

Dear Syd,

Delighted to hear from you—not least because you’re the first actual “young adult” that I’m certain has read my ostensibly YA novel! So far it’s been only adult gatekeepers: very hip, heavily tattooed librarians who specialize in such things, booksellers, parents, etc. I had a fantasy that my editor would be a very sharp, impatient fifteen-year-old girl; this, like most fantasies, was not quite realized.

True, you are my first cousin once-removed (which is to say that your mother is my first cousin, and your grandmother is my mother’s sister, and my children are your second cousins, and your children and my children’s children will be third cousins), so perhaps this is not the most pure of reader relationships, but it’s what I have, and I’m glad for it. Thank you for reading my book.

I thought your letter, which let’s face it was really a list of impossible questions (though I also suspect that we reveal ourselves more honestly when asking questions than answering them), might generate a response that could be interesting to other young adult readers—whether they read my book and were confounded and wouldn’t think to write with questions, or whether they might consider reading my book. So I appreciate your patience if I share this response.

Let’s get to those questions.

1. “Never create anything, it will be misinterpreted, it will chain you and follow you for the rest of your life.” Do you feel misinterpreted as an author?

Yes! But isn’t to be alive and using words to be misinterpreted? But more seriously and specifically, I just really like writing the stories. I don’t pretend to have control over what readers make of them, or authority over all their interpretations. What fun would that be? To believe that such misinterpretations would actually “chain and follow me” would seem a little self-important, no? Then again, there are ways I no doubt reveal myself in my writing that I am not aware of, and there again I’ve decided to write things and send them out in the world, so there’s no one else to blame.

2. Audra doesn’t want to be a robot, hates the suburbs, but not as much as the city, because at least in the suburbs she can look like a bad ass walking around past midnight. But she also realizes that by wanting to be different she has become the stereotypical teenager that wants to be different, and in doing so feels worn out. So does originality truly exist?

Yes! I believe it does, anyway. But too often we are merely reacting to what we see as unoriginal or too familiar, I suspect. To be truly original would be to be less reactionary and more positive? And I guess that’s to say really that of course every piece of writing or art or song or gesture is related to what went before, whatever we’ve passed through ourselves, so it is made up of so many other pieces of things that it is not completely original in the sense of being completely *new*. So perhaps it’s more about being both startling to those who behold it and then whoever makes the work or gesture being unaware or unconscious of an intention or audience? So much of Audra’s behavior in the first half of the book might be thought of as not particularly original—she is mostly just reacting to expectations of what is “normal”; by the end of the book, perhaps, she has found a certain originality?

These are very hard questions, but the fact that you pose them to me makes me feel like I have answers. These answers could change tomorrow. In order to maintain their originality. Along these lines, I recommend Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*; it will cause you to spend long hours walking lovestruck in the moonlight, but may help (or hinder) you romantically in college.

3. Do you have any experiences hanging up in trees?

Yes!

4. Do all stories need to be mad to be a good story? Does that just fit in with the “all writers/poets/artists have some kind of mental issue” cliché, or is there something more?

Yes! But I guess that is to say that for me stories have to have tension, and tension is often if not always the ways in which a person feels or is not quite in alignment with the world around him or her. But I don't think that's necessarily a “mental issue,” at least not in a clinical sense. Often it's the fault of the world, not the person. And to recognize (see question 2) that the many compromises we make to communicate with others, to agree upon a familiar world, are often generalizations that hold our immediate experience at arms' length and makes other people so hard to apprehend: that's what leads to the “something more”?! I mean, I suspect that you are a religious person, because I know your family; I am not a religious person, but I do believe in serious wonder, and these kinds of misapprehensions and frustrations are often at the heart of this “something more” for me, all beautiful and challenging.

5. Is there nothing more touching than Mac Demarco's cover of Blackbird? If so (the answer's no) what music would you recommend/are you enjoying at the moment?

(Pause to research Mac Demarco.)

This is going to take me a while to think about. I'm going to trust your answer about that.

