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On telling stories from the edges

Writer Lidia Yuknavitch on having a fragmentary writing style, fiction as allegory, the value of unconventional storytelling modes, and how to engage your body and mind as a way to jumpstart your creative practice.

You've mostly published longer work, both with novels and a memoir. How did the experience of writing short stories, often very short stories, compare?

Well, I don't know how many people have any awareness of this or not—probably no one because I'm just me alone at my house—but for my entire writing life, I write in literary fragments no matter what. Sometimes those fragments won't stop and they turn into novels or memoirs. And other times the fragments kind of cluster and have a smaller gestalt. And those tend to become essays or hybrids or stories. In my world, I'm not doing very much that is different since I work in fragments, no matter what I'm doing. But then when I get closer to putting a book into the world or reaching an audience, then some shape choices have to be made. With a novel project you sort of have to have some clue that this is going to be a big story, but I still work at the micro level. I still make little fragments until they build a sort of physics or energy. And so the choice to curate smaller works isn't that different for me than making experimental novels.

I found that there was an allegorical or fable-like quality to some of the short stories, especially "A Woman Refusing" and "A Woman Apologizing." Would you say that's accurate to call them allegorical?

It makes me really happy you notice that. The allegorical impulse in fiction writing is among my favorite things on the planet. And so absolutely I was trying to stir that pot.

Were you inspired by other allegorical stories?

Well, I think my early influences were people like Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing and Octavia Butler and even Flannery O'Connor, where there was the story, but then there was this second symbolic meaning that was thrilling and disturbing and changed who you were after you read it. I imagine those early influences got all up in me, and it was often in terms of sci-fi or speculative fiction, where you can really do that dance, because there's usually more than one world in the reader's mind. In some ways I think all fiction writing is allegorical to a greater or lesser extent. But for sure in this book, I was absolutely turning the volume way up on the dual impact stories can have on us.

I think it's interesting that you mentioned Doris Lessing among the other writers, because she's so realistic. What are some favorite books of hers that you count as allegorical stories?

Well, *The Golden Notebook* changed my DNA forever. And then she wrote this sci-fi series called *The Cannabis in Argo*. It's five mammoth books that went way beyond regular science fiction and incorporated her hyper realism with science fiction. I want to be her when I grow up, for sure. I'm trying to get my braids on top of my head like hers, because I think I'm starting to get wrinkly now, and I looked at a picture of her and I'm like, "Oh, it's coming. I'm almost there."

In *The Second Language* there's a quote that stood out to me. You write, "Once there were heroes and saviors... or maybe there had never been any heroes and saviors and those stories were meant to trick girls into forgetting how to be animals." Do you believe conventional story structures are conservative or restricting?

I don't know if they're conservative, but I definitely mouth off a lot about them being restricting to populations of people who don't get to occupy the hero position very easily. And so often, I'm trying to amplify that about women and girls. But it's also restrictive positioning for boys and men and non-gender binary people and queer people. The hero journey has a trajectory that requires a silencing or an ignoring or shutting down of so many parts of being human that are messy and contradictory and glorious. And the fact that, particularly in the structure of capitalism, we've let that story dominate, means all the other stories have little small sounds.

It's just absurd because our addiction to that mono story of the hero's journey—which is so often occupied by a male hero, a white male hero—has taken us to where we are now, where we're standing around waiting for a hero to show up. There are real world consequences to letting one story dominate and eat up all other stories. I feel really grateful and excited to be alive during this time, even though it's a very shitty time, it's also a very exciting time, because if you look at the newly emerged voices and books that have gotten the airspace in the last 10 to 12 years, they're amazing. Tommy Orange and Roxane Gay and Garth Greenwell. These are the voices I've waited my whole life to hear, to have them come multiply the storylines and blow open the restrictiveness you asked about a second ago, the kinds of stories we've inherited for so, so long.

Do you feel that you had to unlearn conventional modes of storytelling?

I think I'm on record as having purchased a very expensive PhD. I came up through this tradition. The most traditional cannons were part of my education and I loved them. I was thrilled inside there. I loved reading books. I'd read *any* book and I was excited. But to answer your question, I think my impulse away from those traditions is an awareness that I couldn't tell the kind of stories that corresponded to my actual body if I used the forms I inherited. But I also think I was born this way, because people who were born up and through abuse or trauma start out with a fracture. I saw self-expression and storytelling as a real place where I could give those fractures some beauty and shape.

In the acknowledgements of your book you write that it's for anyone "in the in-between." What does that mean to you?

Well, I wrote that misfit book about the people who rarely do achieve that magical self-love, or health, or un-fraught relationships, or successful careers, but their identities remain between binaries or between realities or between difficulties. The in-between kind of personal identity is real and it ought not to be treated as less than or not as important. It's a real identity, a real place, and we have things to offer the world from the edges, from the margins, from the seemingly in-between spaces, that could help everybody. I'm using a pretty big "we" here, it's just that I partially identify with this kind of identity in life we're talking about.

