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Zinzi Clemmons

165: Weaving Fiction from Reality

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello, hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Today's show notes are over at diymfa.com/165 because it's Episode 165. Also, DIY MFA Radio was brought to you by our amazing fans and supporters on Patreon. If you'd to become a patron of the show and get some awesome juicy bonuses, hop on over to patreon.com/diymfa to learn more.

Now, today, I have the honor of hosting Zinzi Clemmons on the show. A debut author of a gorgeous novel, What We Lose, Zinzi has already taken the literary world by storm. She is raised in Philadelphia by a South African mother and an American father. She's the graduate of Brown and Columbia universities, like whoa, and her writing has appeared in Zoetrope: All Story, The Paris Review Daily, Transition, and many, many other awesome literary magazines. She is the co-founder and former publisher of Apogee Journal, and the contributing editor to Literary Hub. Zinzi lives in Los Angeles with her husband. So, welcome, Zinzi. It's a pleasure to have you on the show.

Zinzi Clemmons: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

GP: I always like to start off by talking about the story behind the story. I think for your book, this is particularly interesting, right, because it tends to be somewhat autobiographical. Can you tell us what exactly inspired you to write this book, and in particular, to write this book in this way?

ZC: Yeah, I think in many ways, this question is probably the first that springs to mind, and the question that I've gotten most consistently through interviews and now readings, has been how this story relates to my own. And it does in fact come from my personal experience. Unfortunately, I lost my mom to cancer a few years ago, about 5 or 6 years now.

When that happened, I'd just finished my MFA at Columbia, my coursework at least, and I decided to come back home and stay with her for the, what ended up being the last few months of her life. I basically played her caretaker. At the time, I was also working on another novel, actually, for my thesis at Columbia. It was sort of serving as a distraction, I think, from what was going on.

For that reason, it was on a very different topic and it was also written very differently. It was more of a traditional novel, character-driven, plot-driven novel. While I wrote that, some of these reflections on what I was going through at the time sort of showed up in the manuscript, and I showed it to my agent later on, and she identified those parts that were actually about my mom and not about the subject. And she said, "These are really compelling and you should focus on them, develop them."

The other book ended up not working, and I ended up throwing it in the trash and starting from a handful of pages that were on this topic. Those were the journal entries that I was kind of taking at

the time when I was witnessing what was happening to my own mother. Some of those ended up making it into the book. Those are the really short, really kind of pithy reflections on loss and on illness that I think you wouldn't really arrive at unless you've been through the experience yourself.

I started with that really raw experience, those really raw passages. And from there, I started seeing connections between that work and some themes that I had been dealing with throughout my writing career. I started writing in college, and from there just kind of connected those dots and assembled a larger story.

I made Thandi into a distinct character, and started to chart out her life. That's really how it began. I always thought of it as a work of fiction because I didn't want to be limited to my own story, and I wanted to be free to express everything that I sort of felt. So, I tried to just start from my own experience, but really make it a lot bigger than that and make it into something different. It was very organic from there, what kind of resulted from it.

GP: Wow. There are so many things that I want to unpack in what you just said, because there's so much in there.

ZC: Sure.

GP: First of all, this idea of—So, the fact that you chose to write it as fiction, to me, is fascinating, because it is pretty closely tied to your real-life experience. So, then how did you choose which pieces of reality went into the book, and when you wanted to deviate? I mean, you touched on it with this idea of wanting it to be bigger, but how did that thought process really come into play?

ZC: Yeah, I mean, the way I wrote the book was I spent about two years writing, and most of the writing took place at first. So, it took about three or four years total. I spent the first two years just intensively writing, and I spent about a year to two years extensively revising. It was during that process of revision, when I really kind of took the story in a different direction.

I never really paid that much attention to what felt more like memoir, what felt more like fiction. To me, what was really important was just kind of representing the story well. When I went through that process of revision, I was looking more to construct a story and that came down to changing certain details, you know, adding certain character traits. I think more than orienting the story around memoir versus fiction, I was just orienting it around making the story the best that it could be in itself. I didn't think too much about what was true or what was not. And I guess it was that freedom in making those choices that I really wanted to guarantee for myself.

