

# On being relaxed and hyper-focused



Writer Halle Butler on the importance of reading your work aloud, internal versus external success, the connection between socializing and making things, and being a caretaker of the creative process.

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As told to Clare Schneider, 2419 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

**Do you like reading your work aloud or at readings? Does reading work aloud allow for something that isn't available on the page?**

I love reading work out loud. It was something that I started to do when I first started writing. Every time I would look at lit journals to submit my work, I got very intimidated. But at readings you can go try out new material on people who are actually sitting in the room, and you can get a sense of if the joke is landing. If people make eye contact with you after your reading, you did it right. Reading aloud is good for my extrovert tendencies, too. It's a fun place to show off a little bit. Before I wrote *Jillian*, I wrote a bunch of short pieces that were mostly dialogue, that were specifically for performance.

For *The New Me*, I was not thinking about performance at all, and it was feeling really stale. Then, I got invited to do a reading at a bar in Chicago, and I wanted to do a really good job, so I started thinking about what would sound good to the ear, and what would flow well, and how to get a voice that would feel more conversational. At readings, it can be hard when I'm in the audience to follow a plot or to appreciate stuff that I'm hearing the same way if I'm reading it on the page—I wanted something that would be easy for the audience to follow... something attention-getting, or undeniably fun to listen to.

**I'm wondering how you define success in terms of your writing. What does success mean to you?**

Are you asking about external versus internal success? Is that what you mean?

**I guess so, yeah.**

Well, internal success is when you feel like you got your point across artistically. With *The New Me* I was really happy with the way it turned out—the way it captured that feeling of depression and endlessness. The internal feeling of success is when you pass your writing to somebody whose opinion you value and they like it and it has a resonance with other people—that feels really good and that's what motivates more work. That's the thing that makes you excited to work on something else. The external stuff is a very fun treat and surreal if people react to the work publicly, or you get a good review. But that comes with a kind of paranoia—will there be another good review? And that can make you feel self-conscious when you're working.

**I read somewhere that you felt that you needed to publish a book by the time you were 25. What did that mean to you at the time, and what does that mean now?**

Well, that was just proving to myself I could do it. I was really young when I felt that way. I didn't really think about publishing the book, I just wanted to write it. I wanted to be able to complete the artistic act of writing a novel. I wanted to do it before I was 25 because I'm a procrastinator, I'm very lazy, and I have a hard time with follow-through. To be able to get to the end and know what that felt like. To create a book myself felt really important.

I spent a year editing after I wrote the first draft. Sharing that Word doc with a handful of my friends felt so good, and their reactions to it felt so good. It was almost like a joke, like, "Here, I wrote a book as a joke" even though I was writing seriously before that.

**How do you leave room for messing up in your writing process? How do you leave room to let yourself explore and follow things that maybe won't turn into bigger projects?**

I write a lot of stuff that never sees the light of day. I wrote a whole novel in between *Jillian* and *The New Me* that wasn't very good, but I needed to be working on something. I like editing so I'm not afraid of deleting things or of wasting time. The thing I try to focus on when I'm working is being relaxed. When I'm failing when I'm writing is when I'm thinking too much about what the thing will be when it's done, or thinking too much about what it will mean when it's done—thinking too much about its shape and getting self-conscious. Writing is going well when I'm this weird mix of completely relaxed and hyper-focused—it takes a lot of training. You have to work a lot to get to that headspace—where what you want to do is only a little bit out of reach and not way out of reach. It's like building a muscle.

**I want to ask you a question about *The New Me*. I'm interested in the role that clothing plays in it. Some of the most cutting descriptions of characters are folded into descriptions of what they're wearing. And then Millie herself seems to use the act of purchasing clothing or thinking about what she'll purchase in the future as a vehicle for transformation or the promise of transformation. Can you talk a little bit about the role of clothing?**

It's the first impression you get. The way you dress defines your group.

The women in the office are all dressed the same way. They're all wearing the same fast fashion outfits—jeans, blouses, and suede boots. It's the stuff that if you look at *Refinery 29* or those websites—that's what you'd see. So to me, it's kind of funny that the office is this eerie external replication of the internet. This is something I noticed when I was temping. I would research what I should look like when I was a secretary.

Clothing is the first step of the social contract. You buy the blouse, put on the bracelet, and wear the Glossier makeup or whatever people wear. You're saying, "Yes I agree. I will join the group." Conforming to the external appearance is the first step of joining any kind of social group. I think that's why Millie is fixated on shopping, because that will be the first step in making herself visually approachable to these people instead of wearing a pit-stained J Crew shirt, which is very much a signal to stay away. It's like following the letter but not the spirit of the law. Also, when you're depressed like the narrator is, you're probably not going shopping. Because going into a clothing store and buying an outfit is a nice thing to do for yourself—you're looking at yourself in a kind of hopeful way.

Clothing is something to me that, when I was in high school, was really important. I would go thrift shopping all the time. I had crazy clothes. I would cut up my clothes. Shopping, rummaging, and finding stuff was a big part of bonding with my friends. But as I've gotten older and older, and older and older, and older, [laughs] clothing just doesn't matter to me at all. It's almost like, "Oh right, I'm going outside so I have to put something on so I'm not naked." Then there will be days where I think, "Oh, I need to make a friend sometime in the next couple months, maybe I should put on an outfit that will communicate to this person that I am not insane."

