

Whore for Capitalism: On Publishing a Book

Lindsay Lerman

2019-07-22

Abstract

You know what? Fuck all the journals, all the lit mags, all the respectable outlets. They keep telling me (re: this piece about the industry) things like ‘We’re tightening up our social media platforms, so we’re focusing on pieces that we feel will be highly consumable via the platforms. This might be too dark for us at the moment.’ Or ‘Would you consider re-working so the tone is jauntier?’ Say I make it jaunty and friendly and social-media-ready and a couple respectable people at a couple respectable venues acknowledge my existence for two seconds and I maybe sell a few extra books? That can’t be worth it. I just can’t see how it’s worth it. The more I think about it, the more it should be on a blog, open to everyone and without all the extra bullshit. (A guest post by Lindsay Lerman.)

A Short Introduction

Lindsay Lerman and I became friends during our time in the philosophy PhD programme at the University of Guelph, back before we both ambivalently jumped ship from academia. A couple of months ago, she and I were talking about a piece she’d written on the social climate she’d been encountering as her novel, *I’m from Nowhere*, approached publication. She showed me the piece, I told her I really liked it, and she told me that she was looking for a place to publish it before her book was released. A few weeks later she wrote back:

You know what? Fuck all the journals, all the lit mags, all the respectable outlets. They keep telling me (re: this piece about the industry) things like “We’re tightening up our social media platforms, so we’re focusing on pieces that we feel will be highly consumable via the platforms. This might be too dark for us at the moment.” Or “Would you consider re-working so the tone is jauntier?” Say I make it jaunty and friendly and social-media-ready and a couple respectable people at a couple respectable venues acknowledge my existence for two seconds and I maybe sell a few extra books? That can’t be worth it. I just can’t see how it’s worth it. The more I

think about it, the more it should be on a blog, open to everyone
and without all the extra bullshit.

So, here it is. Feral Machines' first guest post.

– Lucca

Whore for Capitalism: On Publishing a Book

“WHO GETS TO SPEAK AND WHY?, I wrote last week, IS THE ONLY
QUESTION”

– Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*

1.

Another angry DM rolls in. *You're a whore for capitalism*, this one says.

Forfucksake, the book isn't even out yet. Why do I do this? Why am I willing
to subject myself to this?

I want to shout back at him, rolling my eyes so hard I see grey matter. *Fine, I'm
a whore for capitalism. But dude we all know all the world's a whorehouse—go
read some Marx at the very very least before you shout at me about libidinal
economies and everything else I suspect you don't care to understand, and get
the fuck out of my face.*

But I don't shout back at him. Silently, internally, I say *thank you, asshole, for
the reminder: These are the stakes.*

Who gets to speak and why and what the hell starts to happen when someone
who shouldn't speak does speak, even just a little.

Have a good day, he later says. *Are you married? You have kids?*

Why do I do this? Why am I willing to subject myself to this? Because I want
to live. Because I have to figure out how to live on terms that are not the ones
you've set for me. This is how I'm figuring it out. This is how I'm doing it.
This book you hate me for selling *is* me doing it.

The book isn't even out yet. I wonder if it will keep happening. I wonder if it
will get worse.

2.

It's been eight years since I started the novel. In those eight years I worked as
many different jobs as possible to pay bills, I had a baby, I moved almost every

year, I finished a PhD, I translated 365 pages of French philosophy into English, I took care of friends and loved ones, I watched as some of them died, I did the research and the job-application and everything else I was supposed to do. I did the things people need to do these days to stay alive.

I wrote late at night or on the weekends. I wrote on stolen time and I liked it that way. It was always urgent; I always needed it, always treated it with the care it deserved. I queried and queried and re-queried. I understood that rejection was just part of the deal, *is* just part of the deal. There's no accounting for taste or preference. Most of us will never examine why our preferences and tastes are what they are. Most of us will never examine the content of our preferences. I accept this.

