

## NEVER PRACTISE ON PURPOSE

# Fionn McCabe falls down and accidentally writes a novel

**O**ne of the most motivating things I've been told was that my art career would almost certainly fail. I was in art school in the US, studying printmaking, and a professor informed me that, once graduated, 97 per cent of all art students stop creating work after only two years. Who knows where that number came from, or why my professor felt the need to enlighten me, but I didn't really hear him anyway. What I heard was that most of my competition was planning to quit.

When I left art school (and set to work joining that three per cent), I landed a job printing t-shirts at a commercial silkscreen shop. Printing for a living

was not the dream job I had thought it would be. Suddenly ink was toxic, creativity was inefficient, and "art" was a corporate logo. It was horrifying. Imagine going to veterinary school because you love animals, only to get a job euthanising them or cutting off their balls.

Another shock — and what ultimately drove me to a word processor — was my co-workers. They say one bad apple ruins the barrel, well, these were the worst sort: mealy, bigoted, homophobic, misogynist apples. There was lots of name calling, gay bashing, awkward male bonding and the like, all the juvenile stuff we try to pretend didn't happen in grade school. Mostly I was left alone, but I am a white male; women and minorities had a tougher time. One of my co-workers once told me, 'You really can't blame Hitler for trying.' Quite to the contrary, I really can.

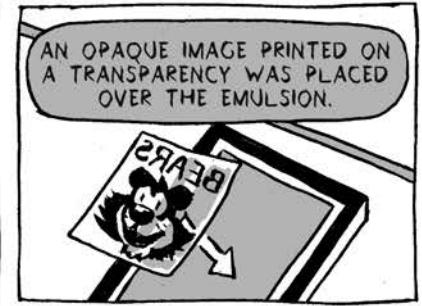
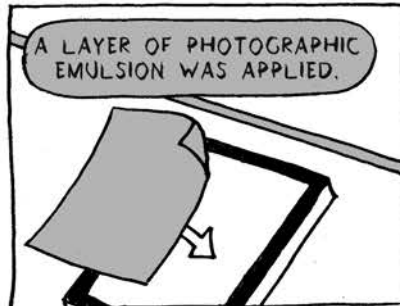
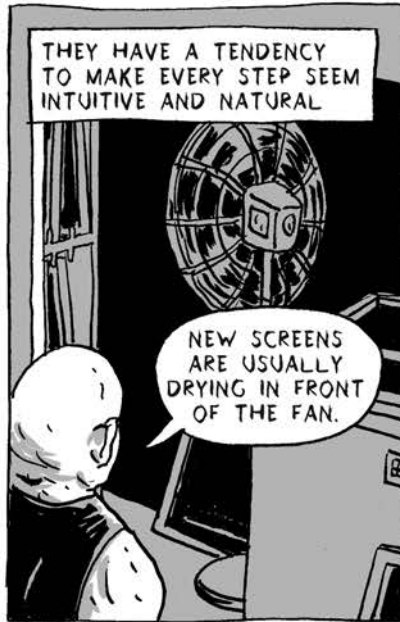
To be fair, some of my co-workers were lovely people. It was a bizarre cross-section of American life: ex-cons, ex-cops, ex-husbands and wives, middle schoolers, high school drop outs, college graduates, illegal aliens, resident aliens, drug addicts,

alcoholics, and on and on. After the uniformly progressive atmosphere of art school it was a rivetingly eclectic group. I began to carry a little notebook and would surreptitiously write down conversations I had or overheard.

While I worked at the shop by day, I continued pursuing my art career at night (a powerful hatred of your day job can build an excellent work ethic). The stories and conversations I wrote down were adapted to accompany drawings I made for my blog or, occasionally, illustrated and turned into small zines. I didn't take the writing very seriously, not until years later, when I corralled the short stories and began organising them into a long one. That was how I ended up accidentally writing a novel.

With everything in one place, my drawings began to feel redundant. I had essentially been illustrating what happened in the stories, but if the writing was executed properly, a reader would already have a picture in his or her mind. And if not, then the writing probably wasn't any good. Still, I knew I wanted to include drawings, not just because I love to draw, but







also to justify the hundreds of dollars a month I was spending on student loans. I finally settled on the idea of a book that was half written novel, and half comic book. A nerdy compromise.

Another thing that hadn't occurred to me was that most of the stories took place at the print shop while my co-workers and I were either printing or eating lunch. Who wants to read about the same place and activities over and over? And yet it felt important to reinforce that repetition because it was the day-in-day-out monotony that enabled the stories to happen in the first place. When people were forced to spend long hours together in the same place, they ended up disclosing information they wouldn't otherwise, even if (especially if) they didn't particularly like each other.

That's how I found out, for example, that the big bald guy on the number machine dressed up as an elf in his free time; that the soft-spoken man who worked in the office was biologically female; and that the floor manager brought liquor to AA meetings to pick up chicks. Adding comics helped solve the problem of redundancy in this respect too;

by drawing the more repetitive and mundane activities in as backgrounds, I was able to focus more directly on the more interesting (if unsettling) aspects of each story.

Before I began this project I had very little experience creating comics. Naively, I did not anticipate that to be a problem. I had read comics all my life and could already draw, so what was there to worry about? Unfortunately, as with any other medium, it took time to differentiate between what was good and bad, what was an authentic voice and what I was regurgitating. With my writing I tried to avoid ripping off my favourite authors by writing the way that I speak (though without the American accent and annoying nasal quality). I've had 31 years' practice at that and felt justified in plagiarising myself. With comics I didn't find the same kind of shortcut; I just drew the same pages over and over until they felt right (or slightly less wrong).

This whole project came about in an organic fashion, with one idea leading to another, in its own time and at its own pace. It was not the most efficient process, though it may have been the most self-indulgent. Honestly, if I had planned this from the beginning, I would have done things differently, but it would also have been a different project. In my experience, as soon as a creative process is pinned down and predictable, creativity begins to wither and die. Now characters have been collapsed, conversations altered, I've added whole scenes and changed the ending. What was once a handful of true stories is now a mix of memoir, comics and fiction. But it's going to be a masterpiece.

When I was in art school, just about every professor advised me to keep a sketchbook and for a while I dutifully kept one. But the more time I spent on it, the more precious it became, and the less likely I was to experiment in case I screwed it up. I found

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myself spending more and more time obsessing over my sketchbook rather than working on anything substantial. I also found that if I toyed with an idea in my sketchbook too thoroughly, I got bored and abandoned it. So I decided to quit sketching altogether. Now when I draw, I set out to make a masterpiece every time.

And it doesn't work.

Often the drawing (or writing, or comic) fails and transforms itself into practice. Sometimes I'll spend months on a drawing, only to realise (whoops) it was practice all along. At that point, I try again, and each new attempt feels worthwhile because, unlike a sketch, it has the potential to be something substantial. I'm still in the middle of that process with my book.

But I hate to practise, so for now ...  
Masterpiece.

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Fionn McCabe is a visual artist currently living in Sydney. His work has been exhibited throughout the United States. He is now writing his first book. It's a doozy.