GP: That's fantastic. I wanted to chime in and sort of highlight for our listeners because I think a lot of people often, I mean, myself included at some point back when I was in graduate school, I wrote the typical graduate school novel, where you're writing about a person who's a writer, who's kind of living that writer-life in New York or wherever. It's very much the, you know, autobiography masked as fiction thing. For me, let's just say it did not go well at all. It was especially a pointed moment for me when my class, my workshop said, "You know, this character is just not likable." I was like, "Oh God." [laughs] right? Like, that's just awful.

ZC: That's scary. Yeah.

GP: Yeah. I know. But I think there's—I think the fact that you were looking at it as its own story and really just weighing out what makes the story the best that it can be and freed yourself of that reality

versus fiction dichotomy, I think that is sort of the key that helps, that could help people unlock the autobiographical novel concept. Because I think if I had been thinking of that, I probably wouldn't have gone down certain roads that ended not so well for me back in graduate school.

ZC: Yeah. I think that lesson can sort of extend to other ways in which I wrote this book. I think in general, one thing that I have always told myself whenever I sit down to write is to really seal off the part of my brain that will worry about what a reader will think. So for me, you know, there are personal aspects of this book. There are parts of it that are ugly and that can really offend and that are embarrassing. And in order to tell a story fully, and—You know, honesty is really important part of writing for me, and to just be as honest as I can with the reader, not about my own life, but more about like how I see things, and in order to do that—I think really in order to make any good piece of art, you have to really not focus on the outcome or how other people will interpret it.

So that whole memoir versus fiction thing is a part of it, but it really is how I approach writing in general. I think it's an important thing for other writers to do also, is not worry about how they'll be received or how it might be published or any of those things.

GP: This also dovetails really nicely to another thing that I wanted to kind of tackle and unpack with you, the fact that there are some pretty big topics in this book. I mean, this book deals with dual nationality and kind of having a foot in two different countries, it deals with race, it deals with illness. I mean, there are a lot of big heavy topics. And so I think the fact that that same idea of not thinking too hard about what other people will think, I mean, did that contribute to those other aspects of the book as well?

ZC: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there are many ways in which this book is not what a publisher wants. I was told that over and over.

[laughter]

GP: And yet here you are, right?

ZC: Yeah. And again, I think you can kind of chalk that up to, again, me just not caring, or at least just refusing to act in accordance with that. A really nice review came out, I think it was yesterday in Bitch Magazine, of the book, and I really loved it. And particularly because it focused on the ways in which the book defies expectations on a formal level. There was this one sentence where the reviewer said, "It's an experimental novel that plays outside of the lines of what is expected of cisgender white men."

I think a lot of that element of surprise and the feeling that, "This is a book that is unconventional and is big," is because we're not really used to reading this type of book from someone like me, and there is an expectation—There are certain expectations of writers of color, of female writers, but also of people who are working in a more experimental form. We're not really used to people who are focused on aesthetics, also focusing on politics and culture and race and those kinds of topics. I think we tend to sort of separate them into silos.

And for me, that's just who I am. I think about aesthetics. I think about innovation. I also think a lot about race. I think about relationships and family and gender, and how women relate to each other. And so for me, it was a very natural thing to combine these, but I think it's something that we're not used to seeing in literature, but it's really authentic to who I am and how I think.

GP: You know, it's interesting that you say that because I think in the beginning, literature was both experimental and political, right? I mean, we look back at literature like the ancients and the stuff that

they were doing that was really—I mean, look at Sao and like stuff that is happening that can be both, you know, experimental, but also aesthetically beautiful, and also making a statement about the culture.

And yet, I think it's like over, you know, however many thousands of years, somehow, we've had that beaten out of our brains, and now it's like, we all have to paint inside the lines and it's all neat and tidy. So, I love that. You know, it's kind of like in a way, it's almost like doing what literature was set out to do in the first place. And yet, it's now this big experimental thing, which I think is kind of awesome. So, kudos for that.

ZC: I'm glad you said that. I totally agree.

[laughter]

ZC: It's completely right.

GP: Yeah. And so another piece of it too, and this is something that for me hit home very personally, because as a Brazilian American raised with one foot in each continent, I felt a lot of kinship to Thandi because I felt like a— You know, obviously the racial factors were not an issue for me growing up because my family's white, but Brazil is sort of a weird melting pot on its own. There was always this feeling of like, I'd go to Brazil and I was the gringo cousin who, you know, spoke with— It's almost like I spoke too well Portuguese, like I was constantly being told I didn't use enough slang. So, I wasn't really Brazilian. And then in The US, I was like the weird kid who like listened to weird music and ate weird food at home, but OMG one time it was a bake sale and I'd bring in brigadeiros, everybody loved me.

