On knowing where to start

Writer Kristen Arnett on utilizing humor, understanding your characters, and propelling yourself forward.

August 3, 2021 -

As told to Shy Watson, 2522 words.

Tags: Writing, Mental health, Time management, Focus.

I'm thinking about *7-Elesbian*, your collection of tweets, and about how funny your novels are. I was wondering what function humor serves in your writing and/or life.

I think as I was getting older and started writing, humor naturally kind of fit into things I was doing, because the way I was able to figure out my own brain was quite often through jokes. Also coming out, and being self deprecating about my queerness in myself, it's like it's way easier to make a joke about something than it is to deal with an actual feeling.

It's something I think many of us do, too, it's just a way to kind of compartmentalize, and it's just instead of having to deal with it, I can make a joke about it. And in my work, I think it's done a lot of the same kind of stuff. Because I think about jokes as, like, how many different ways can I tell the same kind of joke and still derive some kind of pleasure from it. So on Twitter or something, I did raviolis for a while, and I did pet names that were kind of puns.

I loved those.

I was like, how many different ways can I tell this? Because it feels workshoppy almost for me. How many ways can I say something and finally figure out, *this way is the way*, or *this is the thing that really works*? Kind of hone a story down. The ways in which I think about humor are very similar to the ways I think about writing fiction in general.

I think sometimes it's also a way in for my brain. Thinking about how a joke could work is a way for me to actually get into narrative and character development, and the actual thing that's lying underneath that surface level joke. Maybe it's because I've actually been personally trained to, I can't deal with an emotion so I had to make a joke about it. Now I have to write fiction that way.

Very relatable. Speaking of your characters, sometimes, their qualities were so complex they almost seemed to contradict each other. Like how Monika's thought of as "the bitch," but she's also the sentimental mom who will put Samson's work up on the fridge. I think that this kind of characterization is a lot more real to life. I was wondering how you managed to find such range within your characters. How do you build them?

I think a lot of it is, as I'm writing, I feel like I'm discovering who those people are. It's like getting to know anybody, you get stuck upfront when you first meet people. Like here's how they're presenting themselves to you, or here's how I present myself to people I haven't met before. But then through the course of actually getting to know a person, there's these layers that are underneath, that you discover about people. That's how I feel quite often, especially in novel work. It's like peeling back the layers on an onion. Just like, oftentimes not beautiful.

Makes you cry.

Right? You cry, it can smell, there's just a lot going on. But I also think of myself as a person—I feel I contradict myself daily in what I think about things. Every time I feel like I've figured out something about myself, then I will definitely change my mind or unlearn it, or unknow it, because I have to learn something new. That, to me, feels very human. People are not static; we're all constantly changing and growing, maybe in a good direction and maybe not in a great direction. Then we shift again.

When you've been in relationships with people, and it doesn't have to be romantic, your brain has made decisions on who that person is, based on previous behavior or interactions. In *With Teeth*, Sammie has a lot of thoughts about herself as a person, she thinks she's certain ways, then you see that she contradicts those things but then justifies those things.

I think truth, and especially in telling the timeline of events, is very subjective. Almost everybody has main character syndrome. In reality, even if you and someone else are both telling the same kind of story, it touches sometimes, but then quite often it veers.

True. I found the time jump in *With Teeth* really intriguing. I was wondering if you wrote the last bit first, then did the background? Or what your writing process was like, and how you draft a novel.

Well I never outline anything, which is maybe a good thing, or maybe terrible. Just as a person, I get bored with things and I'll be like, "Okay I'm done with that now." It's probably my Sagittarius brain, it's just like, "No." I want to be surprised, because I feel if I'm not surprised with what's going to happen, then my reader will be really bored. This book actually started off about Sammie, whose adult son, Samson, moves home because he's had some kind of thing happen in his life. They're living together in a house that has two adults. I was like, "What is this relationship like and how are they unpacking the stuff that's informed their relationship with each other?"

But, like every other page I was going back into a memory. I was like, you know when you're writing, you're asking a reader to trust you and go in with you, and like, "Here's a story I'm trying to tell you. Sit with me and experience it with me." And on top of that, to have every other page go into a memory, it's asking a reader to do too much. It usually means it's not starting where it's supposed to start. I was going into memory, so often. Into childhood, into when he was a teenager. I just scrapped it. It was like 40,000 words and I just chucked it.

I let myself think about it for a couple days. Then I was like, "What I need is to open on something that is going to be very active, and it's going to tell me a lot about not just Samson, but about Sammie, and who she is as a mom." So I was like, "Okay, I'm going to open on this attempt at child abduction. I'm going to open that way, and it'll be pretty fast pace, and happen within the span of a few minutes, and is going to tell me who she is and how her relationship with her son functions in the grand scheme of the world." As I was writing that, he thwarts this abduction, which is amazing because it's like, "Oh God, something awful could've happened." Something very, very bad could've happened.

Her reaction in that moment isn't, *Oh, thank God.* It's, *Why did you try and get away from me? Why were you trying to leave me? What's wrong with you? What's wrong with me? What's happening here?* So I wrote from that opening. and then into the section of him being a fourth grader. And then reached a point where I needed to jump forward in time. Because fI wanted Samson to have more perspective. Because teenagers aren't little kids. They're starting to develop into who they are. Like, "Here's who I'm going to be as an adult. I have my own mind, and I'm developing who I am as a person outside of my family. Maybe that's not what you want me to be, but I'm vocal about it, and I'm becoming who I am."

