



To help you grow your creative practice, our website is available as an email.

Subscribe

June 4, 2019 -

As told to Kristen Felicetti, 2967 words.

Tags: Writing, Mental health, First attempts, Process, Focus.

On writing as a way to break up routine

Writer Juliet Escoria explains why it took multiple attempts to write her first novel, the realities of being married to another writer, and the complications of writing about—as well as living with—mental illness.

I know you do a lot of interviews with other writers. Why do you interview other writers?

I do it partially because I like to support people's work. So mostly I just interview people whose writing I like, and who I want to see get coverage. And then also, I think it's interesting to put myself in their mindset and try to figure out what I would want to talk about if I were them.

So, two purposes. One, I'm trying to get in other people's heads, and two, just trying to support books that I believe deserve attention in a tangible way.

I know that *Juliet the Maniac* was a long time in the making. I think you started it before *Black Cloud*, even. I saw [this video online of you reading what maybe is an early version of the story at Franklin Park, that had a rotating cast of narrators](#). Can you walk me through the thought process, or the decision-making process, of moving away from writing the book that way, and instead to the structure and voice the book has now? Single voice-driven, episodic pieces with titles, that are often one page, with white space.

Well, the one from Franklin Park, that was part of my grad school thesis, so it was a partial draft of a novel. I knew that I wasn't good enough of a writer to write that book yet, so really I was just kind of writing it for the thesis itself, but I was hoping that I would be able to take some of it and turn it into a novel later. It had more emphasis on the boarding school itself, and it did have multiple points of view. But the character that is based on me was going to be the biggest character in that book.

Then, I guess it was like a year or two after that, I started another draft of the novel, and this was a much more traditional novel structure. It was first person, but it was a continuous story, and I planned on having the structure be much more rising-action, climax, that type of structure. That went horribly. That version of the novel was completely terrible. And it took me a while to realize that. But when I did, I decided that I would do short stories. I was kind of in a rush. I wanted to publish a book. And also, I

was starting to realize I wasn't capable of writing the novel that I wanted to write, and I needed to get better at writing in order to do that.

So then I did *Black Cloud*. Then to start this novel draft, I decided that I was going to not worry at all about what it was going to look like in the end, and I pictured it sort of very fragmented, and like a scrapbook of different things placed next to each other. And that just seemed to be how it worked best in terms of trying to get the picture of what it's like to be a mentally ill teen who's not particularly well suited for being mentally ill, as funny as that sounds. So yeah, the fragmented narratives seemed important to me, both in terms of what I want to read, and also getting across what that mindset is like.

You're married to another writer, Scott McClanahan. How do two writers living together negotiate the solitude that writing requires?

I think it helps that both of us are only children, and pretty content to spend a large chunk of the day by ourselves, and that doesn't offend the other person. When we first got married, we lived in a kind of cramped condo with another person, and that was more difficult. Like my writing space was the laundry room, which was really tiny, and also had mold on the walls. Scott wrote in the living room, or the bedroom, which meant he didn't really have a designated space.

Now, we live in a three-bedroom house, so Scott works out of the guest room, and I work out of the basement. I think that having our own space is really important, where we can go there and not be bothered by the other person at all. But I feel like we're built pretty similarly in terms of knowing that the other person wants their own space, and wants their own time, and has their own interior life, and might be in a bad mood because the writing is going poorly that day, and it has nothing to do with the other person. So just understanding the interior drama that can happen with that.

But, we do—and this is new for me in terms of not sucking at a relationship—definitely make sure to spend time with each other in the evenings. That's something that is really consistent, no matter how busy we are. It's usually watching movies and talking to each other. I like taking time out, because it would be super easy for me to just be totally by myself all day. So being deliberate in terms of spending time with the other person.

You write, but you also teach. Do you have a set schedule?

I don't. I have a very obsessive type of personality. So, when I get into a writing project, it's not hard for me to make time, just because that's all I want to do. But, I go through long periods where I'm not in a writing project, and that's always sort of frustrating for me because I'm happier when I'm writing. I've had to accept that even my writing routine feels sort of bipolar, where it's like I'm either being super productive—I'm a pretty fast writer when I am in that groove—or, I'm not really doing much at all.