[laughter]

GP: So, it was like this weird dichotomy of living in both worlds, and very few books talk about that and talk about that feeling of displacement. Can you tease that apart a little bit for us because clearly it ties to your own experience, but then also the way Thandi experiences it in the book is also her own. So, can you tell us a little bit more about that?

ZC: Yeah. First, I'm really glad to hear that and I'm glad you found the book, and found a sort of touchstone. I think in general, and this is not just a problem in literature, it's actually probably more a problem in our culture, in American culture that we really look for simple answers to complex problems.

And people like you and I, who don't fit easily into a box that we represent a problem for representation and culture. We serve as easy explanations and easy categorizations. And that's just the way that we're used to dealing with race in our country, unfortunately. It's not that way everywhere, but it's definitely so here. I think those expectations are reflected in literature. This is really a matter of gatekeepers is that my book did encounter a certain amount of resistance when I was shopping at it.

You know, I got a lot of rejections. A lot of those were about sales concerns, because it does not fit into categories easily. And the way that it talks about race is not in an easy way. It doesn't wrap it up with a bow. And it is sort in between in the way that you describe.

But what I've kind of found coming now out on the other end of this situation is that even though the gatekeepers may not value these kinds of stories, or they may find them, you know, might make them nervous on a sales level, the response from people has been really wonderful, and they've embraced the book.

I think it kind of speaks to the expectations of culture, and especially, like a corporatized literary industry, don't really address the needs and the desires of readers in a real way. I think readers want to see that complexity and want to be confounded by complicated stories. And again, just being able to tell that story well, and try and do face to what life is actually like is what we're here for, you know?

[laughter]

ZC: That is what life is. Life is about gray areas, and writing is about representing those gray areas. And so it was something that was very important to me, is also important that it was preserved in this book.

GP: I love that, and I love that—I love that you were able to preserve that, that you like, held up against whatever pushback you got, because I think it's so important for this type of story to be told exactly because it's not the cut-and-dry explanation of race or nationality. I think people don't quite realize not to get über political here, but I think most people in the United States—

ZC: Okay, don't handle it.

GP: —don't quite realize how ingrained it is in our culture. I'll give an example, personal one in my life. I have the biggest problem with any legal document, because I have a two-word first name that is way too long to go in the blank that most official forms in the United States go. So, if you're Mary Lou, that works just fine, you can have a two-word first name. If you're Maria Gabriela, that's a much bigger problem. It totally affects everything from your identity and how you are then identified as a person legally or whatever. It's complicated. And it's a fundamental thing, how many spaces they have in the stupid forms at the DMV or at whatever office. And yet, it affects people's lives in a very deep way.

Obviously, I'm not alone in this. I have friends who have very long last names or whatever, and that also causes issues, so I love that this book brings to light in sort of an organic way, all these little nuances that a lot of people don't realize exist. And yet, I think it's very important for us to realize it so that we can all sort of coexist more happily.

ZC: Yeah. You know, I think even if people don't experience that in sort of broad strokes in their lives, so in relation to something like nationality or race or gender, there are smaller ways in which we sometimes need to complicate how we identify or certain aspects of our lives. I think most people will encounter a situation where they don't feel like one explanation or one group manages to encompass who they are, or who someone that they love is. It's a human experience. I think the more avenues we open through art and through literature to allow people to understand that concept, you're ultimately doing the sort of greater good, and that was really important to me.

GP: Absolutely. I mean, think just politically, how many people were part of the Republican Party who are now feeling displaced, or like they don't quite belong given how things have gone in the past nine months. So, I think it is, things are a lot more in that the shades of grey zone than the black and white extremes. I think the more we have stories like this that elucidate those shades of grey, the more people from any experience can start to find out how to navigate those in-between moments.

Another piece of it that I think is just so beautiful and poignant and just, I mean, heroine, at times, is the cancer aspect in the book. So, Thandi's mother has cancer. And obviously, this again ties to your own experience. Can you talk a little bit about the role that the disease plays in the book? Because it doesn't feel like a cancer novel, it feels like a novel where the protagonist's mother has cancer. So, can you talk about that, and how you make it part of the book without making it dominate the book?

