

On always listening



Writer Nicola Maye Goldberg discusses making shit up, empathizing with monstrous characters, the importance of deadlines, dealing with insomnia, and focusing on missing information.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2336 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Poetry](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Education](#), [Focus](#).

I feel like you write with the wisdom of someone who's been alive for 120 years. When did you realize you wanted to be a writer?

I don't know. I always liked making shit up. When I was a kid, my dad used to get his shirts back from the dry cleaners with these thin pieces of cardboard, and I would use them to make books, as the covers. Before I could read and write, I would dictate stories about mermaids and fairies and whatever to various unsuspecting babysitters and have them write it down. I was always corralling other children into making movies with me and using my dad's video camera. My dad is really ending up like a main character in this. I think I started taking writing really seriously probably around the time I was 14.

You were a poet first, right?

Yeah, I think so. I don't know. I don't remember exactly. I think I wanted to be a poet, and then when I got to college, the overwhelming feedback from my professors was that I was just much better at writing fiction, and I don't think I really wrote any good poems until I graduated college, for whatever reason.

Does your background in poetry inform your prose at all?

I like to think so. I like to think that it makes it better. I think that poetry really leaves zero room for error, and that having a background in poetry, and reading a lot of poetry, I try to read at least three or four poems every day, which is fairly easy to do given the internet. Three or four poems I've never read before probably just show up on Instagram for me without me even really trying to seek them out. Just having that in my head, having a sense of the things that make a poem work, just makes prose easier. But I guess it's hard to say for sure.

Do you have a set amount of prose books that you try to read?

No, because I tend to either read a book all at once, or not finish it at all. It's very rare for me to plod through a book. If I don't finish a book within 48 hours of starting it, I usually won't finish it at all. I don't know what counts. If I start one and I don't finish, does it count as having read it? I don't like to push myself to finish a book if I don't want to finish it.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think that's a good attitude. I think too many people force themselves to get to the end when it isn't working for them.

What's the point? There's so many books in the world. That, just to me, seems a terrible waste of time.

Much of your work centers around infidelity and the violence of men. Are we doomed?

You're not the first person to ask me that question, actually. I don't know. I hope not.

I felt so doomed after reading *Other Women*. I was like damn.

I felt very doomed when I was writing *Other Women*. I mean, I guess I can say that the person I had in mind when I was writing *Other Women*, I didn't think I was ever going to stop loving that person, or stop being sad that that person didn't love me. And I did eventually stop being sad that that person didn't love me. So I guess that's something.

There's hope.

Yeah.

How have educational institutions helped or hampered you creatively?

I don't know. I mean, I really hated college. Really, really hated it.

Undergrad?

Yeah. But I had some really wonderful professors. I got to study with Anne Carson, which is just the most incredible thing that could happen. Both in undergrad and in grad school, there were professors who truly took me under their wing, both in terms of my work and in terms of my personal life and have given me an idea of what a life as a writer might look like, and that's been really powerful. I don't really know what I would do, or where I would be without that.

In terms of actual classes, I don't know how much I've gotten out of workshops. Especially in grad school, I think, mostly workshops are useful in that I often felt my classmates just didn't get what I was doing at all. That just helped clarify what I did want to do. I was like, "Oh, that's not what I wanted the book to be at all. That's completely wrong." Sort of like a process of elimination in terms of purpose.

I have mixed feelings about MFA's in general. I know it sounds totally unhinged, but I do think that it's important to know the CIA's role in the creation of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, and the way every other creative writing workshop program in America is modeled after that. And how that affects what American literature is, and even our most basic ideas of what good literature is. And I do wonder if spending too much time in those institutions can hamper a person's ability to write things that are genuinely transgressive.

What was the CIA's goal? How did they want to shape writing?

They wanted to make sure that American writers weren't writing things that were too explicitly political. It was part of the Cold War efforts to kneecap American counterculture. Which worked.

Like abstract art?

Yeah. The championing of certain writers like John Cheever, and the pushing aside writers like Dos Passos or whatever, more explicitly political writers. I can send you some of the articles I read, because I don't want to fuck up any of the information about this, because it's important. They gave examples of certain writers and styles of writing that they wanted to encourage versus discourage. So I don't know.

Something to be wary of.

Yeah. I mean, I don't really know what the state of American counterculture is right now. I don't know how much it even exists. I don't know where you would go to find it, but you certainly wouldn't go to an MFA program.

I guess you'd go to the internet... What's your work entail on the day-to-day? What's your process?

I wish I had a more disciplined lifestyle. I'm working on it. I'm a terrible insomniac, and I think my brain really only operates between 4:00 AM and 7:00 AM. I do a lot of my writing on the notes app in my phone, and then put it together later on my laptop. I also write in a journal, several pages almost every day, and some of that gets recycled into fiction, but not all of it.

Journal entries, or do you do creative writing in your journal?