**I love that—that clothing is the first agreement to a social contract. I'm thinking about how people compliment each other on their clothes.**

Yeah. Nothing feels better than telling someone you like their shirt or having someone tell you they like your

necklace. Whenever anybody tells me, "I like your shirt" I feel immediately like, "Oh, you like me, you like my choice, you wouldn't be embarrassed to stand next to me on the street."

**Can you talk a little bit about your writing routine? Is it regimented?**

It changes all the time around my circumstances. I wrote *The New Me* in 2016, and it took me nearly the whole year. I think I started it the day David Bowie died because I remember being overcome by that, listening to *Station to Station* and writing. I was working five days a week, so I would come home after work, write for a couple of hours, and block off my Saturdays or Sundays and write then. There would also be weeks when I had a party to go to, or I was tired from work, and then I wouldn't write.

Right now, when things are going well and I have free time, I like to get up in the morning around 10:00 a.m., because I'm not a morning person, drink a cup of coffee, look at things on the internet, and then dive into writing. Right now, I would say I'm writing from 11:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. Then I'll go on a walk or do errands and try to write at night, too.

**You've worked on films and music videos, and an illustrated play. What experiences made you want to be a writer, and how have your other artistic practices influenced your writing process?**

I wanted to be a visual artist when I was starting college. I wanted to do printmaking and I also liked figure drawing. I went to a conceptual art school in Chicago, SAIC. Their emphasis is on interdisciplinary practices, so you don't choose a major. You're not like, "Okay, I'm 19 and I'm going to be a printmaker for the rest of my life." You have to take a bunch of different classes and mingle with different mediums. I took a writing class kind of on a whim and really liked it. I felt like I could do it. I felt competitive in a good way. I was excited for the workshops and excited to share my work, which I hadn't been feeling about the visual stuff.

Everyone I've worked with is someone I met at the Art Institute. Chicago has this really great DIY art scene, so socializing for me was tied to making work—you hang out with someone by writing together, or go to a party preceded by a reading or show. Socializing and making things were always bound together for me. The other things, like working on films, were also all very social.

**In another interview you compared your writing process to the first draft of a figure drawing.**

I think of the books kind of like art projects in a way. The interviews I read with artists are usually with painters. I'm reading a lot of interviews with Francis Bacon right now. I feel like I know what he means when he's talking about the balance between mystery and intent, and not always arriving where you want to go.

Making visual art is an expressive, free thing—you're very open to figuring it out. If I think about writing as writing, then I get a little worried about doing something like a Joseph Campbell plot-arc'd, five-paragraph essay thing. But if I think of it more as just an artistic expression, then I can be a bit more relaxed and free. It takes the pressure off to think about different mediums. Because then, you're comparing yourself to more of an emotional, artistic benchmark, rather than comparing yourself within your medium, which can feel a little panicky or gross. It misses the point because you're just trying to contribute to the health of culture by participating in it. Any time you do something creative, you become a kind of caretaker of the creative process at large.

**What does curiosity look like for you? How do you explore things that you want to write about?**

A lot of it is reading. My life experiences have been, to some degree, very confined to the office, which I think might be kind of apparent [laughs]. Curiosity is such an interesting thing. I can be very hard on myself sometimes, and I feel like I used to be more curious. I'll get really fixated on that sometimes, but then I realize I am still curious. So it's a complicated question for me because I always feel a step behind on where I want to be.

I warm up by writing short stories. There's this vague, exploratory time before I settle into a project, where I'm

just coming up with conversations or scenarios that might express the feeling I want to express. For *The New Me*, the voice came to me very clearly. My goal was to describe depression accurately in *The New Me*. I gave Millie freedom to be a little bit worse than I was in those scenarios and gave her full rein to be depressed and say the shitty thing and think the shitty thing. I don't know how to answer this question, because I'm not sure where it comes from.

I write about things I've seen, but then I also like to read a lot of psychology, and philosophy, and pulp books, too. I'll read before I start writing, and that kind of seeps in. Before I wrote *Jillian*, I read Patricia Highsmith's book, *Edith's Diary*. I put it down and I was like, "Okay, I get it." I felt like I knew, after reading that book, how to write a book. I'd been reading experimental stuff and esoteric texts, and I was thinking about numerology and secret communication through generations. I was trying to write these esoteric office short stories, which was very weird. I was like, "Why isn't this working?" and then I read *Edith's Diary*. Patricia Highsmith writes crime novels, but this isn't exactly a crime novel. It has all the strangeness and humor I was reading into Poe and Kafka, but it was clear. It was really clear. Every once in a while I'll come across something that feels really permissive to me. I like the way the mind can take in disparate information and, no matter what, it filters it out through its own filter.

Halle Butler Recommends:

"Is This What You Wanted" - Leonard Cohen

"Inner City Blues" - Marvin Gaye

"Alien Love" - Jackie Lynn

Contrapasso

Twizzlers (eating while writing, instead of smoking, the full family sized bag)

Name

Halle Butler

Vocation

Writer

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