

On staying open to all possibilities



Writer Nada Alic discusses proving yourself, being unafraid of embarrassment, going all in, and making people laugh.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2552 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Mental health, Beginnings, Identity.

Most of your stories have characters who are a bit absurd in their new age practices. Where is this coming from? Is it just a result of living in LA?

My first encounter with spirituality was watching Oprah as a kid and learning about teachers like Deepak Chopra and Gary Zukav and thinking, *I'm going to hell I guess*, because I was raised Catholic and it was very taboo to engage with those ideas; which, of course, only added to the appeal. I've always been drawn to esoteric and new age-y beliefs, because they offer a richer way to experience reality. LA is really the ideal place to observe and interact with new age practices and groups; there are fringe cults who offer free tours of their churches, breathwork classes where strangers scream and cry together, and body healers who channel the dead (I've been to all of them.) Even if I don't believe in a lot of it, I'm interested in the kinds of people who do and why.

I think it also just comes from making art. Whenever you're creating something, you're engaging with the mystery, whatever that means for you, and that inevitably leads you to bigger questions about where ideas come from and what it is that you're tapping into. As an artist, I just want to stay open and curious to all possibilities. Even the absurd ones, because everything is absurd if you zoom out far enough. We're communicating through screens right now on a rock in space and no one knows why.

I feel like in some of your stories you poke fun at spirituality. I'm thinking specifically of "Earth to Lydia", in which a Lowe's employee starts an anti-mindfulness cult. Is there a bit of a sardonic attitude towards these things too? Or am I projecting?

I think what I'm poking fun at is spiritual materialism. A lot of spirituality and mysticism is rooted in non-attachment and oneness, but it's been co-opted and repackaged by wellness culture and religious groups that range from harmless and cheesy to exploitative and predatory. I believe there are people who really are tapping into a higher consciousness, but I also believe I can access those states myself without paying for a special rock or an online course. I'm also poking fun at the idea that you could ever be fully "healed" in a dysfunctional society. "Earth to Lydia" is about people who become too enlightened to the point where it ruins their lives and alienates them from their loved ones. If enlightenment and capitalism are inherently incompatible, what's the point? I've often thought about that, like experiencing ego death is doing nothing for my career! If I reach a state of total equanimity, I'll never make it in America!

Amen. I don't laugh out loud easily, but in every single one of your stories, there was at least one point where I would just start cackling and my boyfriend would look at me all bewildered. So, how do you incorporate humor, and what effect do you want it to have on your work?

Whenever I read anyone talking about incorporating humor into their work, it always sounds so pretentious, like, "As a humorist..." even though I know I've done it before, but for the record, I think talking about being funny is a SIN and no one should do it. But since you mentioned it, yes, all I wanted to do with this book was make people laugh. I really honed my "alleged" humor over years of texting my best friend little jokes, which was better than any writing program I could've done. I recognize that my work will be immediately classified as unserious because it has a satirical tone, and I'm ok with that. Comedies never get the acclaim that dramas do. I would so much rather have people enjoy my work than attempt to impress a handful of intellectuals who would probably be boring to talk to at a party anyway. I do think there are more well-respected humorists in the literary world now though, look at writers like Alissa Nutting, Patricia Lockwood and Melissa Broder. They're all super funny-smart and mega successful.

I really loved your book trailers and your unaffiliated video, *The Trick*. What have you learned from the transformation of your writing into video in other mediums?

I always knew I wanted to make book trailers because I wanted an excuse to work with my friends. Writing is lonely! I'd spent years creating this universe and I wanted to see how it could be visually interpreted on film. Working with my friends made the process less intimidating to me. I was like, ok this is how you post on a casting website, this is how you get a permit, this is what a gaffer does. So much of it is proving to myself that I can do something in the absence of having any models or structure to support me. When I started writing, there was no material evidence to suggest that I could or should write a book; I didn't get an MFA, I didn't know any other authors, I had a day job. I had to show myself that I could do it. The same thing applies to film. I finally feel like I've earned the confidence to write films. I wasn't born with innate hubris; for me it's more like learning a new language as an adult, it's slow and I'm mostly bad at it but I'm not afraid to embarrass myself. It's the only way to learn.

How do you approach digital spaces? What's your relationship with social media?

Oh, you mean my primary reality? I was talking about this with my husband the other day, the question of, *oh, you made a conscious choice to include technology and social media in your book*. I know some writers try to avoid it, but it's such a big part of how we live now. Like anything else, it's neither wholly good nor evil. The evil aspects of the internet and social media are obvious and well-documented, while the good parts of it are so good that they're often dismissed or taken for granted. The internet is a miracle and it has sustained all of my friendships, given me jobs, educated me, and allowed me to live as an artist. I have less contempt and hostility towards it than most people for those reasons.

I both admire and am confused by artists who are totally offline. It's of course a very cool thing to be like, *I'm above it*, which is usually code for *I'm successful*. A lot of these artists are already a known quantity, but if I chose not to be online and intentionally promote my book in 2022, no one would hear about it. We wouldn't be having this conversation right now. I've noticed how trendy it is to write op-eds and Substack essays about the dangers of tech. It's like, but you're on here with us while you're..?

You're using the medium that you're shitting on! Yeah!

I get it, the internet is hell in many ways. It's neurologically damaging and addictive and my muscles have atrophied from sitting all day, but I do wonder how much of it is a resistance to the future happening. I think we're still learning how to coexist with it, we're still in the early days and we need to exhaust ourselves with it before we can recalibrate. I used to only eat junk food as a kid until I learned it was making me physically ill, so I stopped doing that. If you were a kid in the 90s, you were actively poisoning yourself everyday with convenience store food, and now you probably take turmeric supplements and only eat McDonalds once a year ironically. I already feel myself becoming less enchanted by the infinite scroll.

