

On removing mental barriers



Author Lexi Kent-Monning discusses combining nonfiction with fiction, overcoming codependency in her creative practice and finding writing community outside of traditional institutions.

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As told to Hurley Winkler, 3009 words.

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

At the time of this interview, your first book is just about to come out. It's a novel, more specifically a work of autofiction, which is a form that has a lot of appeal to writers and readers right now. What are some of the benefits and disadvantages of writing autofiction?

I started the book as a memoir, which I think allowed me to be really clear with how comfortable I felt sharing certain truths. And so I felt, when I was writing it as a memoir, it had to be really true to my experiences and really true to other people who were characters in it. I know that my account will never be their version of events, but I felt a major responsibility to be as accurate as I could.

I was surprised by how different I felt about the book when I decided to turn it into a novel. I felt really liberated at that point to turn people into characters, to turn certain traits up, to exaggerate certain parts of the story, to move timelines around. I'm sure people do that with memoir. I just didn't feel okay doing that because I'm such a rule follower. I'm such a rule follower that I was like, "Oh, I'm just reporting it. It has to be a newspaper, like journalism." Then once I decided to turn it into a novel and have it be more autofictional, it really helped me see it as more of a story arc, and that really helped make it more of a self-contained thing.

I had a really hard time ending this book because there isn't a clear ending when you're just living it. So I think turning it into autofiction and making it a novel helped me see ways that I could end it or ways that I could turn it more into a story with different arcs that would naturally come to an end.

Do you feel like the book lost anything by leaning into fiction? Is there anything you felt like you had to sacrifice from the angle of memoir?

No. As a matter of fact, it helped me realize what was really not necessary. I had a lot of things in it that were more logistical, that were like, "Okay, well this happened, and then this happened..." I was just trying to be true to real life. Once I saw it as a novel, and I think also just with time and space—it's now been five or six years since all these events happened in my real life—I think I started to become clear about, or saw more clearly that, certain things that really mattered to me at the time actually didn't even need to be in there. It was just a logistic thing that nobody would give a shit about, so it was fine to remove it.

Do you think you'll keep working in autofiction, or do you find yourself more drawn to pure fiction or nonfiction moving forward in your writing life?

It's funny. I think it has made me more interested in doing either pure nonfiction, like memoir, or pure fiction. I feel like being a little ambiguous in the middle with autofiction has been really fulfilling and fun, but it

makes me more curious to see what the extremes of either one of those things could be. So I'm working on something that's pure memoir now and starting to think about something that's more straight fiction for my next project. While it was really fun to live in the ambiguity for a while, I'm kind of sick of gray areas of autofiction and what's real, what's not, what happened, what didn't. Instead, I think it'll be fun to take a turn doing the extreme of both of those things.

How has your approach to writing the second book been different or similar to the first?

It's been very different. When I wrote the first book, I was actually not intending to write a book. I didn't really know what it was. I started with a lot of fragments. It was kind of mostly journaling during this big transition in my life. And then I started seeing it a little more creatively after I read *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson, which really opened my eyes to the world of creative nonfiction and more artful writing about nonfiction. I had previously been biased against nonfiction books because I just thought of them as mass market, boring kinds of writing. Some big thing about marketing or whatever the subject was. I was like, "Nonfiction sucks." But once I read more creative nonfiction—*The Chronology of Water* by Lydia Yuknavitch is another one that really inspired me, as well as *Pond* by Claire-Louise Bennett—once I started to read these things that were more creative, more meandering, it made me realize that I could turn something that was very fragmentary into something that was a self-contained unit.

I used those early pages to apply to a writing workshop called *Mors Tua Vita Mea* in Italy. And so really, I wasn't intending to write a book, but I used the fragments I was working on to create a cohesive piece that was 20 pages for an application to a writing workshop. And once I was at that workshop, I got encouragement to continue it as a book. So it kind of just accidentally happened, which was, on the one hand, exciting, and I think helped me remove any mental barriers I might have had about how daunting it is to be like, "I'm writing a book now," when I first started.

