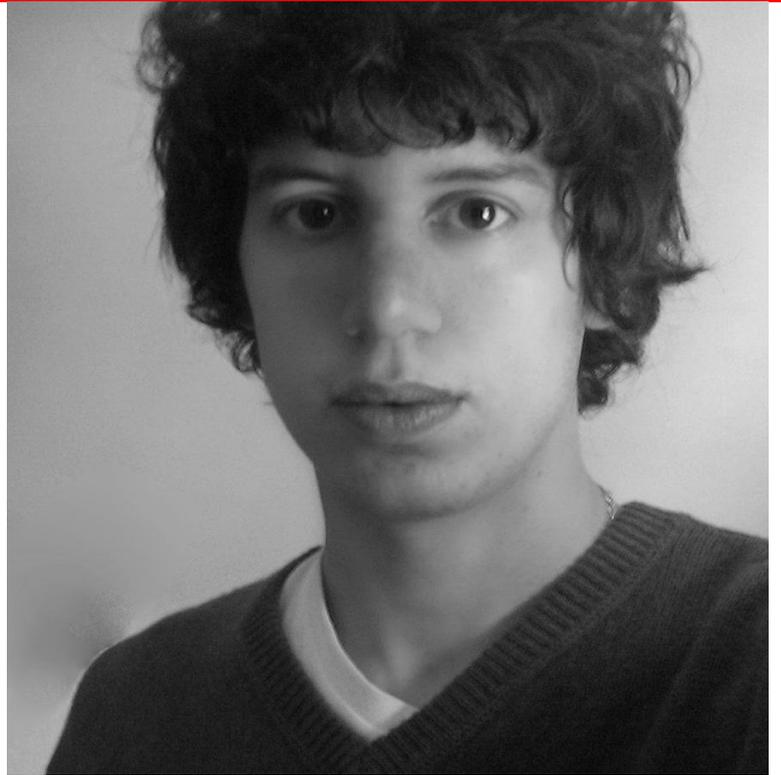


An Interview with Royal Holloway's Matthew Smith



*Matthew Smith met up with me in Cafe Jules to talk about his new novel, ****, or, the Anatomy of Melancholy and general approach to writing as a student and librarian. He arrived with his own traditionally-bound edition of Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy in hand to show me and give an idea of one of his influences.*

What is the hardest thing about being a student and writing?

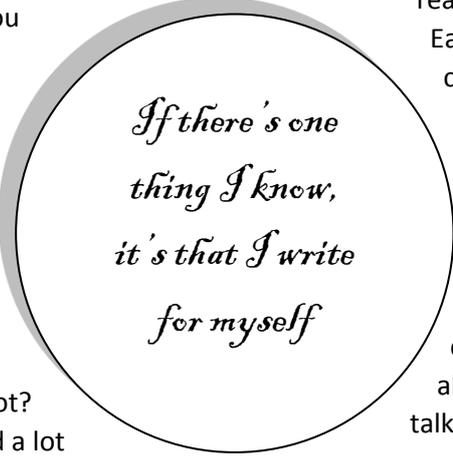
They don't go together that well I find, especially as you're in a totally different mind-set when writing essays to when writing creatively. What I tend to do is have one or two mornings a week where I write. I've written for a few years, and I suppose I began to take it quite seriously when I started writing my own book review blog: Bibliofreak.net. That's when I got into writing regularly, and at university I think I started to refine how I write a little bit. I don't think of university as a thing that has

changed my creative writing massively – if anything, writing a novel was really the big change. That's not to say I've learnt loads necessarily, but I think it's helped me develop a more polished, recognisable style; as opposed to someone just tipping things out of their head and onto some electro-paper, which is probably how I'd have described my style in the past. Admittedly, the same charge Truman Capote once flung at Jack Kerouac's style could probably as fairly be thrown at mine; that is, that it resembles typing more than writing.

You're getting a book published! Could you talk a bit about the process of getting into publishing/how did you contact publishers and get them interested?

