

ADAM POTTLE

# NOTES ON A VIVISECTION

## *Becoming a Deaf writer*

Two years ago, I released a book called *Voice: On Writing with Deafness*. Published by the University of Regina Press, it is part of a series on the craft of writing. In the book, I spoke about growing up Deaf in a hearing family and how learning to accept myself as a Deaf person coincided with my development as a writer. “I wouldn’t be a writer,” I said, “if I wasn’t Deaf.”

To this day, I feel ambivalent about writing that book. First, I was convinced I had nothing valuable to say about the craft of writing. I was thirty-five when the book came out—not a teeny-bopper, but also not a sage. I’d been taught that writing wisdom must come from elders with white hair and stores of experience to draw upon rather than upstart little shits like me. Also, as a Deaf person, I worried that whatever I had to say wouldn’t be useful to anyone except me.

Second, it was personal. Writing the book was like performing a slow vivisection on myself. I had to peel myself open and probe through the detritus. I much prefer working behind the shield of fiction, exploring memories and experiences symbolically instead of facing them head-on. Not because I’m a coward—or maybe because I am. The distance of fiction allows for clearer vision. Things make more sense when filtered through people who’ve never lived and events that have never taken place. Nonfiction brings me close to the subject. It’s difficult to write when the people you know and the things you’ve experienced are crowding right before your eyes. You need to shove them into bottles, date them, and label them, a messy process.

Third, I knew the book would become outdated. I’m still developing as a person and as an artist. I am still becoming comfortable being Deaf and using American Sign Language. I’m trying to treat myself more gently and seek positive, understanding relationships to help combat a lifetime of internalized ableism, which the book explores in depth.

I had all these thoughts before *Voice* came out in March 2019. I look back on the book now, and that ambivalence flutters in the recesses of my mind. I feel fraudulent.

Perhaps I should ask the University of Regina Press to stop selling the book? Many things have made me question my experiences; some are set in type within that book and cannot be revised or excised. A few years ago, I wrote a play called *The Black Drum*, the world’s first all-Deaf musical performed in Toronto and at a Deaf arts festival in Reims, France, just a few months after *Voice* was released. At the festival, I plunged into the Deaf world; I saw thousands of Deaf people speaking dozens of Sign Languages in one place. It wasn’t culture shock. It was a cultural lightning storm that left me shaken.

But as I write this article—writing being the vehicle through which I do my most generous thinking—my ambivalence is tempered by the tender warmth of peace.

I’ve always felt my writing was missing something. Even in my best work, I feel there’s a level I didn’t achieve, an intangible value that my idols (Richard Van Camp, Albert Camus, Eden Robinson, Toni Morrison, Claudia

Rankine, among others) possess. This value functions like cartilage, tying the lines of text together into tight pulsing masses so the pages throb with the immediacy of a quickened heart. My writing, by comparison, is nought but stale air.

But then I realized that’s the ableism talking.

Last July, I began writing a new novel, the first novel I’ve ever written featuring a Deaf protagonist. I had this story in my head for years, but I could never write it. I didn’t have the experience to do so: part of the novel focuses on the protagonist learning to Sign (albeit under unusual circumstances). I had to wait until I understood the beauty of Sign Language, until I inhabited its muscular cadences and exhilarating tempo. It is by far the most challenging novel I’ve ever written. How do you write from the perspective of someone who has no language, as my protagonist does for the first half of the novel? And converting Sign to text is like trying to wrestle a river into a shoebox. I’ve had days where I managed only 20 words. Text runs in rigid lines from left to right, Sign Language flows in all directions. A person using Sign conjures objects out of thin air. If French is the language of love, Sign is the language of imagination.

Internalized ableism convinces you that no matter how good your work is, something will always be wrong with it. I’ve published four books, and whenever I think about them, I still ponder the errors I left with them. I hope that once I finish the first draft of this novel, I will have

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only the writer's typical insecurity about it and not the added burden of ableism.

My writing has changed in these last two years; I think for the better. Maybe it would've changed even if I had not written *Voice*, but I don't think it would have changed as much or as quickly. I have lowered the shield of fiction—my subject matter is hitting closer to home. I'm not comfortable with that, but Martin Scorsese said that the most personal is the most creative, so I will trust in that and trust in myself. That's the writer's journey: developing trust in your abilities and your perspective and liberating yourself through words.

When you perform a vivisection on yourself, you can't sew yourself up again. You stay open, and you can choose to remain in place and fester, with all your

experiences necrotizing, or you can rearrange and preserve your experiences with care, all while pursuing new endeavours in your vulnerable state, cultivating strength and beauty within that vulnerability.

Growth is a lifelong endeavour. I never want to stop learning. The world is infused with possibilities, and it's heartbreaking many people choose stasis. I dare to continue growing, as it sometimes requires me to make excruciating choices. I hope I become gentler and more welcoming as a person and in my art.

But growth, artistic and personal, means nothing if we don't remember how we got there. When you climb a mountain, you take your body and all the work preparing for the climb. Memories are a writer's work, a writer's preparation. Fortunately,

I've put all my vital memories into a box. I may feel differently about them over time—they may take on a brighter glow or a grimmer pall. They may shapeshift; they may fade away. That's okay. That's what growth is. Life is the practice of perpetual revision. We're continually rewriting our own stories—at least we should be—and that means leaving older stories behind.

I'm tired of questioning myself. I'm tired of ambivalence. I prefer to create.

So that's what I'll do. Gratefully. ■

*Adam Pottle is a Deaf author whose recent works include the memoir *Voice: On Writing with Deafness*, the groundbreaking musical *The Black Drum*, and the award-winning novella *The Bus*. He is working on a new novel. Pottle lives in Saskatoon.*



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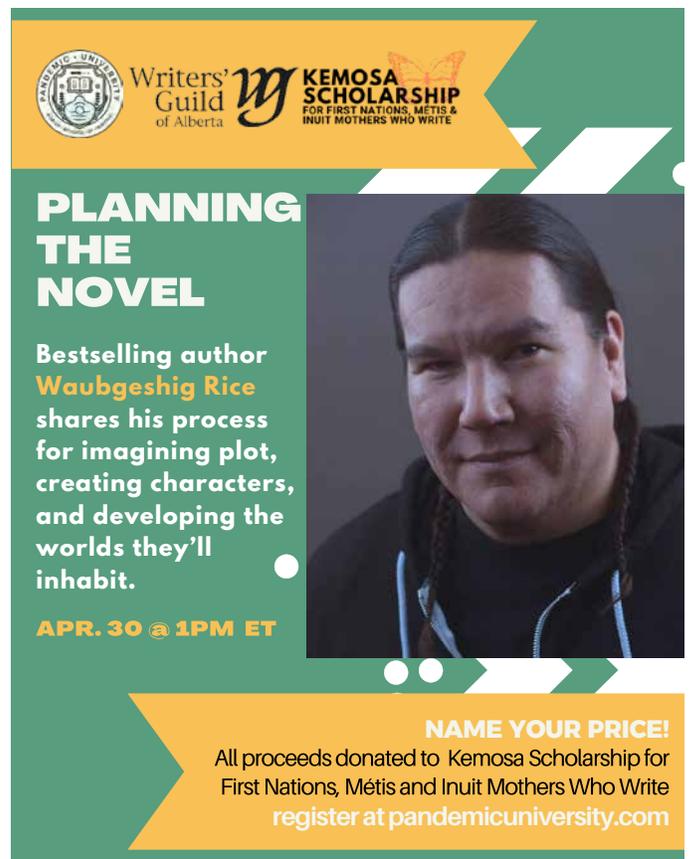
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