But it made editing an incredible chore, because I was not at all organized. I had no idea about the story arc, none of that. That all came later with massive, massive edits. I mean, I had hundreds of drafts. I worked on edits for years, so I would not want to do it that way ever again. And with the first draft of my second book that I'm working on now, I very intentionally went in knowing I wanted to write a book, doing a lot of outlining before I even sat down to write any of it. And cheated a little bit because a lot of the basis of that second book is stuff that I cut from the first one. So it was stuff that I cut but still knew I wanted to use somewhere. And then that kind of gave me an idea for the second book. Very different experiences.

Nowadays, how in-depth do you get while outlining?

Not super in-depth. I think I'm definitely somebody who likes to have a prompt or an idea of what a chapter will be about, but I have seen other writers' outlines and it's like they're almost writing the entire chapter just through outline. And that's just not really my instinct. I like better to just have an idea floating around, but then sit down and see what happens on the page when I'm just in the moment writing.

I find your writing so detailed and vivid. Thinking about the "auto" part of "autofiction" for this book that's coming out, what are some memory mining exercises that you did in order to pull those shiny details from the depths and put them onto the page?

I'm very inspired by sensory writing. I think my first favorite writer was Francesca Lia Block, who's a YA writer. I just randomly grabbed one of her books when I was a teenager at Bookshop Santa Cruz, and that changed my life. I mean, that's what made me first want to become a writer. She, in particular, is so good about writing about food and clothing and just giving such a visual with poetic sensory writing. I think from the very start of when I ever tried to write, that was really an instinct for me. I was so attracted to that kind of writing that I wanted to be somehow involved in it. That was something I really trained myself to do in the beginning. I also just find it is so much easier to access the memory if you have an entry point, like a scent or a taste or something like that.

I often take down notes when something is happening: of what I was wearing, what I was eating, a song, some

sensory trigger that will help me re-enter it later when I'm trying to write about it. It's almost like when you're trying to remember a dream and something will finally click that helps you remember, and you just feel like you're living in it. You're in the alternate universe of the dream when you finally remember it. That's what it's like for me when I use these sensory triggers and when I keep these notes of things. It's like I'm trying to reenter the dream of what the memory was.

A lot of writers will take notes in the way you're describing, but they'll often never return to them. It sounds like you have a note-taking and a note-returning practice, which is a crucial part of it. Can you describe that part of the practice?

Absolutely. I take written notes in my phone and in a notebook. It just depends on what I have with me. I also do a lot of voice memos to myself on my phone. They sound psychotic, and it's humiliating to listen back to them, oftentimes because I'm in a public place when I record them, trying to whisper them, but I often can just talk into my phone more quickly than I can type. I made my best friend promise me that, if I die before her, she will use my dead thumb to open my phone and delete all my voice memos because they sound so insane. They make perfect sense to me, but if anybody was to hear them, they'd be like, "Oh, no. She's not okay."

I don't write every day. I like to write when I have something to write about. I don't like sitting in front of a blank page trying to think of ideas. I like to almost create a scarcity of time for myself to write, because I like to collect a bunch of notes and voice memos and then be dying to sit down to write them. Then I'll let myself sit down to write and there's so much that comes out. I find that to be much more encouraging than sitting in front of a blank page. I don't know how anybody does that. Props to anybody who can. I think living in the thoughts of those notes helps me start to formulate ideas or notice patterns or things like that, that once I'm finally writing, that stuff all comes to the forefront much more easily since I've been ruminating on it.

In terms of subject matter, you write really, really close to the bone. For instance, your new book is based on the aftermath of your divorce. When you're writing about hard things that have happened to you, what measures do you take in order to take care of yourself from a mental health perspective?

I time my writing around when I can have a good amount of free time afterwards to kind of just do whatever will help me in the moment. I'll schedule time to write when I have a day off, and I will only write for an hour or two at a time. After that, I can do whatever it is that feels okay. I also time my writing sessions around my therapy sessions so that, whatever comes up for me, I can immediately go to therapy and talk through it. That's definitely something that, as I got towards the end of writing the book, I really needed to rely on. I had to be really strategic about when I was writing and make sure that I was taking care of myself.

