

Prefatory Note/Disclaimer

It is ill-advised to (in any way) explain your own book, right? A work should stand on its own. But sometimes I like to read interviews with authors. I'm curious about how they conceive of their own projects. Visual artists have artist statements—is that part of the show, of the pieces? Or simply an adjunct that you can ignore or engage? One reason I feel the urge to write something is that we don't live in a book-reading age. We read a lot of hastily constructed things for short periods of time. We are less practiced in engaging fiction, particularly long-form fiction, maybe. I sometimes feel I have to defend the novel form itself. Why bother? What's it for? Each novel is, must be, an argument for itself.

Given that, feel free not to read or to disregard these notes. Or perhaps read the book first and, if you are curious or for some reason want more from the author, read these notes after you finish.

Inspiration

Looking back, two main things inspired this book. The first one was my own experiences of aging as a mother and a daughter. My parents (and my aunts and uncles) were growing old just as my daughter was emerging into adulthood. I had the sense of time moving faster, and then I had the sense that I was ill-prepared for what was to come: losing my elders and sending my child off into the world. As this was happening, a kind of peri-menopausal insomnia kicked in. That mid-night/very early morning wakefulness became a time to work on this novel. Sam, an imaginary character, is very different from me, but we have this much in common. Aging is the reminder/realization that your body is not actually within your control; that you, in fact, inhabit a body. These terms apply to all of us but are experienced perhaps more starkly in menopause. And I always got the impression that we aren't supposed to talk about menopause, that it is a private embarrassment to be endured.

The second thing that inspired the book was the election of Donald Trump, and how overnight the United States became defamiliarized, as if I thought I were living in one

world and it turned out I was living in a very different one. It felt destabilizing, but also clarifying. The world was there all along in plain sight, but I had been blind to it. It would be impossible to write a contemporary novel without addressing the election in some way. The social/political/historical context is part of what a novel must grapple with. What it is like to be alive now. So with much trepidation, I wrote into it. A fixed time in the near past, 2017, the first year after the election. The world changes so fast, “now” is the past as soon as it happens. The velocity of the world, of technology, of history, outpaces art (and always has). How to meet the moment or resist the moment or interrogate the moment? By, I think, becoming very specific, particular, local. A writer might pick one person, one year, one city in the recent past. In fiction, a constraint can become a vantage point. My constraint was the novel would take place in Syracuse, and over part of one year, 2017 (with one dramatic exception late in the novel). The recent past is a funny, strange place to inhabit. It is historical fiction in that we know much more now than we knew then. Pre-pandemic, pre-Trump defeat, pre-George Floyd. And that is just 2020. So WAYWARD is a historical novel, true to that moment in order to speak to this one, I hope.

Also: Around the time when I began writing this book, I saw *My Happy Family*, a film by two Georgian filmmakers, Nana Ekvtimishvili and Simon Groß. The film is about a middle-aged woman who leaves her husband and grown kids for no reason other than she feels the need to be alone. There is a scene in it where she eats a piece of cake by herself, and I knew when I saw it that I would put a version of the cake-moment in my book. It is actually in the book in two places: once, as in the film, in her first days alone. And then at the end with her daughter. Cake.

Uncomfortable fiction (and flawed characters)

When WAYWARD begins, Sam is in a crisis. She can't sleep and everything she depends on for her sense of self is slipping away. She impulsively leaves her husband and daughter and the comforts of her life in the suburbs. She deliberately, perversely, discomfords herself. She gives many reasons why she felt she had to radically change. She wants to see herself clearly, but that is hard. Sam has significant privilege: she has

access to money, she is white, she is able-bodied, she is safe, in good health. She is a “good liberal,” a feminist, but she is also clueless about the world around her. “Ignorant but not innocent,” is how she puts it. She doesn’t like who she is, who she finds herself to be in mid-life. She has to face her own complicity with the status quo, her own compromises. What has she done with all that she was given? Is it nearly enough? And, as the book begins, her own aging is making her more attuned to the misogyny of the culture. This feels acute when Donald Trump defeats Hillary Clinton. The culture has no use for old women. There is a particular distaste that is reserved for old women. Sam has to contend with that, and her own internal feelings of misogyny. Misogyny has colonized her, and it is difficult to get outside of it.

