On standing by your work

Writer Haley Mlotek discusses honoring writers who came before her, the motivating force of epiphanies, and the realistic time it takes to get a book done.

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As told to Emma Olivia Cohen, 2202 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Beginnings, Focus, Inspiration, Family, Day jobs.

When I had just started reading your new book, *No Fault*, I ran into my friend [Winnie Wang] who's actually reviewing it for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. And I said, "What do you think of it?" They were like, "I love it. Divorce is so romantic."

Very early on, I realized I was writing a romance. That was influenced by the way I started looking at cultural representation of divorce. So much of it is about what you need to express, something that goes against what you thought you wanted, or what other people think is best for you. And also maybe something that is dark and tortured, and has the potential to kill you if done correctly. That's my definition of romance. So it made sense to me to apply the two contradictory emotional experiences together.

There's a large section at the beginning that's very research-focused, on the socioeconomics and history of marriage. We don't really know about your personal experiences until we've gone through that. Was that always the structure?

[The book] started as an essay originally. I had pitched to my editor at *The New York Times Magazine* a letter of recommendation for divorce because I thought that would be really funny. He very wisely was like, "I can't let you do that. You're going to get destroyed on the internet." And I was like, "No, that is why you let me do it, but I respect it." I was telling that story to my friend Dayna Tortorici, who's the brilliant editor at *n+1*. She was like, "Well, why don't you just write that for me?" Then when she read my first [draft], she was the first person to say to me, "I think this is a book."

I love that one line you quote from Phyllis Rose's *Parallel Lives*, which you did end up writing a letter of recommendation for, about how the most successful marriages are the ones where both people believe the same narrative of their marriage.

Yes, exactly. I had established this very clean, very well-defined structure for my book: there are going to be four parts and it's going to map the first year of my separation. Right after I signed the book contract, I went over to my friend's house to have dinner—Jazmine Hughes, another brilliant editor. I told her I had this plan to get through all the chapters as I'd outlined them in the proposal. She was just like, "Okay, well, now that I've spoken to Haley the project manager, can I speak to Haley the writer?" Which is a very revealing sentence about my process. That proposal is probably a very funny document of my delusions, about the idea that this was a subject that I could contain that easily. I had to let go of a lot of my assumptions about what the book was going to be when I was writing it.

The decision to start with history and a more social, political, and statistical context was really inspired by the writers who were most important to me. Stephanie Coontz's *Marriage, a History* is still probably one of my favorite books. One of the things that I find almost unbelievable about my finished book is that Barbara

Ehrenreich is not in it. I'm so indebted to her; she is so masterful at bringing in her personal experience to her political values and analyses.

How did you organize that research on a day-to-day level?

I've used Scrivener for a long time, for writing everything. They have a feature where you can upload any sort of PDF or webpage link. I could have the research in one window and the draft in the next. Even when I was paraphrasing, I was always checking because I feel very strongly about properly referencing people as a way to honor the work that's already been done, and to make it clear that I see any work I do as being a link in a chain. I remember a long time ago, my friend Doreen St. Félix called it having a citational ethic.

Finding one really good source always leads to at least twelve more because everybody has collaborators and communities. It's just following the thread. I will admit that even now I still have those little moments of being like, "I could have done so much more." But there's a huge part of this that is a luxury and a privilege. I remember having days where my job was to finish reading *Middlemarch*. Even when things would drag on, having those little pockets of purely pleasurable research helped. I think it's really important to note that, technically, I think this book took me—from that first essay idea to what's going to be published in February—probably 10 years.

I feel like it's good to talk about that.

A lot of that time was not spent writing or researching. It was spent trying to find work that would pay my rent. Sometimes I'm wistful, like, "Oh, well, if I had just run myself into the ground a little bit more, maybe I could have squeezed in more about this decade, or more research about this person." Then I remember that advice I'll never take, but I do think is true: it's not done because it's perfect. It's done because it's done.

The book made me think of marriage as a container for fate, or destiny, or something really transcendent. By getting married, you're making a decision for yourself for the rest of your life, which is a thing that you basically never do otherwise, right? Is thinking about marriage a way of thinking about mortality and infinity?

I could obviously talk about this forever. Okay, bear with me: I took myself to see *Nosferatu* over holidays. I went to a matinee with what must have been every goth teenage girl in Montreal. I felt so happy to be in there, just knowing that they were all having a formative experience. Surprisingly, *Nosferatu* proved to be a great example of how I define romance. I don't know if you've seen it, I won't give away the ending—but with the ending I was like, "Right, yeah, that's love, baby."

Oh, my god. I need to watch it and return to this.