ZC: I think probably what you mean by a cancer novel, what comes to mind when I think of that, that sort of genre or sub-genre is one that really can border on melodramatic, but is very self-indulgent. I don't mean that to attribute certain value to it because there are some cancer stories that I've really liked. But from what I've seen, especially in the popular sphere, they tend to focus on the emotions surrounding it. They're very emotional and they're sort of inward looking.

I think the difference in this book is that there is that inward-looking, there are those parts that are very inward-looking and that are focusing on emotions, but there's also a very large part of the book that tries to treat cancer or tries to analyze it as sort of a cultural or sociological force. These are the parts where I talk about where Thandi says that she thought about cancer as a disease of privilege. And then when she actually experiences it and kind of steps into some of the spaces where it's being dealt with in hospitals and in different locations, the reality doesn't square with the idea that she had in her mind.

A lot of that is related to race. I've always noticed that in commercials, if you visit websites and literature from cancer foundations, they tend to, they're sort of like most marketing campaigns. [laughs] They're mostly white people, and they try to sell an image that is sort of pleasing and they think that people will identify with, because they're trying to raise money. In certain ways, they have the same ends as any other corporation. It's interesting that that's how they've chosen to sell the disease. It creates a sort of dissonance between, again, the reality and the media representation. And the reality is, as I say in the epigraph of the book and the second quote, is that the diagnosis rates for the most part are about the same regardless of race, but the people who are most affected by these diseases and who will suffer the worst from them and often die are people of color and people who suffer more in general.

And so it was really important for me when I was going through this myself, I noticed these things. It was important for me to remember them and reflect on them. And it was important that I sort of put that out there for other people. I think also because it was something helpful for me to get through it, to be able to see this as something that affects not just me, but affects a lot of people in this world, and to sort of think about how they deal with it also. It helped me to get outside of my own experience and to start actually doing work in that area.

You know, you always feel better when you're in a situation where you're really out of control to kind of take control of something, and to try and understand it, and try to interact with it. And so it was really important to me on a personal level when I experienced it, and also when I was writing about it later, and something that I could kind of pass on to readers, especially readers who have experienced it themselves.

GP: I love that you said that and that you unpacked that. I mean, for me, obviously, I haven't experienced cancer either in my own life or with someone who's very close, but for me, I've also had similar experiences. I've shared this with my listeners in the past because of mental illness and having bipolar, which in some ways is not parallel, but there are a lot of commonalities here. I mean, there is a certain sense that certain mental illnesses are illnesses of privilege. Notice how a lot of those commercials on TV, the same ones that you're referring to, are also very skewed white in the television commercials for medications. And also, they tend to give a very, what's the word, kind of rose-colored glasses look of what it really is to have these illness.

I've been lucky to have gotten intervention before things got really bad. But I remember, like when you're in the emergency room, it's a very equalizing scenario. Everyone, you might have someone with a gunshot wound, you might have someone who's, you know, not with a gunshot wound, but at the end of the day, everyone who's in there is pretty darn sick. There's something about that, that

kind of, when people are at their most vulnerable where you sort of realize, "Okay, we're all, we're kind of in this together." I don't know. I just remember this moment where, having an experience like that and realizing, "This is what it feels like to be really vulnerable and also really human." So, I think there's something to that about illnesses that kind of break us down, but also pull us together.

ZC: I think so. I'm glad you bring up mental illness, because this is another area where, it's not the same as something like cancer.

GP: Of course.

ZC: There's different issues you're dealing with. One of them is stigma, especially within the black community and communities of color. You really do see the difference between access to treatment, really, is so key. It's really important to, especially in cases like that, that these stories are told, you know, from the perspective of people of color, specifically. It does tend to ease that stigma, and it makes people feel more okay about seeking treatment and about being open and supporting other people who are going through it.

That's also a very big part of it. I think the way that people tend to treat illness in general is like, you're either healthy or you're not, but that's not the situation. We're touched by illness in many small ways in our lives. It's important to see that it's sort of a constant, and we shouldn't just think of it, as you said, when we get to our most vulnerable points. It's something that we should think about and really hold compassion for, I think, in every aspect of our lives.

GP: Absolutely. I could not agree with you more. I think what you touched on also is the idea of this ripple effect, right? Like, it never really occurred to me how much my own illness could affect the people around me until it actually did. And then all of a sudden, you begin to see those layers, those ripples as it extends outward and how far out that effect can have. And when treatment isn't available to people, that doesn't just impact the person at the center of the ripple, that affects all the people around them, which can be a very big group of people. So, I love that you said that.

