

On not being afraid to make complicated work



Writer Sean Thor Conroe discusses writing like you speak, the influence people's backgrounds have on their readings, and representing your shifting thoughts and ideas in what you create.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2337 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#).

Fuccboi feels like it was written in real time. Was it?

Every chapter was initially written in the month that the chapter was set in, but one year after. So I'd dwell on one chapter for a whole month. Walk around, get in touch with the feeling of that time of year.

What else was part of your writing process?

I held off on writing each chapter for the longest time until I felt my idea of what the narrator was going through was complicated enough, had become complicated enough to be interesting. And then initially ripping it in Uni-Ball on unlined printer paper and then entering it into Notes and then cycling it through emails to myself every day.

Did you edit it at each stage?

When I first sent it to [my editor] Gian [DiTrapano], it was through December, one year. And then I wrote a 93K-word version in January. Gian was like, "Dude, this isn't it." He was like, "Make it a book length and then send it." And then April of 2020 was when it became 67K words, which was the whole book except for the last chapter. And then obviously once I started working with Gian, with the hard copy, making it totally coherent was another thing.

How did you meet Gian?

It was October of 2019. I'd just started my [MFA] program. I'd been aware of [Atticus Lish](#), and had been reading a lotta [Scott McClanahan](#). I'd been aware of [his press] Tyrant, and someone said "You've got to send it to Gian." And it was just a cold send on...it was October 25th. I remember because it was right before the workshop. I was like, "I need Gian to see this too." And then he got back to me that same day. It was wild.

And then that Halloween of 2019, he was like, "I'm going to be out there in December." He wanted to meet up and that was when we first met, that December at the Lutz reading, *The Complete Gary Lutz* by Garielle Lutz.

I could hear your voice the entire time I was reading Fuccboi. How did you manage to write just how you speak?

I think texts, DMs, emails. I just started communicating more and more like that. And then, especially with a

couple of close friends, developed certain lexicons and stuff. And then just simplifying the story as I would be able to, conceivably, via text to a friend. But then obviously, as it went on, getting in my literary bag a little more to expand each individual piece.

But I think that was a big thing. I mean, even with Gian, the way we would WhatsApp and message. And probably the pod helped too, just doing the pod, having conversations and getting comfortable using different types of language in a literary context.

Did you transcribe the pods yourself?

I wouldn't. But you know what? In a previous project, *The Walk Book*, for the first 50 days I just had a voice recorder and I would talk. I would just say everything that happened in the past 24 hours.

And then after 50 days I got so tired of talking. So then I stopped doing that and I just started writing. I actually transcribed the first part, which was spoken, through the Eastern time zone. Central time was written and I was trying to do essays. And then the last part of the book, *Mountain Time*, was letters. Because I stopped walking in *Mountain Time*.

But now that I think about it, I think transcribing those things and listening to those podcast recordings made me aware of how I talk and the rhythms of it.

Thinking about *The Walk Book*, Is it okay to abandon a project?

I don't think a project's ever abandoned until you can't work on it anymore. I don't know if *The Walk Book* has been abandoned. But it's hard. I mean, it's just so...I don't know. It's self-aware but not self aware enough, you know? Like "Okay, bro. I'm out here."

"I'm walking. I'm writing my book."

Fucking discovering America.

[Laughs] So how do you know when a project is done?

Someone wrenches it out of your hands! Nah. I think you've got to feel that everything in it has at least one other connection. Everything in it has at least one other part, at least for a novel, that justifies it being there. I would think about that a lot. Repetition and doubles. Or a similar thing but saying something different about it. Whether that's characters, characters repeating at least one other time, or certain ideas. And then feeling there's a reason for every concept and every line in there.

But there is a little bit of that I think, someone wrenching it out of your hands.

What is something that you wish someone told you when you began writing?

I was reading this book about I-novels and they had this one line about how a book gets rewritten every time someone reads it, because they just impose their idea on it based on their upbringing and whatever sociological factors orient their reading of it, which I do all the time, too.

You read a book and you remember two or three main things that hit you, and when you remember back on that book, you just think of those few things. But, especially with a book like this, there's no telling how much people can just interpret it however they want. I mean, it's an obvious point. But then how I justify that is I think it's like a Rorschach test for how people talk about it. They might be feeling really self-righteous about it, but how they then speak on it shows how they think about things, which is always the point.

Yeah. It says way more about the person than it does the work, how they interpret it. The Rorschach test is a perfect comparison. Have any of the interpretations been particularly surprising to you?

Someone once said about it, "This is so good because it makes poor people sound smart." I was just like, "Oh, damn." Or not looking up certain slang words and having bad faith misreadings of them in flagrant ways. But it's 2022. We have the internet. I feel if you don't understand a slang word, you should look it up like you would some big ass word from old English you don't understand. Strange that even the most educated person would not do that.

I thought all the Nietzsche epigraphs in *Fuccboi* were interesting. What influence, if any, has philosophy had on your writing?

