I think I go a little fucking nuts.

I think writing and reading by their nature require a certain amount of quiet and solitude. With acting, that's a part of my life that I have trouble making meaning of, as it really does feel like another person. Maybe everybody feels that way about their childhoods, but it's just hard to figure out how it's affected me as an adult, and by no fault of trying with several therapists, trying to understand what walking into thousands of auditions as a child did to my brain.

What I always talk to my actor friends about is that I think it's awful that they can't really do what they want to do without being asked to do it.

Actors can't really act without an audience. It's a very social medium. I just feel lucky that I've transitioned into something that I can do whenever I want to do it. Writing fulfills that desire to perform I had as a kid, but does it in a much safer, more reliable way.

I think I would be a terrible actor at this point in my life. I think I'd be too self conscious, too self reflective, and self reflexive. So I think collaborating is a way of scratching the social itch of wanting to make work with others. I've definitely done that a lot. Also, it's just a helpful way of making myself actually do stuff. Being accountable to someone else, and injecting the social element into the creative equation.

Brad and I wrote *Murder-Suey* pretty quickly. We did it over a year, but it was really easy because it was social. It was an easy project, and if I had sat down to write that without Brad, it would've taken longer, been more laborious, and I probably would've taken it too seriously.

I really liked the articles you wrote about Instagram. I was wondering what the most surprising result of your fake Instagram road trip was.

It was a long time ago now, but I think I had just been broken up with or something, and the ex-girlfriend went on a trip and I saw these photos and I was like, "Fuck, she's having so much fun without me." Then she got back and we ended up meeting up and she was like, "Yeah, that trip was awful. It was the worst." It was this nice reminder that images always lie, and that images, especially in the performative context of social media, really lie.

I guess, I was trying to play with that, and I was really interested in how flimsy and impossible Truth is, just how insanely fragile our assumptions on the internet are. That was definitely apparent throughout that month-long project where people would glance at it and just be like, "Oh, my god! I have a cousin in Kansas, you should visit them."

The project was a joke. I was alluding to the fact that the whole thing was fake throughout the whole thing. It was a much more tongue-in-cheek moment of my life where I was trying to be a bit more of a troll than I ever am these days.

Given that it was so long ago, how has your relationship with social media changed? Or what is your relationship with social media now?

The short answer is that I try to think of social media as exclusively a means to an end. This may sound crazy, but I think of all the platforms I use as LinkedIn. I'm exclusively there because I'm trying to work, to write and have opportunities to write. I don't want to use them socially. I don't want to post photos of my life or my food. I just see them as distribution platforms and necessary evils of being a person who makes stuff in 2022.

I had a lot of fun reading "A Bedtime Story," your piece in Joyland, more so than with any other short fiction I've ever read. Being able to watch the real celebrity cameos your fictional insomniac character made was so great. I was also taken by "Hot as Heaven," your short story on Forever Mag about a man who falls in love with his Alexa by way of watching movies about AI together. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems like you're interested in the relationships, sometimes intimate ones, that people form with technology. Is that something that you purposely explore in your work or think about a lot in your day-to-day?

I think technology and our relationship to it is accidentally informing everything I write these days. I just feel like the fundamental question of humankind is whether we have been slowly progressing towards our demise, towards some kind of great existential cliff, or whether the alarmists of today are the same as the alarmists of 50 years ago, who are the same as the alarmists of 500 years ago.

Clearly the planet is warming and we're in big trouble. And clearly the internet is a crazy leap in terms of technology, but there have been crazy leaps before. I go back and forth between thinking "today is different" and the internet is different and social media and phones have introduced very disruptive new elements to the

equation, and simultaneously trying to remember that every old man ever has just been like, "Young people!" *shakes fist at sky* This motion, old men lamenting young people and their technologies, is as old as technology. I guess we won't know whether history's luddites were prophetic sages or whiney babies until it's too late.

There's so many advances to technology that we can't even fathom yet. We might look back on this and be like, "Oh, yeah. Remember when we just had like, Zoom and iPhones? Remember how simple that was?"

Yeah, exactly. We're doing this over Zoom, and I'm very interested in whether something is lost by not doing this in-person. A question I always ask myself: Is this better, worse, or just different?

I just wrote a story about sexting that explores that question. I feel like the cameo story explores that question. I'm really curious about, as we shift away into a more simulated realm, whether the simulation is going to be convincing enough to fulfill us. And if it does fulfill us, is that all that matters? If we have relationships that are entirely digital, but we're emotionally fulfilled by them, will it matter at all that we've left the tangible world behind?

