INTERVIEW
WITH LAUREN GROFF
Author Lauren Groff has written multiple books, most recently *Florida* (2018), a finalist for the 2018 National Book Award in Fiction. Groff, who is currently a Suzanne Young Murray Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, has received numerous awards and recognitions, including her novel *Fates and Furies* (2015) being lauded as then-president Obama’s book of the year in 2015. During her visit to Butler, Groff sat down with Manuscripts staff member Matt Del Busto to discuss the importance of failure, the morality of the sentence, and the dynamic between the writer and the author.

Matt Del Busto is a senior English creative writing and Spanish major with a special love of black beans, getting up before sunrise, and dad jokes. After graduating from Butler in May, he plans to get an MFA in poetry, learn how to use his credit card, and get a laptop that works without being plugged in.

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- Could I hear a little bit about your story to becoming a writer?

Sure. Like most writers, I was incredibly shy, just a very timid little girl. I loved books because I found in them a world I could control, and because I didn’t have to talk to people when I was reading. When I began to write, I thought I was a poet, but I didn’t know enough to write anything interesting. When I got to college, I learned I wasn’t, in fact, a poet, so I took a fiction class and that’s when I realized that fiction was what I really wanted to do.

- Did you study English in undergrad?

Yes, I was a dual major in English literature and French literature.

- Nice, that’s awesome. What sparked your interest in French literature?

I spent a year between high school and college in Nantes, France.

- Oh, wow.

It was lovely. Guy de Maupassant saved my life, because I was lonely and I didn’t speak the language very well. At the time there were bookstores where you could buy a book for five francs, which was about a dollar. I started reading French with Guy de Maupassant, and went on from there.

- There you go.

That’s what happened!

- So, I know you mentioned that you were interested in poetry first. Do you still find yourself reading or writing poetry or are you strictly fiction at this point?
I don’t write poetry, no, but I love reading it.

- **Sure.**

I think that prose writers need to be reading poetry. Reading poetry is a way of understanding how to sharpen your phrasing, how to use white space, how to do all sorts of things that if you just read prose you won’t ever learn how to do.

- **Yeah, of course. Awesome, so I was reading through past interviews you’ve done just to get some inspiration for questions and you had this awesome interview with Cody Delastraty for Longreads a couple years ago—**

He’s the loveliest, he’s really sweet.

- **It seemed like an awesome interview. But one thing that you said in there was, “I almost never feel like I know what I’m doing, which is actually a really exciting and wonderful feeling.” I think that’s a feeling that’s really important for writers to be able to embrace. But, I think for most of us who are writers, that’s the last thing we want to embrace. How have you been able to embrace sitting in the unknown?**

I think I had to change my idea about failure and what failure means. The older I get the more comfortable I am with it. What failure does is that it shows you the limits of what you think you can do so that you can either modify yourself or you can modify the thing that you want to be able to do. It’s a beautiful tool; embracing it is the way that you can change your perception of the work that you’re doing at the moment.

In early drafts, I’m writing something so that it can fail in an interesting way and show me what it is that I know and what I don’t know. Then, in embracing this disaster in front of me—being okay with the fact that it’s shitty and it’s a mess and it’s not going to be good in the state that it is in—I know that there will always be another draft that I’m going to finish to make the work less bad and less failed and less unknown. You slowly push your way through the process into a clearer conception of what you’re doing. But living within the unknown means living within the possibility of embarrassing yourself, of being ugly, and being okay with ugliness. I think that’s an important realization for any creative person to come to.
- So, you think it’s kind of a gradual learning process to accept that?

Yes. Particularly when we’re young we have these unrealistic expectations of youth and prodigy, where it seems as though, especially in the creative world, there’s an internal clock. But the truth is that we all need to put out a certain number of bad pages before we find the one that comes alive, and it doesn’t matter how long it takes for the page to start singing, as long as you’re committed to sitting there until it does. To have this feeling of pressure, this feeling that you need to be perfect on the first few passes, that seems very much to me like a young person’s perfectionism. The older you get the more comfortable you are with being okay with not being perfect the first time that you write something.

- Sure, and I listened to one interview where you said you do 10 to 12 drafts just long-hand before you start typing.

It’s a mess, I know.

- That’s a lot of writing. That’s impressive.

But you know, they’re not good drafts, they’re not interesting drafts and they don’t have full sentences. In fact, sometimes the first draft of anything is just like a handful of index cards.

- Sure.

And so it’s intentionally supposed to be erroneous and full of disaster.

- As you’re going through the drafting process, do you keep those old drafts for notes or is it something where you’ll write out however many pages and then you throw them out and then you know that you have that information in your head?

There have been times where I have gone back and thought, “Oh, maybe I said that better in the previous draft.” Every single time I think that, the reality is that, no, I said it better the second time around because I know more about the story; I know more about the characters; I know more about the room in which they’re sitting. Everything is enriched by the fact that I’ve been sitting with this story longer.