I started by emailing loads of agents and going: 'I've written a book, please will you read it and like it?' (and they emailed back and said they would not!) No, actually I had such a lovely conversation with one of them early on (he was a big *Tristram Shandy* fan, a

book which references Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* frequently) who was really knowledgeable and intelligent. He said that literary fiction doesn't really sell; so even though he really liked what I'd done he didn't feel he could take a chance on it. I sort of got where he was coming from. So I contacted other agents and got about six or eight pretty bland, generic replies (I suspect most of them didn't make it past the first half-dozen swears in the manuscript before they were ready to sick-up on their trendy loafers). Those that did write me a proper reply said 'right, we're going to struggle to sell it – because it is an unusual book'. They might have had a point: even now I can't really tell you what it's like other than that it's very rambling! Which, on reflection, might have been my problem when I tried to sell it. After all, would you trust a shaggy-haired idiot who was thrusting a stack of collected nonsense at you and claiming it was a novel without any evidence of a plot? Anyway, I talked to them and a lot wanted me to change stuff – important stuff – and if there's one thing I know, it's that I write for myself: I object to other people sticking their oar in, even if they are paying me, the cheeky wotsits. When I started out my feeling was: I'm either going to go for a big publisher who'll do everything for me or something where I have control, and in the end I went for the latter (not least because I don't think anyone who wanted to make big money in publishing would have had me). In the end, I've ended up with a kind of hybrid: having a big say in creative decisions, but also having the support of people who really know what they're doing.



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You mentioned that one agent had doubts about selling 'literary fiction'. What would you say your style or genre is?

I do understand what he means because to an extent my novel is quite conceptual (read, bonkers); it's fragmented and unusual. This is supposed to represent the isolated, schizophrenic vibe of the internet. It also apes the way we consume material online: lots of short sharp bursts of information. I think this might work for people as we're more programmed to respond to that than to really dense novels now, where you think 'oh god, I've gotta read all of that?...' I guess I don't really have a style but I think Bret Easton Ellis is quite a reasonable comparison, particularly some of his early writing – his LA novels – before *American Psycho*: he's brilliant at identity and the capitalist world. I like to think my own novel deals with a lot the same stuff about lack of connection between people, although obviously for Ellis he's talking about a pre-digital world.

What is your 'practical' writing style: when and where do you write?

I write in the mornings, I'm a real morning person. By the time it gets to evening too much has happened in the day and my head's full of distractions. So I like to write first thing in the day, and also where there aren't any other people. I don't really understand people who sit in coffee shops and write – I don't trust them, the pretentious mochaccino guzzlers. The thing about sitting in a coffee shop or being where other people can see you write is that you end up putting on a bit of a performance: 'I'm writing now, look at me do writing, I'm so bloody sensitive and brilliant!' That's murder on the creative process: writing isn't a performative act. Saying that, when I sit

at home I do get distracted so I write quite a lot in computer labs and places like that, where I'm away from other people and anonymous (but still quietly pretentious in my own right).

What authors have influenced you? What do you read in your spare time?

I'm quite interested to see what people compare my novel to. Someone said it's a bit like *The Catcher in the Rye*, but, in my ignorance, I haven't read that so I don't know if it is or not – I'll take her word for it though, she seems to be a bright spark. In my own time I read a real variety of things – not a lot of genre fiction – but a bit of most things. I like intimate books, though, about people - don't give me *War and Peace*! I'm not interested in grand epics – not right now, anyway – people engage me, plot is secondary. Actually, it's interesting because the book that got me started on my novel was non-fiction and not about people at all; it was a book called *The End of Time* and is by renegade physicist, Julian Barbour. Its general thesis is that: "Time is an illusion. Although the laws of physics create a powerful impression that time is flowing, in fact there are only timeless 'nows'" – I do like a wild theory! Even from this dumbed down summary of what is a really engaging idea in theoretical physics, there's an obvious link to the digital environment where time is suspended and everything exists in a non-sequential mass, ready to be called up for an instant of time – the 'now' – whenever you might want to access it. It's a very Kantian experience of reality. I also really like Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* because of its strange mix of literature and science. It's incredible; beautifully written. I think the title is near perfection (and hence shamelessly appropriated it as my alternative title). There are actually a lot of links stylistically to the way I've constructed my novel; the way

Melancholy is necessarily fragmented (it reports different people's thoughts); and in my own novel I use melancholy – depression – as a sort of overarching metaphor for existence. Cheerful, I know.

At what point did you know it was ready to show to a publisher/take it a step further?