After two years of knocking on the doors of The Industry, I can see that it might be time to move on. Some of the most powerful gatekeepers are actually the most honest, the most helpful. We are impressed by what you're doing, they say, but there's only room for a few like you each year—it's all the market can bear—and this just isn't your year.

I come across an edited volume published by CLASH Books (TRAGEDY QUEENS) and I see a publisher that is totally unafraid of difficult, subversive, imperfect art, much of it made by women and other invisible people, willing to take chances on unknown writers and misfits—willing to take all kinds of chances. I send them my book and they really like it and they enthusiastically offer me a contract.

The indie world is still a market, but it finds room for me—and more and more like me—because it is not rigidly beholden to the extant rules of the market in quite the same ways as The Industry. This is exciting! I start telling people, just a few at first, because after eight years with this book I am honestly waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the deal to fall through.

3.

I have my first inkling that Something Is Up when I tell someone at a party—not someone I know well, but someone I know—and he asks *Did you sleep your way into this deal?*

Did I sleep my way into an indie publishing deal? Is he joking? I slept my way into a publishing deal for a book about climate change and many kinds of death and a woman seeking agency in forms (and on terms) other than her sexual currency?

Is he joking? It doesn't matter if he is joking; this is what he is moved to ask.

I tell one of my editors about this exchange and she says *Next time, just look right at them and tell them yes, you fucked me.* We laugh about it and I need this laughter; I didn't think this in-the-flesh scrutiny would arrive so quickly. We laugh about how the joke's on the guy who asked the question—no doubt he

imagined me fucking a powerful man, not a powerful woman. (Full disclosure: my book was edited by my editor's husband as well, since they run the press together.)

The possibility that I earned this because I sent a great book to a great indie press who loved it is not something he wants to entertain.

I watch as it morphs and shape-shifts—the Something Is Up. They say it in different ways, but even friends are skeptical, ready to dismiss. *If I had time like you*, some say, *I would also write books*.

Time like me? I think each time. *Have you tried to cobble together part time employment and school and childcare and endless job application as you wrote a book, as agent after agent and editor after editor said No thanks, sorry hun?*

I know that my privilege has made much of me possible. That one word that works so hard, that demands so much work of us, that one word that requires interrogation of our entire lives. I do it. I have needed to do it, to stay alive. Imbalances of power create imbalances of responsibility, I know. And I take my responsibilities seriously. I write to understand them, to know them, to see if and how I can meet them.

But I don't think that's what *If I had time like you* is about.

4.

Someone mentions my name in correspondence with a famous journalist. He thought I knew the famous journalist but I did not. He was rushing to put together a pitch—an editor wanted something from him immediately. This sort of thing happens.

The journalist takes to twitter, mocking him, and me, by proxy. My inbox explodes that weekend.

Was it nice people wishing me well? Was it curious readers wondering what my upcoming book is about? Was it, even, people I know who follow the journalist and were perplexed to see my name in her twitter feed who just wanted some friendly gossip? I'll give you one guess.

The most alarming: *Watching you, bitch*, he says. *Will find every last piece of so-called philosophy you wrote*, he says.

5.

I spend a sleepless night trying to scrub the internet of my presence before I realize that it's pointless. I delete my thoroughly *meh* publications on academia.edu from five years ago—the last remaining bits of evidence that I once entertained the hope of the possibility of a proper academic career. I make all my newly-public accounts private and for a brief second I wonder if I should forget about the book and try to cancel publication.

But the truth is that none of this is news to me. *If only* this guy were the first to call me a bitch or a fake philosopher or an idiot. For as long as my memory stretches back, there hasn't been a single year of my life that didn't involve some variation on this exchange. Not a single year of my life.

I was only eleven years old when I won the schoolwide spelling bee and a classmate, Tom, interrupted our teacher's congratulatory speech to show everyone something on his hand. The teacher hadn't even managed to say congratulations to me by the time Tom spoke. He had drawn all over his hand with red marker and he said *Look everyone, my hand is red from finger-banging Lindsay because she has her period.*

Everything in me changed that day. I knew it would never stop. I knew my years would be filled with Toms putting me in my place, threatening me, holding me down, holding me back, breaking me every way they knew how. I was right.