We have useful skill sets that helped change the story. And so I just keep insisting on characters who aren't usually the ones amplified, so that we can look at a multiplicity of being and learn to see each other a little differently. But nothing ambitious about that.

I wanted to ask about the writing workshop that you run.

Yeah. We have a dedicated space out here in Portland, Oregon. There are the workshops that I run, but we also now have a whole bunch of visiting writers and artists, and we're just trying to offer access to a non-academic, non-hierarchical space where people can explore creative practice and expression. So you might have someone who's never written a word in their life, or dared to make a page of something, sitting next to a person with three published books and it wouldn't matter. Because we're in there working collaboratively, inside the artistic practice, to push at the edges of things no matter who the person is and what their pedigree is.

What are some ways that you try within that workshop to circumvent hierarchy and convention?

Well, we've abandoned most of the traditional workshop models altogether. We have a series of methodologies that are about opening up meanings and multiplying meanings, rather than creating a well-combed, perfect product for the market. We write collaboratively, so it's less and less about the individual who wins the room with the best story or whatever. We're constantly unbuilding the things we're creating and blowing them up, and putting them in pieces, and rearranging them to see what else is in there. They're generative practice models that move very far away from trying to create something you can sell. It's about using art more as a life practice.

What do you do when you're creatively stuck?

I do something with my body. For me that means getting some water, or walking works really well for me too, because it changes your perspective instantly. You could walk the same path for 10 years every single day and it would be a different path every day, so walking is a big deal to me. But mostly swimming, because what I found is that when I'm stuck—I don't actually believe in writer's block, but I know what you mean by stuck—when I'm stuck, it isn't my mind that's going to get me unstuck. It's that I've been closed in or hemmed in by my own thinking. And so moving my body is a way to jostle myself. Jostle the thinker brain and remind yourself that you are always also a body, and your body has a point of view and it can help declutter the analytical mind.

But there are times where I can't do something with my body, and I work a lot with people who can't do as many things with their actual bodies. So I also believe in deep meditation practices as a way of conjuring the same thing, but in your mind's eye instead. And so that's opening up to trance, that's opening up to meditation, that's opening up to imagination and the subconscious and dreams. Those realms and those states of being are as important as somebody who can go do something with their actual body. I see these activities as how to remind yourself that your body is carrying every experience and story that's ever happened to you in your life, so only using your thinker brain to figure things out is like only using a toe nail.

What are some of your favorite other ways to communicate besides words?

I draw and paint. I don't show very many people. It lives at my house. I'm very, very fond of abstract expressionism as a movement, so even in my own house, I like to draw and paint abstract things as a means of challenging the edges of ideas. And if I'm writing about, let's say, driving around in a car, and I sort of run out of cool ideas, if I take riding around in a car as an abstract idea and then I use some oil pastels to make an image of that abstract idea, then I can go back to writing about a car with new juice. Completely new color, shape, form, emotion. I also meditate on paintings a lot while I'm writing, while I'm just thinking about ideas for writing. Painting is probably a bigger influence on me than books.

How did you manage to create a path outside the established system?

Well, I barreled through it because of all that time I spent in academia. I wasn't outside it, although I did flunk out twice. I kind of got spit out as an undergraduate. It wasn't quite working. I have to be honest about how a PhD program is about as traditional as it gets. You know what I mean? It's very snooty and white and all of the expected things. But I think what keeps me devoted to the shimmering edges of those things, is that those are the people I have loved and who have loved me. I'm just one teeny person, but it's part of a bigger motion of telling stories, not from the center, but from the edges, to remind people that the edges are what gives something a shape. And the edges hold the center and give the center any kind of chance. And it's not better or worse than what anybody else is doing. It's just, it's been my life.

What is something you wish someone told you when you began to make art?

That my vision on the inside could sustain the practice, no matter what anybody on the outside thinks. Because some of the most important lessons I've learned about making my own art happened when I was in situations where I got no attention and no feedback and no positive reinforcement. And the world tries to convince you that if you don't get acknowledged or you don't get purchased or clicked "like" on Facebook, then you're nothing. And the absolute opposite is true. The meaningfulness comes from the inside out and the bridge you could make to somebody else who might need it, not from fame or acknowledgement or a gold star somebody sticks on your belly.

Lidia Yuknavitch Recommends:

Tommy Orange - *There There*

Carmen Maria Machado - *Her Body and Other Parties*

Ocean Vuong - *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Garth Greenwell - *Cleanness*

Bernadine Evaristo - *Girl, Woman, Other*

Jacqueline Woodson - *Red At the Bone*

Jeff VanderMeer - *Dead Astronauts*

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