

On making work that doesn't fit neatly into categories



Writer Jackie Ess discusses writing as method acting, when a project starts as a joke, and not wanting to be the voice of any particular group.

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As told to Elle Nash, 2924 words.

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Darryl was written over the course of four years. What was the inception of this project and how did you decide specifically on the structure for it?

My partner at the time started a nature photos Instagram account, and I said, it would be the funniest thing in the world if it were a guy that put in just completely insane captions on the photos. Like a Rorschach inkblot thing. And I was thinking what if Darryl Cook was in our world? I started mostly just doing a characters as a bit. Most of them are just caricatures, as Darryl sort of is at the start, but I think it got more interesting, he had more subjectivity. Then I started a Twitter account for Darryl (later deleted), but on there, I would do these little monologues as Darryl, and I think you see that the chapters are a little bit like Twitter threads, I mean they're kind of micro chapters. I was getting way too into them. I was being Darryl for an hour a day.

A year before, I had put down an experimental novel I tried to write and just decided it was no good, and wasn't thinking I was writing another, but I think around the point I imagined the character Clive, I was like, oh, this is the story. This is the world, and this is like a novel-sized thing. At that point, I had moved out to Eugene to live with a partner of mine who was a student there. I had a job where I was working from home, and then I lost the job.

It was kind of like now, in terms of not leaving the house. I was able to set up a good routine and write every day, and it just started to happen. I could get up in the morning and I was always ready to write Darryl's diary. I was learning to write as I was writing the first draft of this, and you can see a record of that a little bit in the story.

Last year I was studying method acting exercises to figure out more how to inhabit different character mindsets. Was there any moment when you were thinking about this character, that you had difficulty trying to inhabit Darryl?

Yeah. I mean, it is a lot like method, and honestly, I've done things that are like that for other characters that have not really made it into books. There's that story about Dustin Hoffman and Lawrence Olivier on the set of *Marathon Man*; there's a torture scene in this movie. Dustin Hoffman comes in one day and he was all beat up and just looks horrible. Olivier says, "What's been going on with you?" and he's method, right? So, he says, "Well, my scene calls for my character...who'd been up all night, he'd been beaten and so on. I've been awake for 36 hours, slapping myself across the face." And Lawrence Olivier says, "Well, let me give you some advice. You should try acting." It's pretty good advice I'm finally starting to take as a writer, which is to "try writing." I don't think that becoming Darryl was very difficult. I would say becoming some of the other characters was a little bit more difficult. There's quite a lot of characters who are very cringy in some sense, and I think it's

hard to inhabit that without slipping into making fun of them more.

There's this one line I'll never forget, where Darryl says, "We can forgive ourselves for needing this. We can forgive ourselves for needing to be fucked this way." It's such a good line. Was humor in the work something that came naturally to you?

I think that's always been with me. A lot of my favorite art has always had an element of humor to it, and actually, I don't really know how to be serious. Or, not at length. I can get very serious for a second, but I'm probably going to break it up with a really dumb joke, and in that sense, a format like *Darryl* is the only one that I could do. When I was young, my favorite writer was Samuel Beckett, and Samuel Beckett breaks into slapstick all the time.

There's a great scene in *Molloy* where a guy stares at the ocean, thinking about throwing himself in, and he's just sucking on rocks, and it becomes this long digression about his whole system of how he gets the rocks out of one pocket and into his mouth, trying to keep them balanced, until he accidentally eats them. That kind of silliness where you can go into a bit of a game, or into something mechanistic, or something that's just the goofiness of language. I want that. That felt very natural to me. In the case of *Darryl*, it did start with a joke. I had a joke before I had a story.

I would say if anything, I had to discover the seriousness of him. I wanted to give this person a chance to speak for himself because that is the funniest thing to me in the world. He definitely borrows a little bit from a certain kind of mood of internet stridency. The funny thing is that, to me, what I connect with, where the book connects with trans culture, more than what he says about gender or what he says about the trans people he encounters, is that there is kind of a culture of asserting itself and trying to be real, and trying to be recognized, and trying to be valid. He is incredibly caught up in that in a strange way, given that he does not have the kind of identity that is part of that process.

