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As told to Ruby Brunton, 1946 words.

Tags: Writing, Creative anxiety, Day jobs, Politics, Adversity.



On letting the world into your work

Writer Heike Geissler on turning her experience of working at an Amazon fulfillment center into a book, trying to fend off the influences of capitalism, and what it means to be political—even when that isn't your intention.

Much of your novel *Seasonal Associate* is written in the second person using "you." It's as though the "you" of the novel could be the reader. Any one of us could find themselves in the situation that of the "you" of the novel—in this case, being forced through circumstance to accept a seasonal temp position.

I should say, in Germany it's a bit different because we have "you," and then we have the other "You," which is very elaborate and for official use. When you talk to someone you've never talked to before you use the official you. With the Prime Minister, for instance, I would say, "You," the official "You," which is written with a big initial letter. So, there is a certain difference.

My intention was to have the perfect setup that I have complete control over. There's no room for interpretation. I'm totally transferring my position and whatever happened to me and whatever I think is really important over to the "you" that I'm using. I tried to create a "you" that's me and is perfectly enabled to understand what I thought and felt and went through, so that I could spread my message, whatever that message is. I really wanted to be understood.

The other part is that when I wrote that book I was kind of off the market. I had no publishing company anymore. When I wrote that book, actually, I turned it into audio files, so the "you" that comes from the character was something you could hear. I really wanted to speak through the person listening. It was written for the purpose of being heard at first. It turned out it works quite well if you read it, too.

There's also an "I" in the novel that chastises the "you." Since the "I" and the "you" are in fact the same person, this produces some comical results. Was the humor intentional? What was your idea behind the two—the "I" and the "you"—talking to each other?

After a while, I couldn't get further with the "you" as part of the story. I needed something extra, like a different look on the story. This was when the "I" came in—it was as something extra, because I felt so narrowed in by the structure I had created. So the "you" is still working at Amazon and having all of the troubles there, and the "I" comes in later.

You said that when you went to work at Amazon, you didn't have the intention of setting out to write a book about the experience. So how did it come about? At what point during your time there were you like, "Oh, I'm going to turn this into a book?"

It was after I'd been there a while. I found it all very interesting, really. You'd get these sticky notes at work, maybe for communication amongst colleagues or whatever, but I started taking notes on them. I wrote down whatever I found interesting and took those notes home with me and typed them into the computer every day or night, usually while very sleepy.

It was only after I had finished working there that I thought I really wanted to make something, because I had not earned enough money, really. I thought I could earn a good living there, but I didn't. Life still costs a lot. I keep forgetting that. Things are expensive, even if you make good bargains. So I still was kind of out of money and I thought, "I just want to turn this into something good. I want to talk about the position I'm in, but also about the world I live in." And that's what I did. It took a while. I started work in 2010, and it took me until when the book was published in 2014. So it took a while.

Those are two things that we often forget, that life is expensive, and also things take a long time.

Right. They do. A lot of time.

You've mentioned before that capitalism influences us from an early age—children are expected to have ideas about how they can contribute to the world we live in, and what kind of work they might want to do. Could you elaborate on this?

I think it is absolutely important that everybody contributes to the good of the world. I'm trying to teach my children to look with a lot of interest at the world, and about how they can take part in it and be active, whatever that action might be. Society tries to make use of the people that are in it, which I totally understand in a way. But of course, society is looking at the people who are living in it and not really challenging them in a good way, but only trying to reproduce itself and its own worst habits. And this is what I am *not* interested in. I don't want my children to be part of this cycle that is capitalism and whatever the world is now.

I think there's not enough space for creativity or interesting ways that enable you to remain interested in the world. Children get trained to be machines and simply function. To get out of that circle seems impossible. It's hard to change that, and that's very disappointing and makes me angrier every day.

I grew up in the GDR and maybe it was different in Western Germany, but I remember the teacher asking us, "What do you want to become when you're an adult?" And we always had to have an idea. I think it makes sense as long as the task is interesting and challenging in a good way, but nowadays, so many of us have shitty jobs and life gets precarious for so many of us. There is no stability anymore. So the childhood promises were meaningful once, but now they've lost their meaning.