6.

I lay awake and ask myself the questions I have always had to ask myself: Should I just be quiet? If I am quiet forever, will they leave me alone? Can I fool them into thinking I'm quietly dignified, can I earn their respect? (No, I can't.) Can all this be worth it? Is it worth it? The book isn't even out yet.

I get in touch with the famous journalist and I say *I'm afraid of the messages I'm getting, my employment is always precarious, I am in fact a real person, and I know it would have taken you only two seconds to block out my name.*

Did he [journalist friend] tell you to ask me to take the tweets down? she asks. No, I say. *This is me, vulnerable person, saying that I'm afraid of the messages your tweet has caused people to send me.*

Well I did look you up, she says, *and I confirmed that you are not really a public presence, but if I were you, I'd be humiliated to have been included in that original email.* The email she posted on twitter, with my name right at the top.

The subtext is all I can see. I have another sleepless night.

I did look you up, she says, and the subtext is that she very quickly deemed me worthless relative to her need to do reputation-building, image-crafting—a nice set of *sick owns* on twitter.com that a little nobody lady like me should be embarrassed to have been dragged into. Even she—defender of the vulnerable—was telling me: This is how much of a no one you were. Are.

Is this what it takes to “make it”? It haunts me. Still.

These are the stakes, this time in even more personal terms, weaponized by someone I had hoped would be incapable of such weaponization: Who is valuable and who is expendable?

7.

I think the way I've trained myself to think, after all these years in and out of the academy, throwing everything I can at the question, letting it haunt me until I coil my life around trying to think through it, but I will keep hitting the same wall. I want some ruby slippers to click.

I can already see it and there's nothing I can do about it: What are the systems at work and how are they working to distinguish the valuable from the expendable? But the systems—the system of systems—it's all just too vast. It's a monster.

I like monsters, I like thought too vast to conform to the precise contours of a problem, but something about this is different.

And if I do get to speak one day—say The Industry deems me palatable or even valuable—whose work will I be doing? Why will I have been declared worth listening to? Can I ever set the terms? Will I ever set the terms?

8.

Commodification is problematic, I don't know if you know that, another one tells me. The tone suggests a deep need in him to let me know that I'm punching above my weight.

Maybe he's worried about my soul. Maybe he's worried that I haven't thought it all through adequately. Or he wants me to say, *You must be right, please tell me how to do this*. I'll give you one guess.

A writer friend of mine calls himself the liver of the world. He is a particularly active site for de- and re-territorialization, I think he means. He processes it all because he can't not, and he pays the price for it, year after year. But this friend has *never once* had a stranger or a friend call him a whore or a bitch or suggest he slept his way into something or question his right to exist, to speak.

These days I wonder if there's an even darker meaning, a harder meaning. My friend the liver sends the question straight into the core of me: Whose work am I doing? Whose work will I be doing, five years from now, ten years from now, twenty years from now, assuming I get to live for that long, assuming I am still writing?

9.

These are not new questions. I know this.

But I am inhabiting them in new ways, seeing how they feel in me on a Sunday morning at 7am, like Audre Lorde says. Audre Lorde who also says: the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. People keep trying to prove her wrong. Has anyone succeeded?

The other day someone unusually perceptive took one look at me and said *I hear you'll have your first book out soon. How are people treating you?* He kept looking and said *You've got to know how little of it has to do with you. You are showing them all their fears.* I should name this one because he was oxygen. This one—this artist—Paul Rucker, was offering me his wisdom, hard-won I'm sure, over the course of many years, telling me *You can do this, keep going* and I am not exaggerating when I say it was oxygen. He was oxygen.

But still, these questions will not leave me. If you are like me, you need to know why you're asking them.

This is all I've got for now, and I need you to help me remember if I ever forget it: I want to live. I have to figure out how to live. I have to live as more and other than the sum of the violences done to me. I have to. We all have to. These are the stakes.