You're going to be like, "What's wrong with her?" A reason that romance has been such a feminine art form for so long—something that's directed at women and femmes in pop culture—is because it speaks to this idea of having agency over your lack of power, really living inside of a decision that's been made for you that you are compelled to follow through on, one that you can't resist. Joan Acocella has an amazing essay about the Dracula trope called "The Bloodied Nightgown" that talks about the narrative of it beautifully.

I love the way marriage is depicted in that movie because I think it's one of the rare times I've seen somebody demonstrate the way marriage is a talisman. That it's intended to keep something out as much as it is keeping something in. There is something so beautiful about believing you're going to feel a certain way forever. Yet marriage is a structure that is stronger than all of us. It's a political unit, it's a social unit, it's a cultural unit that has its own roots in the world that we're entering into, not the other way around. It doesn't enter our lives. We enter its life.

There's this one devastating Lauren Berlant quote you put in the book: "Who is to say whether a love relation is real or really something else, a fantasy, or a trick someone plays on herself or on another in order to sustain a fantasy? This is a psychological question about the reliability of emotional knowledge, but it is also a political question about the ways norms produce attachments to living through certain fantasies. What does it mean about love that its expressions tend to be so *conventional*, so bound up in institutions like marriage and

family, property relations, and stock phrases and plots?”

Absolutely devastated by this idea. And then I love that after that quote, you just write: “Anyway, me and my friends have an obsession with endings.”

Just leaving that there.

It’s perfect but knowing all of the institutional baggage of marriage—and this part of what the book is grappling with—what do you do with all that information on an individual level?

As Lauren Berlant writes about in *The Female Complaint*, the most devastatingly impossible romances were often written by people who knew better. And especially when you look at melodrama as a genre, many of the people working in that industry were marginalized in so many ways. Because who better than somebody on the outside to show what it looks like on the surface? At the same time, I want to be a product of my culture. I want to feel the influence of the community that I’m a part of, the world that I live in. I want to participate. I don’t want to hold myself apart. And so I guess that is the tension between participating in these structures and critiquing them.

There’s a section in your book where you’re talking with your friends about everyone having epiphanies. You write, “There was no shortage of epiphanies in my world. Everyone was always realizing something.” Then you say that the epiphanies didn’t require anyone to do anything, and “They didn’t even necessarily have to be true.” How are epiphanies a part of your writing process? Is a book a way to make a sequence of epiphanies into something substantial?

I think [epiphanies are] so important as a form of energy, especially for a writer working on a very long project where motivation does not get you very far. It’s not a reliable resource that you can just call up anytime you need it. The work that an epiphany does, I think, is that infusion of a new energy, or a renewed interest in the topic that lets you feel that you haven’t gotten to the bottom of anything.

It’s a reminder that there are still things to be thought. I keep joking, but it’s so serious. I’m like, “I’m not going to write another book because I used up every word I know; I’ve got nothing left.” But that’s not true. It can’t be true. The longer you think about anything, the more it’s possible to surprise yourself.

I love the portion of the book where you’re talking about the documentary *The Continuing Story of Carel and Ferd* (1972), and their idea that everyone is secretly thinking of their lives as an anecdote they’ll tell on TV. You also write about Gary Indiana, who knew the couple, and who said that when he wrote about Ferd, he released himself from the myths he told himself about their relationship. Were you thinking about those ideas in relation to your experience writing memoir?

The fear that I still have is that there is something about speaking, or describing, or writing, that reifies a narrative in our heads. We’re easily influenced by other people, but we can also be very influenced by ourselves. And it’s dangerous to decide exactly what something means, or what it represents, or what somebody else’s intentions were, because you could live under a mistaken impression for so long. I was thinking about how writing my memories as they occurred to me in the moment of writing would probably have the effect of solidifying something in my mind. And that made me feel very careful about how I wrote, and what I ended up publishing.

Like, while you were actually writing, you were pausing?

Yes. I was really thinking, “Is this a memory that I can describe in a way that will not preclude me from having it challenged, or questioned, or cut off from the fact that the person I’m writing about has their own interpretation?” A rule I made for myself pretty early on that I hope I kept: I wouldn’t ever write anything that assumed what the other person was thinking. I ended up editing out [parts] where I would say, “He must have thought this,” or, “I knew he meant this.” I do think for all memoir writers, it’s really important to protect your own experience and your own way of telling the story and to really commit to it, to stand by it. And the

best way to do that is by acknowledging that it is fallible. It can be challenged. It is just yours, and that's enough. The thing about a book is that it exists forever. You have to stand by it.

Haley Mlotek's recommendations for movies about divorce that she could write a whole book about but somehow didn't end up including in her actual book:

A Separation (2011)

Certified Copy (2010)

Falling in Love (1984)

Gloria Bell (2018)

Stepmom (1998)

Name
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Vocation
writer