Do you think the conditions of contemporary capitalism have changed in a way that's making it harder to do creative work?

Every job should be partly creative, or should at least have some momentum for creativity, because creativity is just natural. Every human being is creative. Everyone is creative at a young age, but many people lose their creativity because it's not useful anymore wherever they work or wherever they live. Maybe it's not even wanted. Sadly, sometimes it isn't efficient to be creative because you ask questions that make things more complicated.

I do this creative work because I really want to, and because I really have to. I would do this kind of work anyway, no matter what else I had to do to survive. Sometimes the creative work puts a barrier between me and the world because it seems so necessary, I forget to look at the world and I'm only focusing on my own creativity and other people's creativity. I forget to look at what life is actually like. What are people doing? And what are they talking about? I'm not really an expert on talking about creative work, but it is so useful and so needed.

It's interesting that you say that the creative work is something that you would do anyway. In that sense, it's like you are forced to accept doing some of these shitty jobs, because they allow you to do the creative work that you feel is necessary.

Yeah. I mean, I'll do anything I have to in order to get by, and to make time for my work. I would never want to go back to Amazon. Not because I'm trying to avoid that kind of work in general. It's more that I really like the life I'm having now, and I'm really working hard so I don't have to go back to working for some big company. I don't appreciate them. I'm not looking to be a part of that world again.

There is a very relatable part in the book where you don't want to send out payment reminders to your

employers. What is it about sending out payment reminders that fills every freelancer with dread? Why is it so hard for us to ask for what we are owed?

There seems to be something inside of me that really does not take the work I do that seriously. But I think I've changed, because now I can ask when the payment is due, and say, "Yes, please do send me the contract." I really want it to be quick. I want to get it over with and get the money. I've changed in that way, because now I know I'm working really hard, and I feel if somebody does not like the work I've done, then that's something we can talk about.

You've mentioned before that your writing gets more political the more you let the world into your work. How does that work?

I think I'm getting political because I'm really, deeply disturbed by the world—what I see, what's going on, politics, all the inappropriateness, and unfriendliness, and the cruelty that you find in language. It's not just in the President of the United States, but now some German politicians are following him. He's their orientation and they seem to look up to him and recreate him in their rhetoric and behavior.

Do you feel that writers and artists, or maybe just all people, have a duty to reflect on the world and allow politics to enter their work?

I think what everybody has to do is read the news, look at the world, and notice what's going on. And maybe always also step up... or step back?

Take a step back.

Step back. And try to be objective, but of course that is impossible for a human being. I think what really is important is to create words that serve a function, and to create images that are strong, and works of fictions that can help us imagine a different world. They do not have to be obviously political. Creating words that work and that are written with passion and love and a deep interest in the world is always political, even if it doesn't seem so.

People get tired of things being political all the time, like obviously political—for example, messages against the police or against the government. What I'm really interested in is: How can I say what I want to say and turn it into a strong message? I'm interested in creating strong characters that make a point and are really alive, even if they are desperate and crazy. But they know what they do. I want to write stories that *tell* stories, about people who know what they are doing or want to find out why. That's the key for me, and it probably is political.

Heike Geissler recommends:

Dubravka Ugresic: *Fox*

Chantal Akerman: *Saute ma ville*

Andrea Scrima: *A lesser day*

Alexander Kluge, Ben Lerner: *The Snows of Venice*

Podcast: A History of the World in a 100 Objects

Le cirque de Alexander Calder

The most dangerous Game, exhibition, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin

Juliana Spahr, David Buuck: *An Army of Lovers*

Ryan Gander: *Loose Associations*

Peter Fischli, David Weiss: *The Way Things Go*

Dmitri Shostakovich: Symphony No.2

Kate Zambreno: Book of Mutter

Name

Heike Geissler


Vocation


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