Once I scratched that first idea, I wrote the whole thing pretty quick. Like the draft of it happened, I was writing 2,000, 3,000 words a day minimum, and I was like, okay, I'm going to get this draft out.

It felt like every time I was there writing with Sammie, it was very uncomfortable but also I felt like I had to really stay and see it, and be present there. Because I was like, when I'm jumping out, I'm not letting myself

sit with the discomfort. It happened very quickly, after I had finally figured out how I needed to start it. Maybe that's what takes work a lot of the time, is really actually figuring out where a story starts. That can help propel it into what it's supposed to be. What I was writing previously was not where I needed to start it, so it didn't have any kind of propulsion.

I totally understand what you're saying. Well, to my knowledge, you don't have any children, and to my knowledge, you're not a taxidermist. So I was wondering what role research plays in your writing practice? Or if you just use imagination and feel it?

Being a librarian has been a blessing and a curse when it comes to working on fiction. Because I love to do research. Then I'll do research instead of actually working. Like when I was doing *Mostly Dead Things*, I spent a lot of time upfront thinking about taxidermy. I had documents, and because I was working in a library, I inter-library loaned a million taxidermy guides, from specific times, for different kinds of things. I bought a bunch of books. I spent a lot of time in web forums.

Eventually, I was like, "Okay, I actually need to write now." Because I realized I was using research to put off writing, because the writing was scarier.

There was not the same kind of hardcore, very specific kind of research that went into *With Teeth*. I did much more research about how I think about unreliable narrators. Then the other thing was more thoughtful research about how queerness functions in Central Florida specifically and what that looks like. A lot of that was just being thoughtful and also talking with some other people about perspective, of how queerness functions in spaces that are more conservative. Florida's a red state. So it was like, "What does queerness look like? What are queer spaces? Define queer spaces*.*" We have gay IHOP in Orlando. It's not actually like a gay establishment, but a couple management people came on that were queer, and then they started hiring queer staff, and it began to feel like a very queer friendly space. So more queers were going there. So it's a queer space in Orlando, but it's not like an actual queer-sanctioned space. It could change at any time, right? Like if management changed. Or at any kind of moment, it's not defined. But it's like, queer spaces that are like, *We'll make this queer*. Like DIY gay, I guess.

Precarious!

I was thinking a lot about how that runs through the book, and also the idea about thinking a lot about queer community, or lack, especially if you're a queer person who had found family, or created a community on your own, and what would that look like if it's suddenly taken away from youbecause your queerness doesn't fit into the queer spaces that are available, and how that would be detrimental to a person's mental health. Where it's like, I've been estranged from my family, I've worked really hard to build up who I am and understand who I am through these friends and family I've made and created around myself. And because I don't fit into these queer spaces, I feel like I'm losing that, too, and it makes me feel like I'm losing my identity. It was a lot of more introspective stuff. As a queer person who's from Orlando, and it's asking a lot of me, personally. Whereas working through the scope of *Mostly Dead Things* allowed me to use the taxidermy as a framework, *With Teeth* made me have to think about my own queer experience coming from Orlando.

Anyway, I didn't have the reprieve of doing a ton of research with this kind of book. I'll tell you this, the next book I'm working on, I'm almost just like, "What can I write where I definitely get to do some kind of research, so I don't have to stay with a person and really unpack." I felt like I was Sammie's therapist.

I know you have a live-in partner who's also a creative. What does that look like for your creative process? Do you co-write and edit with her, or are you both in your own heads doing your own work separately?

Yeah. I mean, I'll be completely honest with you, I never thought I would ever date another writer. I really did not. You always hear people be like, "Oh my God, don't date another writer." Or something like that. I don't know. I usually feel excited if people around me are doing well with their writing, even if mine's not. I don't usually have a feeling of jealousy of other people's success, knock on wood. I'm saying that now, watch it become something horrible that starts happening. I feel good about stuff in that way, I have a lot of writer friends, I'm

always excited when their work is going well. But I didn’t know what that would look like to be with another writer. I’m like, “Is that weird? Is that going to be strange?”

Quite often, we’ll discuss parts of our work with each other. I’ll share things with her, and she’ll share things with me, we’ll kind of talk around problems that we’re maybe having. I definitely don’t shove a whole manuscript at her and be like, “Read this, can I have some edits?” Usually I’m like, “I was thinking about this.” It’s kind of just like a sounding board for me. She has such a good perspective, too, because she’s been doing different kinds of writing for so long. She’s a TV critic, and she’s done food criticism, and different kinds of writing about queer perspectives for a long time. It’s been really helpful, exciting.

Especially, I’ll say this, the past year and a half when everybody’s been trapped in their home, it’s been nice to talk about different books we’re reading, and what works in books, and what doesn’t. Or listen to a reading and then unpack it afterwards. Like, “What did you think about this?” Or “Here’s my takeaway.” I love being able to talk about books and work. And the ways in which I feel like my work is fucking up, and then feel like I can be vulnerable about that in a way. I’ve been able to celebrate good stuff that happens with work, then also be like, “This sucks, I feel like my brain’s broken. My writing’s shitty right now, and I just want to talk about the fact that I kind of hate it,” which is also nice.

Kristen Arnett Recommends:

7-Eleven

Steel Reserve

T Kira Madden’s *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls*

Sad13’s *Haunted Painting*

Cheez-It Snack Mix

Name
Kristen Arnett

Vocation
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