I would say that your book is in large part about codependency. I think about the role of codependency in art-making a lot in terms of considering the reader or the viewer or the listener more often than we consider ourselves in our creating practices. Is that something you think about, too? If so, what have you done that's helped you center yourself in your own writing practice?

That's something I'm still trying to figure out. I'm not good at it. I completely agree with your premise, and that's something that I really love about the book *Drifts* by Kate Zambreno: it hits so well on codependency in a writer's life. I wrote a lot when I was a teenager, a little bit in my early twenties, and then I didn't write for over a decade. And it was only once I was out of my marriage that I started writing again. And that sucked. It's because I didn't ever take time for myself to do the things that interested me. And that wasn't just because of my relationship. It was also because of the jobs I had and where I was in life in general. I have not lived with anybody since then, and that is a huge part of why I think I have the freedom and time to write as much as I want to.

If I stay at my boyfriend's place or something, writing is the first thing that goes away. So I am still trying to figure that out. I'm still very codependent despite all the therapy, despite writing this book that's very much about codependency. I just have a really hard time. I'm a very obsessive person, so I find it really hard to dedicate myself to anything else except for the person that's in front of me or whatever it is that I'm super into. The opposite can be true sometimes, too, though. When I was editing this book, I didn't talk to or see

anybody else for a month. I was just like, "I'm going into a hole and I'm not here. Take me off your list. I'm out for the month."

You don't have an MFA and you didn't go to college. What's been helpful for you in terms of finding a writing education and community outside of those gigantic, expensive institutions?

The first step for me was just finding writers I really liked. I read Chelsea Hodson's first book, *Pity the Animal*, and just felt so connected to it. I started following her on Twitter, and shortly after I started following her, she tweeted about a workshop in Italy and that she and Giancarlo DiTrapano of Tyrant Books were accepting applications. That kind of thing was something I'd never even considered. I didn't really even know that workshops existed. I don't come from any kind of writing community or world at all. So I was like, "Oh, what's that?" I had no idea what workshopping was at all. So when I got accepted, and she sent us all our manuscripts and we had to take notes and stuff, I was like, "I don't know how to do this." To me, I was like, "Oh, this is like English class, and I'm reading someone else's paper." But the last time I did that was in high school, over a decade before. I think part of the reason I was attracted to Mors Tua Vita Mea was because it felt accessible to me. Other workshops and residencies seem much more academically rigorous than what I personally prefer writing to be like. I like feelings better than structure.

With indie lit, some writers have all this academic achievement, some don't. Some have a mix. This is a community where somebody can find their spot no matter what their background is. And everybody has just been so welcoming. I mean, I can cold-DM a writer that I like, and they're always so warm and friendly and welcoming, and I've been constantly amazed by that.

And right now, I'm putting readings together and just cold emailing writers I like in the towns I'm going to. Everyone has been so kind and so excited. So I don't know what other people's experiences have been like, but for me, I've encountered nothing but warmth.

Lexi Kent-Morning recommends:

Good Women by **Halle Hill**. This book recently came out on Hub City Press. Halle Hill is unbelievable. She writes about Southern women in a way that makes me feel... I mean, I don't know that many Southern women, but now I feel like I do because of her book. She writes very much in the tradition of Carson McCullers.

Transcendental meditation. I know this recommendation is a little culty. I started doing TM in 2016, and it is expensive, but they do offer scholarships. For me, it has been unbelievably helpful with my creativity. I think it's one of my top creativity tools. It helps me remember dreams more. It helps me just have a different kind of patience with myself when it comes to writing and creativity.

The Sun magazine. I love *The Sun*. Growing up, my parents were subscribers to it, and now I am. I love the variety of writing they have in there, and the people they feature are just always unexpected, so I love that.

Chelsea Hodson's Morning Writing Club. It's so helpful to have a community and a responsibility to show up. That's been immensely helpful for me. If you're looking for writing community without a college degree or an MFA, boom, there you go.

Black Lipstick. It's a newsletter run by the writer Mila Jaroniec about beauty and makeup, however that looks to the writer. So that can mean all different kinds of things, whether it's the masks that we wear or whether it's internal beauty.

Name

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Vocation

Author

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