What's next for you? Do you have any projects in the works, anything exciting that you'd like to share with our listeners?

ZC: When Viking bought What We Lose, they also bought another book from me. I'm thinking that it'll probably be an essay collection because they do also write quite a bit of nonfiction. Readers of the book will not be surprised by that.

[laughter]

ZC: But I love writing essay. I love being able to deal with issues in both fiction and in nonfiction, kind of, addressing them more directly. I'm always working on like two to three essay ideas at a time currently behind deadline on a couple of them. But that's sort of what I'll be focusing on in the near term.

In the long term, fiction really takes a lot out of me. I think it'll be a while before I dive back into another novel, but the issues that I started dealing with in What We Lose, maybe less so illness, but definitely identity, race, relationships, parenthood, those things, those are perennial topics for me. And in a novel, I can imagine myself just going deeper with them.

GP: And the novel that you were writing when What We Lose began to appear, that's just gone. You tossed that. It is permanently out of the picture?

ZC: Yeah. It's one of those—Throwing out a book is a really tough, emotional experience. [laughs]

GP: I can imagine. I was hoping you could unpack that for our listeners because it's a hard decision to make, but sometimes you have to do that. How did you know that, that you'd kind of gone as far as you could with that project and it was time to just put it away?

ZC: Well, I was very lucky because I have an agent who is very honest.

[laughter]

ZC: She actually told me—You know, I had my own feelings when I was writing it. I didn't feel like I was fully connecting with the subject matter. It was actually about a character who had HIV, because I didn't have enough closeness with the topic in my personal life. I felt like I was approaching it much more from a sort of conceptual or topical angle, and I wasn't fully connecting with the character. I knew that on some level, but I wasn't admitting it to myself. So, when I showed it to my agent, she sort of confirmed it to me.

And just because this is a writing show, and we're talking about craft, that hurdle of throwing things away, which every novel writer does. It's actually a really important step of starting to refine your idea, because you can write about anything you want, but in order to get closer to the topic that you need to be writing about, you do have to throw things in the trash, you have trial and error. You just have to try them and go through them. When you do throw things out, it can feel really devastating at the time, but it does mean that you're getting closer to what you should be doing. So, I try to, for friends and students, I try to tell them not to be afraid of it, and not to get too attached to the material, but just to keep going really.

GP: I think also, the other side of that same coin, is what you said. If you throw something away, you're that much closer to the thing that will be the right project for you. I think oftentimes, as writers, we get hung up on the act of throwing this thing that we think is, "Oh, so close to being done," but it's really not, throwing that away. And we sort of forget that this thing is actually impeding us from reaching the thing we should be working on.

ZC: Yeah, absolutely.

GP: I always end every interview with the same question. What's your number one tip for writers?

ZC: This relates to what I just said. I've always been the person who just tries really hard. You know, if there's somebody I want to talk to, I'll talk to them. I won't take no for an answer. I just keep going. I think that's really the most important quality that any writer needs to have is when you hear the "no," don't listen to it, just keep going. If you believe that you have a story to tell, don't stop until you've told it.

GP: I love that. It's an interesting counterpoint, because on one hand, it's, you know, don't stop on the right project, but then also, know when to stop, which you were talking about before. How do you know the difference? Is there like a feeling you get when you know it's a "don't stop" project versus a "oh yes, please, put it in the trash stop" project.

ZC: Yeah. I always get this feeling that is sort of like fear when I've written something good. I think that comes from knowing that I've like exposed myself in some way. I think what that is that I managed to tell the truth about something. That's always my goal. You should feel like you're putting a little bit of yourself on the page. I think also when you feel that fear, you feel a little bit exposed just because you're invested in the topic.

GP: Like the stakes are higher.

ZC: The stakes are higher, yeah. Whenever I start to feel like that, I know I've kind of hit something. And also when I can't stop thinking about it, and it's—Again, it's something that you learn to recognize the more that you do it. It's going to be slightly different for anyone. But the more you sort of fail and keep going, and eventually you succeed in some small way, you learn on how to distinguish the two from each other. And that's where that advice comes back around is you just have to keep doing it.

GP: Such great advice. I love it. Thank you so much, Zinzi, for being on the show today, it was a blast speaking with you.

ZC: Yeah. Thank you so much for your questions. It was great talking with you.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing, and keep being awesome.