

On finding joy within the world itself



Writer Michael J. Seidlinger discusses balancing expectations with reality, the pros and cons of social media, and why the process of creating something is more important than what comes once you're done with it.

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As told to Elle Nash, 2695 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Mental health](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Beginnings](#).

Tell me a little bit about the pressures of being a writer. Like, you continuously have writing come out, there's a feeling of needing to stay relevant, and then also of marketing oneself on social media. And, really, our attention span is often limited to reading headlines and listicles and tweets. So, what is that experience for you, as a writer, like?

I mean, it changes over time, but I often have this fantasy of, "What if I were born earlier?," born in the era wherein I would end up being right in that same category of authors in the postmodern sense that were coming out in the '90s, where it seemed like presses and the general audience were more receptive to experimentation with narratives. There is a definite line at some point, that was drawn in the proverbial sands, where certain types of work weren't as accessible to a mainstream audience. But there was some element of publishing, back in the '90s, before things started being bought up by news media corporations, that involved this honorable sense of publishing stuff that's new and innovative.

I constantly think the role of the writer is compartmentalized, based on what we're trying to do with something that is inherently becoming less and less accessible or less of part of our cultural ecosystem, in terms of popular culture, where we're all watching Netflix, playing video games, but we see reading in general become more of a niche thing. Maybe it was always a niche thing, but I think as a writer, and choosing to become a writer, and becoming sort of addicted to craft, you start to realize just how so much of it is a personal thing, and everything else is just extra.

That's something we often don't realize, as we just kind of run into things and go onto social media and start tweeting and trying to be part of a community. You become influenced by everyone else's goals. Like, you see a writer friend getting some huge big book deal. And then you're like, "Oh, but I didn't get that, but we've been writing at about the same level, so to speak." You can get really lost in the weeds.

***Runaways* is a little bit about the struggle to write and also deal with social media at the same time. How are you able to write and overcome the struggle?**

I don't. That's the thing. The quick version of how *Runaways* started was, I mean, if anyone knows me at all, they know that my social media is, essentially in recent years, has been almost exclusively writing despair tweets. That's a conscious choice. I used to be far more visible online.

Then I had a series of bad experiences. I was trying to do this road trip back in 2017. I used social media to direct me across the country. And it was very humbling and cool to meet so many people. They all allowed me to crash in their guest bedrooms or on their couch. But, there was also an underlying feeling that this was going to be a book. My agent at the time, who was the last agent I had, was really hyped about selling it. He couldn't sell it, and lied to me about sending it to certain people, when he didn't. I think he sent it one round and realized it wasn't going to work, and then he ghosted me. After that, I kind of hit this wall, where I no longer could be myself on social media.

How so, you felt like you couldn't be yourself?

We all sort of do that thing where we self-edit before we type out something. It would almost be like this voice in the back of my head saying, "No one gives a shit about whatever it is you're about to write, whatever you're about to tweet."

So, I reinvented myself by virtue of doing despair tweets for a while. I was getting reactions from people, like actually getting retweets and likes and all that. I was like, "All right. Well, this is what people want." And also, that started to help me, too. So, writing about despair was sort of a nice balm for dealing with it.

It became a far more sobering, solemn tale of what it means to be a writer dealing with this despair, and specifically dealing with this broadcast that we feel like we have to do. And that's why I brought up the '90s, earlier. Because those writers didn't even have that option. The writer is just, they're writing. Whenever there's an interview or a discussion somewhere, people are far more interested because no one knows that person that well. And we don't have that anymore. Now, it's like you go on Twitter and your favorite author is talking about how they ate hummus for lunch. And you're like, "Great."

I know. It's definitely difficult. One of those things people say, where it's like, "Yeah, if I get the big book deal, then I'm going to leave the internet or whatever, because then I won't have to be on it."

It's the opposite.

You've been involved in the independent community for a really long time. In the past you owned Civil Coping Mechanisms and became this constant champion of the work of others. So, how has that also affected how you work? And what inspired you to be that person?

Right. I kind of, just like you, I found indie lit by accident. I think it was 2012 or something like that. Prior to the discovery, I wasn't ever a reader of transgressive lit or horror and experimental literature like *House of Leaves*. I think I was online looking around for message boards or something. And I found HTMLGIANT. This is back when Blake Butler and a lot of the names that are now very well established and had their big book deals and all that, and kind of have paved the way. They were all still communicating and sharing on this blog. And I just fell in love with what they were doing. There was this sense of, "We don't really need permission to showcase our writing. And we don't need permission to make recommendations. We don't need to be part of this vehicle that's around us." I just fell into that, more as a participant, not so much as someone that's being one of the top voices floating around.

I was just there, helping out, reading people's work, making recommendations and all that. I started CCM on a whim. There were a couple authors, including Noah Cicero, who I was a really big fan of. CCM became this opportunity to publish authors that I felt should be published. I just liked what they were doing.

And it was sort of a, "Figure it out as you go," kind of thing, truly DIY. And I don't think it really caught on or went full steam until I published Juliet Escoria's *Black Cloud*. That was when I finally found the groove and CCM's voice, its self-image.

My whole approach to it was, "I'm like you, the proverbial writer. And you're like, in the sense that we're trying to do something that is inherently, probably only going to be enjoyed by a couple people. So, why not just

elevate each other's voices? Because, it's loud out there, it's getting louder. The world's falling apart." It was falling apart then, but it's definitely falling apart now. And that's been my mantra about all the literary drama stuff.

I was always that kid in high school English classes, where instead of reading the book for the book report, I would just watch the film adaptation or go buy the Cliff Notes. But it wasn't until that sophomore year of undergrad, when I found *House of Leaves* and just fell into all this really dark literature, that I got the bug. I became supremely obsessed with reading. And then writing just happened on its own. It's an extension of that, I think. Indie lit really was the canvas from which I was able to figure out how to paint.