- Sure.
So you just throw it out, toss it out.

- Is it cathartic to throw it away?

Oh, it feels amazing.

- Because you’re finally done with that?

Yes, you’re done with the ugliness. Well, the next draft is still ugly, but at least it feels more beautiful.

- When do you know that you’re ready to make that switch from writing longhand to typing it out?

There’s always a moment when you realize that work has come alive, that you’re Dr. Frankenstein and the monster has twitched its head. It’s having the patience to get to that point where you’re able to just see the vital elements imposing themselves on you. Sometimes, it takes a long time; sometimes it only takes two drafts. It all depends on the project, but what is essential is the depth of listening, having the right quality of attention.

- Why do you think it’s necessary to start long hand?

Writing is physical; we pretend that it’s not by putting our early work on a computer. But we are physical creatures and everything we know is taken in through the body. I like to smell the paper, I like to smell the ink, I like to see the pores of the paper. I like to be invested in the work in a closer, more physical way because the physiology of typing is pushing the keyboard away; the sentences up to the blinking cursor look just like those on a perfect published page, right? It looks as though it’s almost already printed anyway.

- It does.

Writing longhand just allows you more capacity for error. I think it’s just a more beautiful process.

- For sure. Going back to that Longreads interview you were talking about Véra Nabokov, and you mentioned just how interesting that that character is and how it’d be possible to write a million different stories about her. That idea was interesting to me, and for any character who you’ve written drafts and drafts about, how do you
decide which single story of theirs is the one that turns into the novel or the short story?

When you write a novel or short story, you’re making many millions of tiny decisions as you go through the drafting process. Obviously with a novel there are many more tiny decisions than with a short story, but each decision that you make has a causal relationship to every other decision that you’re making and eventually some of the decisions are closed off by what is the absolute right decision. There is a place you come to when you understand that this telling is more truthful because of all the doors that you’ve closed and all the windows that you’ve closed up to that point.

- You just mentioned short stories versus novels. How does the production process look differently to you between those two?

They’re massively different. A novel you carry around with you. It’s the little ape on your shoulder that you feed throughout the course of the day. Everything that you go through goes into the novel—you go to the grocery store and you see something that will maybe be tossed into the open mouth of the novel. And you do this for years. A novel usually takes many years to write.

I have learned up to this point—after years of failure—to keep the idea of a short story in my head for as long as possible because what happens then is that life enriches the story in your subconscious. There’s a certain point when the story becomes so urgent you can’t actually see anything else, you only see that story and not the novel, not the other things you’re doing, and you have to sit down to write the story. That’s when I know that the story is ready to be written.

I try to do the first draft of the short story in one sitting; what I like about the short story is the energy of surfing to the shore with a single wave of energy. There so many moving parts to the novel. There’s always something that you need to be working on, making better, rewriting. With the short story it’s really about the harnessing of a great deal of energy.

- Are you someone who pursues multiple projects at the same time?

Yes.

- Do you always have half a dozen different stories, all kind of—
Yes. I think that I'm actively trying to work on multiple things at one time because I love the way that stories sort of cross-fertilize underneath the surface of your consciousness. But also, most of the stories that I write I have tried in different ways, and they don't work out, so I have to throw them back in the compost.

- **I think one thing about your writing that sticks out is the attention to detail, and maybe this is due in part to your inspiration from poetry, but that attention to detail specifically at the line level. How are you able to manage those minute details within the context of a three- or four-hundred-page novel?**

The gorgeous thing about doing a project where you write a draft and throw it out, write and throw out, is that details and ideas sort of begin to accrete. They start to live. By the time that you’re done, you know the story. You can hold it in your hands, all the pieces of it, too, and all you have to do in the final part—all the other decisions have been made—is to sort of squeeze the sentences and make sure that they’re true and moral.

I think that making the right decision in terms of a sentence is moral decision. It’s making sure that you’re being as truthful as you possibly can be, as correct as you possibly can be.

- **Talking about truth makes me think of how you’ve mentioned in past interviews how every fictional story is going to have autobiographical elements just like every memoir is probably going to have fictional elements. When you are writing fiction stories, is there a part of you that is aware that maybe part of it is autobiographical? Is there any sort of line that you try to toe between fiction and including autobiographical elements?**

Not when I’m writing, but when I’m editing, yes, that’s a question that comes up. When I’m writing I’m just trying to get at this platonic ideal that has been formed a little bit above my abilities. When I’m editing I like to play with the preconceived ideas that the reader may have about me through the biographical details she may think she knows. It’s like a waltz—you believe that you know these things about me, so I’m going to make you see them in the text, and then I’m going to send you spinning out and coming back in. It’s pure play. And a lot of the details in the work that you probably believe are from my life are not.

- **Sure.**
It’s fun.