Fair. How or when did you realize you'd become a writer?

For years, I wrote stories on the weekends and made zines with my friend Andrea Nakhla, who is a painter. I knew that if I really wanted to write a book, I would need to get serious about it and figure out how to quit my job

to write full time. I saved up for a year before I quit at the end of 2018 so I could have a few months to cover my rent and bills to just focus on writing. I'd never not had a job before and as an immigrant, I was terrified, but I also felt this weird sense of calm that I could figure it out. Doing it in such an extreme way was my only option, but I don't know if I would recommend it. It puts a lot of pressure on the writing, and it took me a year to learn how to work alone without any structure to my days. A lot of my friends are musicians, filmmakers and visual artists who are way more successful than me, so while they were so supportive, I think they forgot what those growing pains were like in the early days when you have absolutely no idea if things will work out. I felt very alone in it.

I remember I would go to these parties in LA and people would ask me what I did and even though I was writing every day, I felt like I couldn't even talk about it, because it wasn't real yet. Meanwhile, I met so many men who were like, oh I'm a producer or, I'm a writer, and you later find out they did none of those things. That is the level of confidence I aspire to! Just saying things! After almost three years of writing, freelancing and mentally unraveling, I got a two-book deal with Knopf in early 2021. That was such a paradigm shift for me, I was like, I'm a writer now. I've done it, I'm doing it.

Aside from money, what are the rewards of your creative practice? What do you get out of this work and what has it taught you about yourself?

For starters, internet clout, obviously. Really though, writing has changed my life. I feel so privileged and I can't believe I get to do it. For me, writing is like a spiritual barometer. The degree to which I'm able to write is the degree to which I'm able to have a healthy and positive relationship with myself. Whenever I have writer's block or I'm procrastinating, it's because I'm unwilling to sit with myself. Just the process of writing and sucking for so long is a kind of endurance test. The fact that I no longer feel totally identified with some of the stories in the book is an indication that I've grown.

Another thing writing has given me is access to a world of artists; especially women. When I first started writing, I didn't have a lot of friends and I wanted to connect with likeminded people, I wanted to connect with cool girls like you! My goal is to continue to write and occasionally get invited to cool dinner parties where I can meet other artists and no one is taking photos and there's an ornate tablescape and one famous person but no one is talking about it, and the host will introduce me to everyone as an author, and that famous person's ears will perk up but I will purposely ignore them out of respect but we will somehow later become lifelong friends. Is that relatable?

Nada Alic Recommends:

[4000 Weeks](#) by Oliver Burkman: This book is a philosophical, anti-productivity book that helps you confront the reality of your own mortality, reexamine your relationship to time, and release yourself from the fantasy that total control is attainable or even a desirable state. I've gifted this book to so many friends.

[This is Badland Magazine](#). *This is Badland* is a Balkan magazine run by Rafaela Kacunić and Nina Vukelić. As a Croatian, I was so proud to see something so innovative and reflective of my culture: people who are passionate, bold, weird and free. I randomly stumbled across it online which I imbued with great synchronistic significance a couple years later when my childhood photo graced the cover of their new issue. The art direction is so futuristic and the stories are so interesting, it makes me feel like I'm in on a very cool secret, which is that Balkan youths are steering culture and they are already way ahead of us.

[Perfectly Imperfect Newsletter](#). I'm going meta to recommend a recommendations newsletter. It features internet micro celebs, actual celebs, and cool regulars who know about obscure and interesting things. It reminds me of the pre-algorithm early days of the internet that was all about discovery and real people. It's always something very specific like, "smiling for 60 seconds every morning" and "rose tinted vaseline." Everyone has their little things that make up a life and give it meaning. I like that there's a space for people to share that kind of stuff.

[The Elysian Theater](#) (/going to comedy shows). The Elysian Theater is a local alt comedy/improv theater on the eastside of LA that regularly hosts work-in-progress shows and various comedy nights and feels very unpretentious and intimate. I've seen so many amazing shows there from Anna Seregina, Kate Berlant, Mitra Jouhari and others.

(I'm doing my very first show there Aug. 4 and I am very excited.) I love live comedy so much; watching someone get up on stage and say words and that be a whole show? It's like magic. In our spiritually impoverished world, laughing in a room together is the closest thing we have to experiencing the presence of god.

Reading artist interviews with a bit of skepticism. This sounds very youth pastor, "don't listen to me, find out for yourself" type advice, but as someone who is curious about how other artists live, I've read so many interviews that have left me feeling bad about myself. I used to read about an artist's comically-perfect morning routine and think, wow, I am a garbage person I guess. I came to this realization way too late, but a lot of artists present a public persona that's not real. Some artists lie, embellish or omit parts of themselves in service to the age old practice of self-mythologizing. This is partly due to insecurity, or privacy, or part of a larger performance, but it is ultimately propaganda for their work and reputation. The static nature of published words imbues them with unearned authority like the 10 commandments written on stone tablets, so it's easy to forget this. Even if they're being honest, a lot of artists are suffering deeply and I don't know, maybe they're not the best role models for you?? Artists are people and people are complex organisms, ever changing, mysterious even to themselves. Seek out sources of inspiration where you can find them, but don't be seduced by fancy pull quotes. No one knows what they're doing; some people are just good at performing confidence.

Name

Nada Alic

Vocation

writer

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Phoenix LoSavio