There was a point where I'd read it several times and changed nothing, at that stage I thought I should probably stop and let someone else read it! I'm a horrible editor and feel like I'm someone who would benefit a lot from having a professional editor sit down and spend a long time on my writing, helping me to make lots of revisions. It's always good to have more people's perspective on whether something works or if it doesn't. Saying that, I am vehemently against writing for a target audience, which people do a lot now – just write the book you want; then if you're happy with it, fine. If someone tells you something doesn't work, consider their opinion, but remember that it's going to be your name on the cover some day: you're the one who needs to be proud of the final result. Maybe if someone tells you they don't understand something then you should consider changing it, but don't just write it to be marketable. There's a good example with Plato's idea about 'forms'; that there's an ultimate, perfect form of everything, for example, of 'the table' and so on. I think the creative process is basically like that: you have an idea in your head about what you're trying to create and that is the idea's perfect form. You're never going to achieve that anyway because what you get onto paper won't be anything like what's in your head, but if you ask other people as well, they haven't got a clue what's in your head, they only know what comes out of your mouth, so if you take their advice it's going to be even further from that original idea. So just ignore people and focus

on what you want to do! Then, when they say it's crap, politely suggest they read something else and then flip them a v behind their back, like any self-respecting writer.

How do you tackle writers' block?

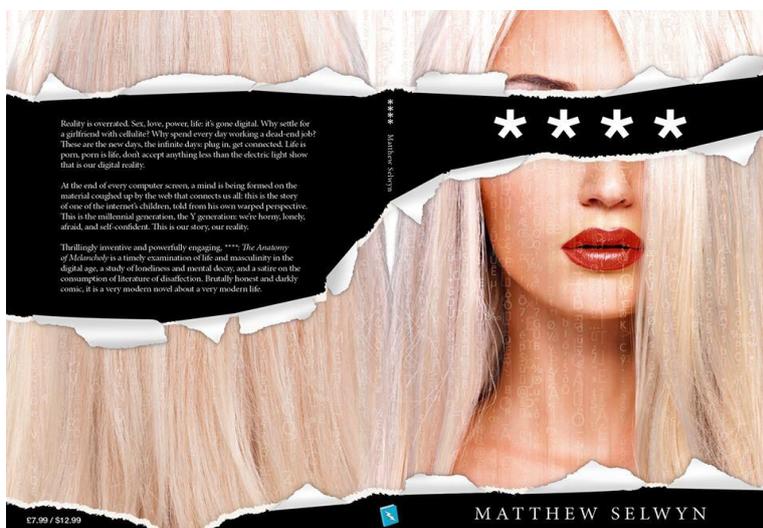
I don't really believe in writers' block. I read an interesting book by Andrew Cowan where he talks about writers' block and he sort of thinks it's part of the writing process, I suppose in the same way that Freud thinks dreams are a big part of the creative process. I think writers' block is something like that, a way of ordering things in your head, which is part of the reason why I don't get on well with NaNoWriMo (which I'm attempting, failingly, at the moment). It took me a long time to write my first novel – a couple of years maybe – and a lot of time was spent just digesting ideas and thinking about it, though I don't know if it really should have taken that long!

Have you ever written drunk?

No! To be honest my writing makes so little sense anyway that doing it drunk would be a disaster! I think Hemingway said 'write drunk and edit sober', but what on earth did he know? Beardy twit.

Which character/author would you most like to have coffee with?

Good question, this is going to be difficult. Well, I'd like to have coffee with Martin Amis, because I love him! Character-wise, I feel like I should say someone nice but in my head I think I'd like to meet someone like Humbert Humbert because he's all charming and loquacious and I would just ignore the fact that he's a disgusting perv and get swept up in his words! Or maybe one of Martin Amis's characters like John Self; they're horrendous but I think they might be a laugh. I don't want to talk to someone who's just normal – force me to spend an hour with a Henry James character and I might well expire of boredom. Come to think of it, I just don't like people generally and as I don't drink coffee anyway, this whole question is a complete sham. If I had to extricate myself from this baffling requirement to bow down to the cult of the coffee bean with some imaginary person, I'd probably suggest I just drank alone, in private. Viable answer?



****, or, the
Anatomy of
Melancholy is
now available
to buy
everywhere
now!