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As told to Shy Watson, 2492 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Identity, Focus, Inspiration.

On not always trusting your feelings

Writer Jordan Castro discusses accepting responsibility, the process of learning, and the complication of "finding your voice."

What do you do when you're creatively stuck?

I either try to power through or pray.

So by powering through you keep writing even if everything's coming out poorly, then edit it later?

Exactly. Most of the time if I just keep writing, even if it's stressful and feels bad, because my feelings aren't always trustworthy in relation to what's happening on the page.

The Novelist is a full-length novel that takes place over the span of a few hours. How did you manage the time dilation, and why did you make the choice to do so?

I read Nicholson Baker and Thomas Bernhard, and their books took place over the course of a short period of time. I realized if I did that, I could go anywhere I wanted and include a bunch of different rants and so on. I think in terms of making it fun to read or making it readable, I realized that his thwarted desire to write was a good plot device to keep the momentum going. Like, he kept wanting to write and was unable to write and he kept getting distracted. So that's always lingering in the background, sort of propelling the narrative forward. And in terms of the time dilation, I think I was trying to pay really close attention to what actually happened when I was using the computer and getting distracted. And so it made sense to get into the minutia of the various activities that take place in the morning.

I also think when I was focusing on the concrete actions and concrete sentences, even things like navigating the internet, scrolling and clicking and stuff like this, it helped. Because I thought since there's not really that much of a plot, there would be a risk of it feeling stagnant or too abstract. A lot of the concrete actions and the active sentences help to still make the book feel...I keep using the word active, but active.

Speaking of the online distractions, your protagonist spends a good deal of time on social media. How would you define his relationship with it? How would you define your own?

I think for him, he has these ideas of himself as some kind of writer, or he oscillates between positioning himself, in his head at least, above the lit world or other writers. But then when he logs into social media and is actually confronted with other people in the form of tweets or Facebook posts or whatever, he shrinks into himself and either feels bad about himself or starts shitting on other people. And so I think it serves the role, especially since the whole book takes place where he's basically just in front of the computer, of him being confronted with other people and having an uncomfortable experience with that.

I definitely get distracted by it, too. And I think part of the impetus for the novel was just me trying to find a way to make that feel productive, where it was almost like, *okay, well, I'm not going to be able to overcome this compulsive clicking and scrolling because I've tried different ways and I can't really do it. And so maybe instead I can try and incorporate that into the work itself so it's at least sort of generative.* But now that I'm not working on a novel that takes place mostly on the internet, it feels much

more egregious and difficult, because I'm still just clicking all the time. Now it's harder to justify.

It felt very real to the experience of just automatically opening an app and being like, wait, what?

That's almost totally my experience. It was fun to try and watch myself and pay attention to what's actually going on when I get sucked in. Because it really does feel like getting sucked in; it doesn't feel like I'm choosing to do it.

What's the most surprising thing you've learned from writing and/or being around other writers?

I think one of the most surprising things that I've learned from writing is how full of shit that I am a lot of the time. I think a lot of the impetus to write for me comes from a sort of reactionary place. The first thing I wrote in *The Novelist* was the rant against his friend, Eric. And at the time I really thought I was just sort of owning this person and self-righteously proving a point or something. And then when I went back to read it, I was like, *oh, wow, this is really ugly and kind of frantic and pathetic almost. And it always feels surprising.*

I know that I have blind spots and I know that there are dark crevices of my consciousness, but it's always surprising to see it on the page and be like, *Oh, wow. I was totally coping here, or like, Oh, wow. I was totally just indulging the kind of ugly impulse,* which happens. It happened with the novel I'm working on now, too.

And then the most surprising thing I've learned about being around other writers is maybe that a lot of them don't seem to actually write much and are more concerned with things like social dynamics or politics or other things other than writing.

I've always hated that.

When I was younger, I always bristled when people would describe themselves as writers. And that's partly why the title, I think, is so tongue in cheek. It's like, "I'm a novelist," or like, "I'm working on my novel." I've always felt like there was something kind of cringe about parading that around as some kind of identity or a way in which you unironically perceive yourself. Even though, of course, I am a writer and I did write a novel, so it's not inaccurate. But I hate the social game of it. It's always shocking when I hear other writers talk and they're totally abreast of everything that's going on in literature and what this person said in this interview, and can you believe this person got this much money for this? It always just sounds so pathetic.

The Novelist celebrates change and is critical of those who are unwilling to put in the work. In what ways can we change positively?

I think on the one hand it's tempting to say things like, "We can become more loving. We can become more tolerant. We can become more generous," or whatever. And that's all true, but I think that the way change happens is through concrete decisions that are embodied in one's own life. I think a lot of the time people have the temptation to try and change the world or change something in politics or something like that. And it's very easy for emotions like envy or resentment or hatred to sneak in because you're not holding yourself accountable and you're not having to manifest these things in your own life. And for me, a lot of the positive change that has happened in my life or in people's lives around me starts with adopting a sense of personal responsibility, where it's like, *it's not other people's job to change, it's my job to change.*

And I think that's simultaneously empowering but also realistic because change spreads. Good change spreads out from the individual as opposed to this top-down imposition. And I think there's momentum involved in that. It's like, if I choose to accept responsibility for something and I want the world to be a more loving place, I take it upon myself to become more loving. Then that can spread out to my friends and my family and so on, in an authentic and dynamic, living way. It's also an endless pursuit. I can always be working on something like that, because it's not like I'm going to fully eradicate these things within myself.