It's a mix of both. I write it as a journal and then sometimes I'll pull out pieces of it and use it as fiction. But I also journal in the notes app as well. So there is not a clean delineation. I often write while watching television. Before COVID I used to do a lot of writing, in a notebook, by myself at a movie theater. I like deadlines a lot. They keep me on track. Without deadlines, I tend to get a little bit lost. I'm very interested in the daily routines of other writers, so I can try to copy them, but I'm yet to find one that I can really stick to.

Do you give yourself deadlines, or are they the deadlines imposed by your agent or editors?

They have to be imposed by someone else. If I try imposing them on myself, I don't listen.

In your acknowledgements, you thank your agent Julia Masnik for believing in the book before it was actually any good. What was bad about it? What did she believe in?

It was just a very early draft at that point—the chapter or the short story or whatever you want to call it, that ended up being cut and then published in *Joyland*.

It was the short story or chapter or whatever titled "The Virgin" that ended up being cut from the actual book, but then published in *Joyland* separately that I think of as being kind of a hidden track to the novel that readers could seek out if they felt like it, but that wouldn't be key or necessary to understanding.

So the hidden track was the original or just something that was cut from the novel?

It was the first part of the novel that I wrote. And so it did end up being cut because my editor felt that altogether the book was too violent, and that chapter maybe pushed it into the realm of the gratuitous. So, I felt ultimately that was a good compromise, that it sort of exists in the world and one can read it if you feel like you need to, but you also don't have to.

Has anyone compared *Nothing Can Hurt You* to *Twin Peaks*?

Not that I know of. I was definitely thinking about *Twin Peaks* when I came up with Sara Morgan's name. I wanted to have the same number of syllables as Laura Palmer. For some reason that was important to me. And I love *Twin Peaks*. Everyone loves *Twin Peaks*. It was definitely an influence. *Twin Peaks* was such a huge deal for me when I first saw it and remains a huge deal for me.

Much of your dialogue is so brilliant. Lines like "Nothing in nature blooms all year," and "The only thing more fragile than the body is the mind." I was wondering if you keep a notepad of quotes or how you collect or create so much gold?

Someone I dated in college said that I seem like I'm not paying attention, but I actually always am, which is true. I'm really good at remembering conversations. And I think that I often seem more spaced out than I really

am, so people will sometimes say things around me that they don't realize I'm listening to or absorbing. If someone says something weird, it'll just stay with me until I write, and I'll often feel like I have to write it into something to get rid of it otherwise it'll just stay in my head forever.

Like when a song's stuck in your head you're supposed to play it.

Yeah, yeah, that's often how it feels with people talking.

What does your curiosity look like? How do you explore things?

Pretty obsessively. I spend a lot of time reading Wikipedia articles, and I can get sort of hyper-focused on really anything, especially when information is missing. That drives me nuts. And so I'll circle around the missing information for as long as I can, basically until I'm exhausted. And that's often sort of the start of something, of some kind of fiction, is a piece of missing information that I can't get out of my head.

I thought that your choice to not include a chapter from Blake's perspective was really interesting in that way, because I felt like that was the one perspective of the crime, him being the murderer, that people would really want to hear, and it felt like this gulf of absence to me. We just didn't get...It's like you don't get to hear it as the reader.

I felt like I couldn't write it. I felt like in order to write that I would have to answer questions that I didn't know the answers to. I also didn't know if I could empathize enough with him to write it well. I think there are certain writers like Mary Gaitskill and Rachel Kushner who are really good at empathizing with pretty monstrous characters, and I really admire that. I find it an almost superhuman skill. And there were quite a few characters in the book that I really had to consciously push myself to be able to write from their perspective. But I just didn't feel like I could do that with Blake.

The book said it was based on a true story. How much of it is?

So in the '90s at Bard there was a student who killed his girlfriend and was found not guilty by reason of temporary insanity.

Was he really on acid?

According to rumor. I mean, there isn't a ton of information about it available that I could find. The bare bones of it is just that he had a history of schizophrenia. He was found not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. And the prosecutor who accepted the plea deal was the same prosecutor to whom a serial killer had confessed I think a couple of weeks before. And the weirdness of that coincidence was kind of the beginning of the book for me. It was sort of being obsessed with how strange and creepy that was. As well as the proximity to the crime. Though at the same time, if you Google the name of any college in America plus "murder," you'll find a similar story. So it's based on a true story, but it's also based on a bunch of true stories. The novel's connection to this particular murder is not that important. This was the murder that I happened to become interested in because that's the college I happened to go to, but if I had gone to a different college I might've been interested in another. College girls get murdered by their boyfriends a lot it seems.

Nicola Maye Goldberg Recommends:

Under the Bridge by Rebecca Godfrey

"Sister" by Hether Fortune

Madness, Rack, and Honey by Mary Ruefle

Stoker (2013) Dir. Park Chan-wook

Claire DeWitt series by Sara Gran

Name

Nicola Maye Goldberg

Vocation

Writer

□

Claire Goldberg