I just read an article about two people who got married without ever meeting in person after FaceTime dating for months or years, and they had proxies at their wedding.

Proxies? Where you get a stand-in for you?

You get a stand-in, yeah. I think the other thing that I'm interested in is, although they felt fulfilled enough and love each other enough over FaceTime to get married, it's going to be different to hang out in real life than it is to hang out over FaceTime.

What do you do when you're creatively stuck?

Recently? I just painted two paintings. It's the first time since I was in preschool that I've held a paintbrush. I've never painted anything in my life. I actually posted them on Instagram and my friend told me, "You don't have to, but most people gesso their canvases." I put paint directly on the canvas, and he explained to me that most people don't do that. It was so fun to not know that.

It's fun to be a novice. I guess, trying something that my ego isn't attached to helps, because I feel okay at writing, and strangely enough, that can make writing really hard. It's also in my bio on the internet; I'm a "writer." I think that can make writing hard too. So doing stuff that I don't feel any sense of identification with, I think is what I do when I'm stuck.

Yeah, and there are no expectations for what you produce.

Totally.

I feel like painting can induce this meditative state where you're just doing this thing physically and then ideas just arrive. Writing is like, "I am using my consciousness." Painting isn't very social though. If you need a social element, you'd have to do live paintings.

Tangible work, I think, is probably better for accessing the unconscious, maybe a little more than writing.

****I found your [Confessions hotline project](#) fascinating. Is that still going on? ****

No, the line isn't live anymore. Greg Hochmuth and I came up with the idea over lunch. It just took on a life of its own in this really weird way, which was really encouraging and cool.

We decided that in order for confession to provide actual catharsis, someone else needs to be there, but also to be able to do it, you need to feel the safety of anonymity to some degree, which is I think why Catholic

confessionals are built the way they are. The way the line worked was the speaker could only speak as long as someone was listening. The listener was muted, but if they hung up, the line went dead. Basically, you knew someone was there, but you were facing silence in the same way you do sometimes with a therapist. Sometimes a therapist will just let you keep talking. I think that is sometimes when the best stuff comes out.

I've been reading about psychics hired by the CIA lately, and most of them were Catholic or Scientologists, because they found that when you clear your consciousness by doing confessions through auditing or confession booths, more can emerge. It clears space. I was curious if you thought about that at all or found anything like that with the Confessions project?

I think the Scientologists and Catholics are onto something, for sure. I think analysis is a somewhat similar space of clearing the mind and allowing what is in the unconscious to come up. Both my parents are therapists, and at this point I'm pretty done with therapy. I feel very over it, because I don't think it's very helpful for me, but I've gotten pretty deep into Vipassana meditation in the last five or six years.

Although with Vipassana you're not talking. You're completely silent for 10 days at a time and meditating. I feel like that's a process for me of allowing the noise to settle. There's a metaphor that I've heard used before: if you have a dirty bucket of water, the way to be able to see through it is not by reaching in and trying to scoop out the sediment. That just makes the water murkier. You have to let it sit silent and still to let all the sediment drift to the bottom. Then it's transparent. Then you can see through it. I feel like, for me, rather than vomiting up everything, it's a process of getting quiet and still. Eventually, I begin to feel like I have a little more access to truth and reality as it is. Sure, one way to do that is via confession or analysis or something else in the verbal realm. But I think there's other ways as well.

Gideon Jacobs Recommends:

Catalog Sale: Eric Oglander and Avi Kovacevich started an auction house recently. I don't know much about much when it comes to antiques and folk art, but they just seem to have uniquely good eyes for "value," not in the monetary sense of that word, but in the sense that they recognize when an object, often for extremely subtle reasons, is charged with meaning and authenticity.

Corn Smut: Priscilla Frank draws and writes Corn Smut, a.k.a. earotica. She also recently put on a puppet show at Summertime Gallery in Brooklyn called All is Full of Love that was so good I was, at points, unsure whether I was laughing or crying, a sensation that usually only happens to me on hallucinogens.

Your Heartbreak Lives Here: Kendall Waldman's pandemic photobook quietly articulates what early pandemia felt like, a formal study of an informal tone.

Men and Apparitions: Lynne Tillman, one of my favorite writers, writing about images, one of my favorite subjects.

Jawline: Liza Mandelup's 2019 doc feature is something I find myself still thinking about three years later.

Name

Gideon Jacobs

Vocation

writer

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Bieke Depoorter