But the moment I start pointing fingers and blaming others or absolving myself of responsibility, I can immediately start scapegoating other people or becoming hateful or envious or resentful. And I can use a kind of metanarrative to self-justify terrible interpersonal relations. And so I think for me, it starts with responsibility and then it snowballs from there. And you see these people that for decades just become increasingly sour and bitter, and they have all the "right opinions," but they don't actually help anyone. Change occurs gradually over time through concrete actions.

Your choice to include a character named Jordan Castro in the novel interested me, especially because the narrator never meets him. What do you think of their relationship, and does it remind you of any real life dynamics?

That character sort of emerged; I didn't plan it. In some ways, the Jordan Castro character is just a model for the narrator. He's someone who's a successful novelist, whereas the narrator is not. He's someone who has a life-affirming worldview, whereas the narrator's sort of struggling back and forth between attempting to have one, but not really having one.

The Jordan Castro character is so far away from the narrator that he can use him as a model without all the personal baggage he has with his friends on social media. I've noticed for myself that when I'm

learning something new, especially something that is foreign to my current understanding of the world, or even the current way that I perceive myself, I almost have to take on this perspective like I'm imitating it in order to really understand it.

The narrator finds himself imitating Jordan Castro's language, even. I mean, it's common to read something or listen to someone talk then find yourself imitating their speech patterns. A lot of the way we learn is acquisitive in this way where it's like we're not only learning what someone thinks but also almost adopting who they are in some sense. It's imitative, you know? And so the book deals with imitation and I think that's just another way in which positive change can occur, through the process of learning from another person.

And for me, there was definitely a period of time in 2016 to maybe 2018 where I was encountering these shitstorms on Twitter, or I would see a person's name constantly associated with someone who you should hate or whatever, and I would engage directly with the people's work. I started reading and watching stuff from other corners of culture that I was previously unfamiliar with. And so there was also that anxiety where it's like, *I know I'm not supposed to be liking this person's thing*, but also finding myself attracted to it and seeing that some of it made a lot of sense.

There's something frantic and false about the way people in online crowds try to enforce a kind of brutally incurious attitude toward people they perceive as their ideological enemies. I've always been interested in thinking things through and reading widely and coming to my own conclusions. It occurred to me a long time ago that when I was a kid, I was really, really involved in radical left-wing politics, but I knew absolutely nothing of what other people thought. So I was like, *I'll just spend some time reading this stuff*. And come to find out, they're not these boogeyman monsters! And I think that process, which is really the process of actually learning, is important.

Your novel made many salient points on cancel culture. What's your take?

My take is that it's bad. On the one hand you hear people say it doesn't exist, but then those same people will say it's good. I care a lot about literature, art, free expression, and the ability of art to exist in this space that isn't clean or clear. I think ideology often, whether it's right-wing or left-wing, sort of wants to map the world in this really clean, binary, easily understandable way, as if graphed.

My favorite art honors the complexity and the beauty, but also the darkness, of human experience, as cringe as that sounds. And I think this sick attempt by ideologues to censor art creates a culture of uniformity, and it also assumes art can be boiled down into bullet points. They read with a red pen and say, "Well, does this check off these boxes?" I'm not interested in that at all.

But I would never use the term "cancel culture." There's the normy conservative pundit way of talking about it where they're just like, "Cancel culture's out of control." And I don't exactly feel that way either.

If you get stuck on that, you can just become an evil twin of your enemy, where you just complain, feel resentful, and so on. I've seen so many people be like, "As a white man, you can't get published." And it's like, I've seen rejection letters from major houses to friends of mine, who've won awards and who have been published in major presses that say things like, "We don't need another book by a white man right now." I've literally seen that. And I've heard people talk like that behind closed doors, too. So I know it's real. But instead of complaining or becoming resentful, I wrote the best novel I could and hoped it'd work out. And it is working out, so maybe I defeated cancel culture.

What advice would you give to writers who are just starting out?

Read a lot. Keep writing. A lot of people only write for a little while and then quit, but just keep doing it. Find a few writers that you really, really like and figure out why you like them. Look at their sentences, look at what they're doing, and imitate them.

When I was younger, I liked Bret Easton Ellis a lot, and I remember watching an interview with him where he talked about how he basically just copied Joan Didion. He was like, "You only need one or two writers that you really, really like in order to become a writer." And then when I read Joan Didion, especially *Play It as It Lays*, I was like, *oh my god, Bret Easton Ellis totally took this from Joan Didion!* I've had that experience so many times where I've read someone then read who they're influenced by and it makes so much sense. It's a great way to learn.

I was at an event with this writer, Sam Riviere. He's an academic who studies imitation. He was talking about the common advice in workshops of: find your voice. He said, "I don't even know what that would mean." I don't either.

Jordan Castro Recommends:

lifting weights

Ordet (film, 1955)

eating raw fish

Kneeling in Piss (band)

reading the Gospels


Name
Jordan Castro

Vocation
writer

Fact

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