On a craft level, how would you determine whether or not something was funny for you?

This book went through a bunch of rewrites over the course of a few years. I read a lot of stuff out loud. I have an overdeveloped internal censor, and this is one of the places where it actually helps me, because it really hurts, I think, when it comes to writing things for the first time. All that second guessing: is that really the sentence that I want to write? Or, is that really how that should go? Or, maybe I should write this other paragraph first, or something. But if I can get to the point where I have some kind of manuscript, then what I find is that when I read things out loud, I have a lot of unconscious editorial resources. Many people who know me will tell me things like, "I never know when you're doing a bit" and I feel a bit bad about that. I'm probably doing a bit less often than people think, but maybe more often than normal people are. It's probably a psychological problem. At some level, there's an intimacy that's lacking or being avoided. There's a sense in which this thing that I do, which is fun, is also compulsive and a little defensive. It's like all the things that make me a worse person are helping me be a better writer. All is redeemed.

In *Darryl*, I felt every word needed to be there. There was nothing unnecessary in the whole story. I'm always asking the question, does this sentence, or does this scene absolutely need to be here?

I did actually have a little anxiety about whether I ought to put more female characters in my book? There was a moment where I was like, ok, it makes sense that this is Darryl's limited point of view, but did I try though? Maybe I should think about this a little bit more. I worried about that a little bit. And also, of course, for a long time, I worried whether I wanted this kind of thing attached to my name.

In early 2018, I showed it to Jeanne Thornton and that was really helpful. Jeanne has a book, *Summer Fun*, coming out this summer, and she runs Instar Press with Miracle Jones. That was the home I thought for it because this is a really, really indie press and they're connoisseurs of very weird trans writing, among other things, and they published a book-length study of porn on Tumblr that just came out a few months ago. Jeanne was very encouraging, and was the first person who really told me that it was a good book, who I believed. There was a little bit of editing that happened after CLASH got their hands on it, but I would say that in general, my process of editing

is that people give me really good advice and it plunges me into doubt for a little while. Then I disappear for a long time, and then I come back and I don't do the thing that they told me to do.

Probably, the person who I take workshoppy advice from most consistently is my friend Torrey Peters. Torrey had had a very cool perspective on the book and did make a suggestion that I kind of took. I would love to learn craft from people, as I'm not convinced I'm actually any good at it. I think with anybody trying to imitate my example, I should be giving them the Lawrence Olivier advice, that they should try writing, because I think I definitely live with my characters in too indulgent a way.

Can you talk a little bit about the unsurety of having something attached to your name, and also what convinced you to know that this is what you wanted to publish?

At a certain point, the thing that I had to be convinced of was more to do with its quality, than its moral suitability or whether this is like the right political message to be putting in the world, that's it. I don't have a lot of anxieties around stuff like that. Go bother somebody who isn't a writer about those kinds of things. How I would see the story is that for me, at some point in my life, I transition, and for a while it really sucks because I feel like I look like a freak, and it's not a subjective opinion. People will tell me so on the street. I've got a lot of shit from people, and was quite frightened of that. I had a very defiant attitude and I thought about it a lot, and I operated with the assumption that there was no privacy, because it felt like there was none, because anything I did would be seen through that lens.

In particular, it became cheap for me to do things that were revealing, because I was only revealing what I assumed that everyone could see. At a certain point that stopped being true. Now it's sort of like, well, yeah, I kind of have privacy if I want it. Of course, people are invasive occasionally, but when they are, it's no different than just people being rude. I think I had to recalibrate on that, and that recalibration was timed in my life to where I had finished this manuscript. I was like, "Huh, I have the choice that people can see me as less of a weirdo if I want. What would that be like?"

I wanted to go and find out what it would be like to be seen as a fine upstanding citizen. I'm not sure I did a very good job of it, but you know, closer than now and closer than before. I found out that it's really boring. I think I just needed to separate out for myself how much of this is a choice. It is.