If there's any formal technique that anyone sees in my stuff, it's an accident. I learned by doing. I don't have any formal training. I think it's funny because, a year or two ago, when I started teaching workshops, I realized I'd never been in one. I just learned from others.

I know earlier we were talking about how difficult it is to break into the trade publishing marketplace. But then, as I'm answering this question, I'm like, "Well, it's not like I'm making it easy for them." I'm writing what I want to write. That's key. And there are readers that want to read it. It's just maybe not 50,000 readers. And that's fine. That scares the crap out of me, actually. I don't know if I want to handle that kind of pressure.

That made me think of the MSI lyric, "You're telling me that 50 million fucking fans are never wrong. I'm telling you that 50 million screaming fans are fucking morons."

I love that band.

As a writer, let's talk about cultivating a brand, the cringe-iness of it, the necessity of it, and kind of what it means. You talked a little bit about the despair tweeting. I know if I go to Michael Seidlinger's Twitter, then I'm going to see tweets on despair and writing.

Yeah. Well, I mean, I don't remember when brands became a thing, but it's totally still a thing. I don't know if we still call it that, but everyone, even if they don't realize it or not, you sort of inherently perform a little bit on social media, kind of have to. I mean, some people are very earnest and they'll just be themselves, but the nature of the vehicle of social media is such that, as you tweet or post or whatever, you start to realize what hits and what doesn't, there's a natural sort of adaptive quality that we take on as writers with social media.

I think we all do that, to some extent, just because it's a very exhausting thing, trying to gain validation and visibility on social media every day, or throughout the years that we're on it. So we naturally find that groove. I'm sure you've done it yourself, where you just see certain things that work. But then on the flip side of that is...Social media was supposed to be created so that we could have our voices out there, but I have found that if my tweet about something that isn't writing despair, if I have a piece that's about a video game for instance, it's a paid and written piece just because I'm a freelance writer, that will not get as much attention. It's almost as if the algorithm is like, "That's wrong. Where is your writing despair tweet?"

So, literally, the only things that ever really work for me on Twitter is writing, and specifically writing despair or something that involves one of my books. That's it. And a brand is such that it works really well, but you do get typecast as that, even if it isn't the people around you and your followers and stuff like that, it's almost as if the algorithm typecasts us a little bit, too.

So, it's a necessary evil, but I just find it very ironic. We end up cultivating these things, this idea of what we should be online. And eventually, by virtue of doing that, the reaction of doing that is so we kind of get pushed into this certain thing that we are. People may expect certain things. Like, you expect me to write, tweet out something that's writing despair. And at the end of the day, I'm a person that is deeper than you think. It's not just writing despair. But I can't be that on Twitter. If a society was like, "All right, let's open a forum. Is social media good for us," it's a definite no.

I used to be the type of person and writer that was always thinking about the next move. All my worth was put into the writing. I didn't realize until, literally, last year but it started to kind of push back on me, in the sense that writing is only one aspect, the publishing aspect is only one side of the writing. And writing itself should be a component of your life. But it shouldn't be the only thing you're living for.

I started realizing that hobbies are things that you live for, too. People in your life, I think that's something we lose too, we lose track of, but also hobbies and small things, just even really enjoying working out and going for walks, and maintaining that side of your health. I started to lose a lot of that over the years.

I was watching Brand New Cherry Flavor on Netflix, recommended to me by Juliet [Escoria]. And I Googled the director, and saw he had two books that had been published by CCM. I was like, "Oh, that's really cool." But the thing is that when I look at that stuff, or I look at Noah Cicero's bibliography, there's this part of me thinks, "Yeah, that's just a guy that writes whatever the fuck he wants, and doesn't think about the next step or if he's going to get published by a mainstream publisher."

I wrote my second novel hoping to break into the bigger, mainstream industry. And that didn't happen, which is fine. And it could always happen in the future. But there is this sense now of me almost saying, "I miss the days before my debut came out, where I wasn't thinking about it." When I was writing and publishing back then, I was writing just because that's what I wanted to write.

I mean, I still do that, but I thought way less about how it was going to be received. I literally was just writing what I wanted. I kind of miss it. I care too much about what people think now.

One of my books that came out with OR Books, back in 2015, called *The Strangest*, is a modern retelling of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. That was when I lost sight. That's when I started feeling all the pressure. I think about it frequently. I want to remember. I want to remember what it feels like to write without any sort of pressure, even self-imposed pressure or actual pressure, both. Yeah, I miss that. I miss that, and I want to remember what it feels like, because even now I have a couple projects in mind that I'm writing for the sake of it. I don't care. I'm writing it. Those are meant to be the pride and joy. I'm just going to try to reclaim that vibe.

Yeah.

It's hard, once you start getting published. I tweeted on a whim, which usually tends to be the best tweets anyway. I was like, "Publishing can't save you, but writing just might." I think that was the tweet.

And I feel that 100%. That was coming from my gut reaction to all this shit, of years of realization, years of just doing it and fucking up and losing sight of things. You got to like some aspect of the writing process. Publishing is after the fact. Publishing is when you lose it, when it becomes someone else's. The thing you're writing, the best part is when you're in it, when you're actually being able to make it what you want it to be. Everything after, it should be icing on the proverbial cake. It shouldn't be what you're aiming for.

Michael J. Seidlinger Recommends:

Walking aimlessly

Eyeliner

Juice Wrld

Cooking for a group of people

Signing out

Name

Michael J. Seidlinger

Vocation

writer

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