For me, at root, a philosophical question or an investigation needs to be really clear before I can feel like writing. And then every detail that I write, even descriptions of the fictional world, has to be somehow playing or prodding at that. All the epigraphs are from *The Gay Science*. In that book, I feel like Nietzsche was writing himself back to health. It goes through the seasons. When it's spring finally, he's convalescing. And I felt that's conceptually tied to what *Fuccboi* is.

And also an outlook of writing. A lot of dudes are just fucked up about some shit and they could spaz out on people or they could try to write themselves into being okay.

I really liked the part of *Fuccboi* where it went into how Knausgård compared himself to Hitler and talking about how if people aren't allowed to express their terrible thoughts, thoughts they might be ashamed of even having, they become more and more repressed until something has to give, basically.

Well, an interesting thing that people seem to be sleeping on is that the book is called *Fuccboi*, and it's not like a pro-fuccboi book. You know what I mean?

But, at the same time, the narrator's getting caught in loops. And I think the main thing is being able to acknowledge that we can change. Everyone is changing constantly. That goes against the Western sense of individualism, where the self is so fixed. All of the enlightenment is about the sovereign fucking individual. But I definitely, probably from my upbringing too, moving all the time and having to constantly adapt in new places, have a pretty split, poorer sense of self.

So oftentimes, at least when the book was being written, I'd be on an intense one about something that was making me spaz. And then when something would shift in how I'd feel about the world, and I stepped back and laughed at myself or looked at myself, then I would start to try to write it and just straddle the lines. But if it's too fixed and you have a moral point you're trying to make or you're angry, you're writing is just not going to be good.

I'm continually trying to get to that point of stepping back a little bit, which I think is the point of what reading does. It helps you step back a little bit and look at what you're doing and allow yourself to reevaluate.

But I don't know. That could just be me. A lot of people have really clear ideas about who they are and they go back to their hometown and they're with their childhood friends and they're fine. You know what I mean? Maybe that's just indicative of me being a little schizophrenic.

When you were saying that I just thought "writing on the precipice of change." I don't know. That seems like such a good point from which to write.

I like that. I agree.

And also a really good rule to have for yourself. Until you're starting to turn the idea over and see it in a different way, you don't know it. You don't know something until you see multiple angles.

And it's way more fun when everything is turned. Syntactically, tonally, politically. And obviously the core point of it is just the larger gang mentality of the culture. It's way easier to be on one side and fucking rage out on the other side. That's just a way more calmer existential state to be in, because you don't have to straddle anything. And the protagonist of *Fuccboi* is raging out against that, but not in a clearly defined way. Or else it's not interesting, I feel.

A lot of the time, as soon as you start articulating something, it kills the nuance of what you're feeling. One of literature's faculties is being able to straddle things in that silent way. And that's also something I need to keep reminding myself. It's easy to fucking wanna fight, but it's just that you want to be angry. You've got to replace that anger. It's no good.

Do you have a philosophical question that *Fuccboi* was answering or exploring?

For sure. I mean, it's a title. It's like *The Sarah Book* in that it's like a breakup. Let's look clearly at a bunch of fucking fuckery you're on, but then looking at bigger questions. It speaks to the bigger question of a dude who has no sense of economic belonging, no financial safety net, health issues. And for whatever reason, self-imposed or not, he feels like he has no use for himself in the world. Like, looking at that, you know? So that's the philosophical question. Is it all him or is it the world?

And then if I ever get too far into one direction, fucking straddling it—bringing it back and trying to stay in that curious mode of only looking at different sides of things instead of trying to moralize or tamp one thing down. And that became the organizing principle of *Fuccboi*.

I called the narrator of *Fuccboi* by my name. As soon as you say the author has your name, people are going, "Oh, you're just writing about your life." It's like, "No." If you just wrote a book like, "Hey, here are things that happen to me," it wouldn't be good. But it's also exciting, for me as a reader, books that have the narrator have the name of the author, because then you're trying to navigate what the author's doing with where he or she is drawing the lines.

Even if we were, to our knowledge, telling a first person story about our experiences, it would also be fiction in a different way too, just because memory is flawed.

The minute you start writing, you're lying.

I was curious, having attended an MFA program, do you recommend?

As patricidal as the narrator is, and maybe I am in some ways towards anything institutional, ultimately, literature is a community that everyone participating in it literally upholds. If no one's reading and digging up old books and talking about them and making them important, they're not important. So I think that if you find yourself in a circumstance where you're able to attend—it's obviously not something that everyone can do—and you feel you have something important to share and you have an opportunity to work with writers you respect and learn from them and partake in that conversation, then definitely. You know?

Participating in communities besides your solipsistic self is something that it took me a long time to get to, but is something that I think, ultimately, helped me. It was good for me. I was the solitary, lone, "I'm-fucking-more-real-than-everybody"-guy for 10 years. And that didn't lead me to a good place. At the same time, writing is, will always be, a solitary thing. No MFA program, no matter how good the teachers, is going to tell you how to do it.

Sean Thor Conroe Recommends:

Pure Colour (2022) by Sheila Heti

Cold Devil (2017) by Drakeo the Ruler

Cold showers

Forever Magazine

Celibacy

Name

Sean Thor Conroe

Vocation

writer

□

Viva Hansen