Right now I highly recommend my friend Laura Gibson's album “Empire Builder”; the title track makes me cry: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMamoan2JwA> . Also Guy Clark's “Dublin Blues”; Sam Beam & Jesca Hoop, “Every Songbird Says”; Richard Buckner, “Blue and Wonder”; Rickie Lee Jones; Jolie Holland; Willie Nelson, that whole “Country Willie” album. I just got a turntable and am buying all my favorite vinyl from high school. The Specials, “More Specials”; The English Beat, “W'happen?”; I could go on forever. OH MY GOD, this song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM-SvmC2iIA>

6. Follow up to question #1 are authors/Vivian meant to be misinterpreted?

Follow up to answer #1: they have no control over it. I guess I'd trouble the word “meant” in your question, too. Intention is dangerous. If you make or write something with a specific meaning or lesson in mind, if you believe it must be understood a specific way, you're setting yourself up not only to fail but also to be unhappy. And Vivian in particular—she is really not in a place where she understands herself particularly well, so how would she convey any degree of

certainty? (Especially when people are disappearing and mysterious voices are writing in her notebook?)

- 7. Was your reference to *Catcher* sentimental like the Laura Ingalls Wilder references? I mean your book reminded me somewhat of *Catcher* with the whole say less with more, dead sibling, true romance, let's not feel like we have to yak about bull deal—but then again a lot of reminds me of *Catcher*.**

Great question. I don't know. Sentimental, but in a different way, because my relationship to Laura Ingalls Wilder is different, and her relationship to the world is different, of course, than Holden Caulfield's. He's such a great character because we do relate to him, but we do so differently at different times of our lives. I mean, there's always something so satisfying about someone who's willing to say that others are *phony*, that the way the world works is out of whack, because that makes sense to us and we often have enough decorum not to say so. There's an honesty about Holden. And then again, I really like reading books again and again as I get older because it reveals the ways I've changed or am changing. Because some of the characters I took to be heroic when I was young, say Dean Moriarty (who seems quite psychotic to me, now), don't seem quite that way, now. I mean, Holden's voice is so entertaining and his disquiet is so honest, but man, at some point if your whole game is calling everything phony it feels a little reactive and sad-sack-like? But I love that book for his voice, and the way he reminds us, especially as we age, that we're in danger of becoming phonies! (There's a way, I recognize, that we sometimes distance ourselves from books we held dear when we were adolescents because we're kind of embarrassed of who we were, then, when in fact maybe it's that we're being reminded that back then we were True Believers and now we've become jaded, cynical?)

And perhaps one way to segue out of this self-incriminating answer is to quote a passage where Holden holds forth on, of all things, originality, or the danger of repetition:

“If you do something *too* good, then, after a while, if you don't watch it, you start showing off. And then you're not as good anymore.”

Looking back at my notes from my last reading of that book, I also wrote down sections that just made me laugh out loud (what better reason to read?):

“I don't even like *old* cars. I mean they don't even interest me. I'd rather have a goddam horse. A horse is at least *human*, for God's sake.”

- 8. So are you and Ransom Riggs tight? Like do yall ever go ball up? I was just fascinated by the street cred on the back [of the book].**

Yes! Well, no, not really. Never met him. But we have a good friend in common. That's typically how those endorsements/blurbs work. It's uncomfortable. But he appears to be a very generous and sweet guy, and obviously talented and curious. I'm not from Texas so am not certain what “ball up” means, but if it means that he and I would spread out a blanket somewhere and then roll up in a ball together, I'd like to think that that's the kind of thing we would do, if we ever met. Sounds excellent.

9. Why do we feel like running away?

Don't run away! It'd make your family so sad! But from this aged mid-life perspective I'd say that running away always seems enticing and easier because we suspect that the things that are bothering us or are difficult are actually other people's or places' faults. I've run away a lot of times and I always found the same problems, every time I got tired and settled again. So then I had to run away again. Staying is the hardest thing, because it means admitting so many things and trying to improve?

To return to *Klickitat*, I think Audra runs away for some of the reasons I spelled out above—she sees her options as being limited, a series of expectations where success would mean doing what other people have already done. She's also so over her parents! And I recognize (in retrospect) that in my work I'm often writing around some anxiety I have; in this case, it's like "What if I'm not a good or an inattentive father, and my daughters decide I'm unworthy, and leave me?" Greatest fear ever, and then again someone pointed out to me that they're going to leave me, eventually (just as you are now headed off to college?), even if it's not quite so dramatic.

P.S. My favorite line was "I bought a burrito from a cart and sat on the steps for an hour, trying to figure out what to do." (204). Very relatable.