Another way to see her: grotesque self-pity alternating with grotesque self-deprecation is where she begins, stuck in her own solipsism. One of the things driving this novel was the necessity of a reckoning, and mid-life is a particularly good time for such examinations. The country itself was having its own crisis/reckoning, so I saw that as an aggravating force. Deep foundational questioning is required of us, personally and as Americans.

I found Sam interesting, because—at this time in her life—she wants to change. She wants to put herself on the hook. She tries to become a better person, even if she falls short. This striving to be and do better is moving to me; change gets harder as you age.

For me, powerful fiction is simultaneously comforting and discomfoting. We find something recognizable and human in a character, which is a comfort, but that close, honest, intimate experience of a consciousness can implicate us, as it also shows the hypocrisies and the delusions that occupy people, animate people, drive them to make mistakes (and much worse, collude in all sorts of ways). The other way fiction creates comfort/discomfort is by addressing the hard terms of a life, the inevitable slipping away of ourselves and the people we love. Literature creates an imaginary space to engage with our mortality, something that gets obscured in the day-to-day noise of life. Fiction and poetry can remind us to ask what we should make of the very short time we have here with one another.

All of this makes fiction sound very abstract and almost utilitarian. The fiction I love operates via the hyper-specific and via the miraculous alchemy of precise language. It creates a form for depicting very particular and eccentric (but imaginary) minds. Full of contradictions, in self-conflict, and prone to making mistakes. But striving at some level to see more clearly and perhaps move someplace new via foundational ruptures. Those have always been the questions I find compelling: Can you ever see yourself (or the world) clearly? And if so, how should one act (morally) in the face of that clarity? Can you get over yourself, especially as more self accumulates as you get older? And then what?

Why I write and read novels in the age of the internet:

Such quaint, outdated tech, really, novels. What are they for? When someone asked me about this when my third book came out, I wrote this manifesto/mission statement, and, however often I come up short and fail, it is helpful to imagine what it is you are trying to do as a writer or what you want as a reader. Maybe I wrote it because I teach creative writing and enjoy trying to describe why I respond to the novels I assign. Maybe it is because I'm a novel-obsessed (and somewhat pretentious) nerd. Nevertheless, I still feel this way (with a few new revisions):

In Other Words

I think a novel can describe — enact — the experience of our own interiority better than any other medium. I like how reading a novel makes you go deep and long, that it accumulates and makes connections. Oddly, magically, reading a simulation of genuine loneliness can make you feel less alone. It is an intimate experience between the reader and writer. And I really like that you can't click through to something else. (Of course you can always throw the book across the room.) For my own work, I like voices distorted by emotion and doubt and subjectivity. I want the story to be emotional — practically deranged with emotion — but I also want it to be unsentimental and uneasy. All of the structural decisions come out of these concerns. It's not about trying to be experimental or conventional. The process is weirder and more intuitive. The form of the book finally comes out of necessity. Another way of putting it is that the form is a solution to an artistic problem: how do I make meaning, what is this?

Ideally, at some point in the process of writing, the novel itself asserts a kind of consciousness. The “mind” of the novel (much smarter than the author’s mind) presenting things, making associations via structure and recursions, connecting things over the duration of the novel in wholistic, deep ways. By the end, the writer hopes that the reader apprehends the book the way one might notice details and parts of a sculpture or a painting and then stand back to see the entire piece coming into view. Making—in a mysterious way—sense. It works by creating resonances via the beauty of particular arrangement.

Formal structure compels me, but it only matters if it all comes out of (and returns to) the human feeling of a book, its (and my) messy soul. Human sounds, voices (the provocations and intimacies of confessions) prevail. Questions prevail. Because I’m only interested in writing about what I haven’t figured out. I usually start with a question. And rather than discovering an answer as I write, I try to make the question as deep and complicated and honest as I can. The momentum, if it exists, is in that increasing complication. I think some people perceive this as ambivalence — I tend to undercut everything with its opposite — but I don’t see how anyone looking closely at something can feel only one way about it. (Maybe multivalence is a better word than ambivalence.) People in my novels have strong desires, but they don’t only go in one direction. In other words, the rest of the culture wants answers, but a novel asks radical questions. This is how James Baldwin put it: “The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.” We do this by avoiding easy reductions and questioning clichés of language and thought, the ever-ready, shopworn, threadbare static. Perhaps then writing and reading can be, in their own quiet way, acts of resistance and subversion and protest.