I'm sort of a perfectionist by nature. So, sometimes I will have to tell myself, "I'm going to half-ass the teaching today. Like, that's fine. My students aren't going to notice." So just kind of forcing myself to not care as much about teaching as I would on a different day. But I think being an obsessive, compulsive type of personality is helpful because that's all I want to do, that's all I think about when I get into a project all the way.

When you talk about having an obsessive personality, what does that look like in relation to working on a project? Does that mean you're seeking out books to read? Does it mean you're taking long walks to just work something out?

It is on my mind a lot. Like the very end of the book where it talks about being haunted by the teenage self. It felt very much like I was being occupied by a teenager character who was constantly in the back of my mind, if not the forefront of my mind.

I do think walks are really important, as well as exercise in general. That's both for my mental well-being, and then also the writing. I think that meditative time jars things loose sometimes. It's also nice having another writer as your spouse because sometimes we'll go walk the dog around the soccer field here in Beckley, and talk out problems that we're having. And even if you don't necessarily find a solution, it's still nice to say them out loud, as opposed to just repeating it in your brain.

But the obsession really comes with just wanting to do it as much as possible, and getting really micro on the sentences and what I'm trying to do. Then I get weird, superstitious ideas about, like, "If I do these things, then it'll work." I feel like my addictive personality has been able to latch onto writing in a positive way, so I don't mind being an addict, even though it means I can't have a glass of wine to chill out, because I do feel like it helps serve my work.

You moved to Beckley, West Virginia, after living in places like Southern California and New York City. You've talked before about having more time to write there, versus having to work multiple jobs while stressing over making rent. But I wanted to ask, was there anything about moving there where you had an expectation, or an idea about something, and then you were proven wrong?

I was scared to move here. I wasn't sure what would happen to me. As anyone who reads the news will know, the drug problem here is real bad, and I was kind of scared of relapse, and I also wasn't sure if I would feel isolated or not. But it turns out that I am really happy living here. I feel like I'm happier living in a small town than I ever was in the city, much to my surprise. I wouldn't have expected that from myself.

Then also, Scott had acted as though West Virginia was an entirely different culture than what I was used to, and I sort of thought he was exaggerating things for comic effect. Then I moved here and realized it's true. The culture is different. One simple thing is how involved his parents are in my step-kids' lives. I kind of felt like we were being irresponsible parents and step-parents by having them have such a large role in the kids' lives, but then I realized that that's how families are viewed here, which is that grandparents are not the same as parents, but they take a huge role in their lives, as well as cousins and aunts and uncles.

When I first started teaching here, I had students who would ask for an extension on a paper or something because their grandparent died. And I thought it was like when my grandparents died, where I was sad, but I only saw them like three times a year. And here, they're super involved in their lives, and yes, the death of a grandparent can indeed be devastating to a person.

So, that is one example of how the culture is indeed different, and the concerns are different, too. Like, I told you that I had to plug my computer into the [internet] router if I wanted to do video [for this interview]. Any politician who's running here will put high-speed broadband internet in their platform, which seems so odd in 2019, that that's something that they have to promise people, because there are so many places around here where you can't get internet. So it just seems like, in that way, an entirely different world.

One thing I really liked about *Juliet the Maniac* is that it doesn't provide you with any easy answers, like the Juliet character doesn't magically get cured at the end. And there's not some big, traumatic reason for her mental illness. The problem really is that it kind of comes from nowhere at all, or it's simply her mind, which probably isn't so nice and tidy for people, but I find it more interesting, both as an idea, and narratively. So, saying all that, I was curious if creating work with ambiguity and asking more questions than answers, is an intention of yours, or something you strive for?

You know, there are plenty of good books out there about mental illness or institutionalization, or mentally ill teenagers, or whatever. But a lot of times I felt frustrated that they presented it as a neat arc of, you know, like what I was talking about earlier, the traditional novel structure. Or, like you do this and then all your problems go away. That was something that I just got frustrated by and felt like was dishonest. That kind of novel isn't what the experience is like. It's very rocky, and you don't always know why you are the way you are. Like, my life is like Juliet's in that way, where I really can't complain about a whole lot, except I have a severe mental illness that seems to be hereditary, as it does run in my family.