_In one interview I read with you, from Lucie Shelly with The Paris Review, you spoke in there a good amount about the idea of time and kind of our desire to control it as people and how fixated we are on it. Do you feel like any of your interest in writing is being able to create an artifact, whether it’s a book or a collection of short stories, that could outlive you?_ 

This is interesting. I don’t know if, with climate change, if anything created right now will outlive the creator.

- **Sure.**

But what I do think that I’m doing when I’m writing fiction is that I’m creating a way to access time that we don’t normally get to access. We tend to live time as going forward like an arrow, because we are fallible human bodies that will disintegrate and decay. And in our memories we can go backwards, we can time travel backwards. Only in our imagination can we time travel forward into the future. With writing you are addressing a future reader who is reading the work of the past and sometimes shooting into the future, and you get to control the movement back and forth. I think fiction writing in is the most beautiful thing. It’s time travel! It’s creating out of the work of history a false memory that you can now insert into another person’s brain. That’s kind of beautiful.

- **Yeah, that’s kind of crazy.**

It’s really nuts! We’re all time travelers when we read a novel.

- **In the last five or ten years, your work and renown has really skyrocketed, with Fates and Furies being then-President Obama’s favorite book, among other exciting things. How do you feel about kind of writing more under the limelight now than five or 10 years ago? Is that something that’s exciting, is it something that’s frustrating, or is there really no difference?**

What’s hilarious is that there’s this bifurcation between the author and the writer. The author is the one who gets the acclaim or none at all; the writer is the person who has to bang her head against words every single day. If I’m not on tour doing interviews like this, I’m not the author; I’m the writer, and the writer has to deal with her own daily failure.
- *Sure.*

So, I actually don’t think about that other stuff. It doesn’t enter into the storytelling (until at least the editing part) and it’s a very deliberate decision to split the writer and the author, because if you do allow other people’s opinions or ideas of what you are or who you are as a writer, that will kill you. That will kill the stories. It’s good to resist any externalized impression of what you should be doing as much as you possibly can and to only focus on the thing at hand.

- *As far as now being an author and doing things like this and coming on tour and being someone who, in a sense, is a spokesperson for the literary community, is that a task that you enjoy having?*

I don’t see myself as a spokesperson, but I love doing talks and meeting people. My life is really quiet. It’s rigidly rule-bound, and it’s very regimented. Doing things like this campus visit allows me to meet people and have conversations and see places like Indianapolis. I love it.

- *That’s awesome. And as far as being a fiction writer, in one interview with the Harvard Gazette you talked about alienation as being a really rich and delightful place to be as a fiction writer. Could you explain that a little bit?*

Sure. I feel like with other modes of storytelling you can write from the interior but in fiction you can’t, because you always have to be set apart in order to observe. I think that for a fiction writer to feel like a misfit, to feel like someone who’s not really at ease, to feel as though she’s not part of the in-crowd, that’s really essential.

You start to see with older writers or even writers who get a lot of renown that they begin to internalize fame, and they start writing the things they think people want. They stop being interesting. Always having a little bit of an oppositional nature, or feeling as though you’re observing from the outside is massively important. This is also why most writers of fiction were the nerdy geeky kids that nobody liked.

- *Yeah.*

Yeah. (Laughs.) Because they’ve had lifelong practice with it.

- *Especially as far as you mentioned earlier, being an introvert, there’s just so much more natural seeing and observing of the world.*
Yeah, you take a step back a lot when you’re an introvert. It’s super helpful.

- How about as far as any of your readers who have read anything that you’ve written so far or even will write, is there any certain feeling or idea that you hope to leave readers with?

When you think of your own work it’s like looking at the texture of a piece of fabric from close up; you can’t actually see the pattern that others see from far away. But maybe my largest impulse is that I want readers to love humanity. And to know that even though we’re all extraordinarily flawed, I want us to work for betterment, even if betterment may not happen.

- Sure.

It’s very idealistic in some ways. I just want us to be better than we are.

- What do you think you of ten years ago would be most surprised about what present you is doing now?

Oh my God, ten years ago, where was I 10 years ago? I’d be surprised I still live in Florida, to be perfectly honest. I had a 10-year contract with my husband to live in Florida, which we’re now twelve years into. But I would be really happy that I’m still writing and still feeling the daily failure of writing. I think all I’ve ever wanted was just to write until I die. That I’m still doing it feels pretty good.

- So you’re currently on fellowship and you’re working—is it a captivity novel?

Yes, a captivity narrative.

- Captivity narrative, okay.

Inspired by Mary Rowlandson—well, sort of. The funny thing is when you propose these fellowships, it’s a year and a half before they begin and I’m kind of done with the project already. But, I’m working on something else that I don’t even understand right now.

- That’s exciting!

And I’m letting myself fail, yes! There’s a lot of failure happening daily.
For any readers who will look at this interview, is there any sort of advice you’d want to give aspiring writers?

Find the joy in what you’re doing. If you’re writing out of duty, that’s probably not going to be writing that’s going to fill you and come alive on its own. Find a way to love the work at hand.