In your writing life, what has been the biggest struggle for you?

In general, believing the things I say are worth saying or worthy of being read can be a real difficulty. I think humor protects me from that, because when you're cracking a joke, you're not really worried about it. It's one form of speech that's very willing to impose. And I have access to this very easy confirmation, like, are people laughing? Are they turning the pages?

Actually a gigantic problem I had about this early on that influenced *Darryl* was that I'd come out of this trans literature orbit. I thought, "Oh man, everything I write is going to get read through this category and it's going to be worse than just being about my categories. It's going to be read as though it's about me." I don't want to write something that is going to be like the trans woman novel, the trans woman of color novel. I don't speak for anybody. I really think I'm both non-representative and specifically, probably a bad representative of many of the groups that I'm a member of. I don't ever want to be a voice of a group. I had just come out of this world where I felt it was very easy to get tokenized, then I was like, "Oh wow. If I write in the character of this middle-age white guy, I can do anything." That set me free.

I wanted to write characters that were a bit unlikeable. But I think *Darryl* is a very lovable character. He's fucked up in some deep ways, but I care about him and I feel like most readers who get into the book do care about him. Even when they see him make really catastrophic mistakes that hurt other people, there's a sense of, "I can see how it's happening and I wish he wouldn't do that." I want that, but I think I really wanted to write outside of a slightly valorized political identity, because that's something that felt very uncomfortable for me to wear. I walk poorly in heels and balance poorly on pedestals. Just let me wobble on this way.

I think in general, the whole trans conversation seems to be very much shifting its coordinates, and it's much more about trans kids these days anyway, just in the sense of that's who a lot of the attacks are on right now. It actually feels like I'm much, much less in the hot seat, like, ah, some 30 something person who nobody cares about. That's great. Maybe I can finally write about people like me once I'm really totally sure that nobody cares. We're almost there. I'm almost irrelevant. I can't wait to be irrelevant.

Were you worried about whether or not the book would be successful or picked up by a publisher?

A little bit, yeah. I knew that it was definitely going to be destined for the indies. No bigger. I will say that I was very pleased that I got it on a Lambda hot list. I was thinking about it and was like, "What category are these people supposed to put me in? Is this trans fiction? There's a trans character. There's a character that thinks a lot about transition. Is he trans?" Well, life is complicated. So maybe. Is he bisexual? On the face of it, yes, he has sex with men and women. Is he gay or? On the face of it, he seems in love with this man. There's a lesbian character in the book who observes this all with somewhat some cool regard, and she says, "I don't really want it to be a part of this bullshit," but she shows up. It's like, "Wow, like this book is really L, G, B, and T, so what the hell category are you supposed to enter it in if you want people to read it?" It fits very uncomfortably into these categories which I really appreciate for what it's worth. Because life fits poorly into those categories.

These literatures, they're there to promote work that is really hard to promote otherwise and would not sell really, if it didn't have a little bit of categorization and a little bit of genre scaffolding around it. I definitely feel like I wrote something, that I was pretty much willing to self publish or not publish. The next book may have a slightly similar vibe. Although, I think the next book is more heterosexual. That's how I'm going to really hit. Really start playing for the majors. That's how I'm going to really get in there. I know how straight people think.

I wasn't sure if I knew, but now I know that I do, because I wrote how I thought it was and they told me I was right, so now I can do it. No, but I have no idea. It definitely is a somewhat marginal book in a way. At the end of the day, I don't think that this story says anything really cruel about anybody. I hope that people end up seeing that.

Jackie Ess Recommends:

[Stories by Paris Green/Frog K](#)

W.E.B. Du Bois's *In Battle For Peace: The Story of my 83rd Birthday*: [an account](#) of starting a peace group in the early 50s and being accused in court of being a Soviet agent (he was not)

[Daniel Naroditsky's chess videos](#)

Grow your own herbs and drink more tea

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