So, like Juliet, that was always kind of a mind-fuck to me—to be placed in places with other troubled people, or troubled teens, and they all had these very concrete reasons of things that had gone wrong, and for me it was just like, I don't have anything to complain about, except I'm fucked up in my brain. So, painting that seemed important to me, too. A lot of times it's not because of a reason. And I feel like people look for that, in terms of addiction, too.

Like, the show *Intervention*, they always present, "Oh, the parents got divorced, or the dad died, or they were sexually assaulted." As though there's a reason why someone is an addict, when there can be contributing factors, but some people are just addicts. And it's as simple as that.

I feel like I have gotten to a place where I am better, but it's very precarious. Like I could have an attack of mania or depression, and really not have any control over that, so the "better" is very temporary. It took me decades to get here, where I feel like I'm able to function more or less as a normal human being. Even with this book coming out, I've been kind of panicked. I won't sleep for a couple nights in a row, and I'll be like, "Oh god, am I getting manic again?" So it's kind of like constantly biting your nails.

Are there any precautions you have to take when you have a big event, like a book coming out, to help ensure you're in as calm a mental space as possible?

Well, I went to therapy for a while beforehand. When I was going through the editing process at Melville House, I started to realize that I still—even after writing the book—had things that I hadn't processed through, and I was behaving... well, I don't know if I was behaving, but I was feeling really irrationally about the book. Just overly close to it. I felt like I needed to go to therapy just to talk about my teenage years because I had never done that before. Like, I wanted to exclusively discuss that as an adult.

Then also, just knowing that this is indeed a stressful but ultimately happy time, and therefore, I need to be super gentle with myself and make sure that I take time out to relax, and to meditate—which I only ever do if I'm in crisis mode. The other day I was in crisis mode, and it's nice to have a spouse who will remind you, "You should go meditate. You're being really crazy right now."

But I mean, I do feel like a sick person, in that I require a lot more upkeep than the average person. It's kind of frustrating because you don't feel like you can always say that. Like, I would be uncomfortable telling my department chair, "Hey, I can't teach any more than five classes because I can't handle that level of stress because I'm bipolar." That would make me feel really uncomfortable, which sort of makes me feel like a hypocrite because I want to remove the stigma of mental illness, but I don't feel like we're there in society yet where you can tell your boss about that. But constant maintenance is required, which is frustrating. And I learned it the hard way.

I sent this question in advance, because I know it's really hard to answer on the spot. What is a question about writing that you always wanted to be asked, but no one has asked you yet?

I'm glad you asked me that in advance, because otherwise I would have probably drawn a complete blank. But I feel like no one has ever asked: Why do you write? I guess, maybe that would be rude sounding. But why do you write at all? Writing is hard. And in terms of the amount of energy and stress you put in, it doesn't always feel worth it in a logical way.

I started writing because I'd get these feelings as a moody teenager, where it was like I needed to put my emotions somewhere. Like an outpouring of emotions. So sometimes I would do harmful things like cutting, or drugs, or promiscuous sex, or whatever. And then other times I would write poems. So it really was an outlet for my feelings.

Then, as I got older, I had to go to school in order to understand how important editing was, which not everyone does, but I needed to go to school in order to do that. And I started to realize just how fun it was to turn something that was okay into something that I was proud of through a real thorough editing process.

Now, I feel like one of my issues, and why I used drugs, was just kind of feeling like every day was the same, and life was pointless and endless. You clean your house, and then a few days later it's dirty again—that type of everyday, boring despair. Writing sort of breaks things up and gives a concrete goal that you're looking to in the future. And then it also makes my brain feel more organized. I feel like if I'm writing, I think more clearly.

Juliet Escoria Recommends

-Serfs Up! by Fat White Family

-Mysterious WV YouTube channel

-Witch Baby Soap Spell Box

-Ordet (directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer)

-Buying *Mickey* by Chelsea Martin directly from the author

Name

Juliet Escoria

Vocation

Writer

Fact



Photo credit: Saja Montague

Related to Writer Juliet Escoria on writing as a way to break up routine:

■ [Carmen Maria Machado on writing about whatever you want](#)

■ [Julien Baker on learning to articulate joy](#)

■ [Scott McClanahan on making your own place as a writer](#)

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



↑