

Welcome to another episode of Read My Bitch: the podcast where Bitch magazine readers read aloud one of their favorite articles from the archives and then discuss it. I'm Kjerstin Johnson, the web content manager at Bitch Media.

Today you'll hear from Brittany Shoot, who's not just a Bitch magazine reader, but a Bitch magazine and blog contributor as well. Brittany will be reading a selection from Anna Clark's article "The Ambition Condition" which was published in Issue number 41, from the fall of 2008. A newcomer to the freelance world, Brittany has plenty to say about the gendered nature of the industry. Before we get to that, here's Brittany reading The Ambition Condition.

Brittany Shoot: My name is Brittany Shoot, I am a freelance writer and editor, and some people call me a critic and occasionally I am known to take care of animals as well. So I guess that makes me an animal caretaker. But yeah, I spend almost all my time writing right now.

Kjerstin Johnson: So how long have you been reading bitch?

BS: I've probably been reading Bitch for, I'm going to say at least five or six years. Because I know I read it in college and I know I'm that old now. I'd like to say that I picked it up in high school, but I don't know that that's true. And I'm not quite sure where that would've happened because I grew up in the sticks. Yeah, I think like five years.

KJ: So why did you pick out the Ambition Condition for Read My Bitch?

BS: This particular article is pretty much the only one that I can think of off the top of my head. And I don't mean that there aren't a lot of great ones in my, you know, personal back catalog, but in the last couple of years that were of particular interest to me because it came out right around the time that I went completely freelance as a writer. I mean I finished grad school and I didn't have a job lined up. So I moved abroad because my partner isn't from the U.S. and so we decided to live abroad for a little while and the only thing I can really do here is you know sort of hustle odd jobs and write for people back home. So that's what I decided to do.

So right around the time that I made that decision, I mean I think within a few months, the article, because I moved, I think I moved the same autumn/fall that the magazine came out and I kept the article by my bedside for months because it, I would read like a paragraph before I'd go to bed and I'd be so overwhelmed. I was like, oh yeah, that's it! That's it! And my partner's asleep. He falls asleep immediately. And so I'm lying there thinking, "Oh this is hard this is going to be really hard I'm going to have to tell people what I do and it's going to be difficult. And it just really, really resonated for me. And I think maybe in particular what was so interesting was that I didn't read it after I had been doing it for a

while. I had been writing for people on and off for a while but I hadn't been making it like my full time, you know, career. Like I hadn't said, "OK now I am a writer."

And so to read this article which is all about owning that I think for me you know, as I was getting into it, I've thought about it a lot since then and there are a couple of my friends who are also writers and at some point along the way I ended up having a conversation with them, a little bit because of this article because they are so reticent to own that they're writers. I mean one in particular that I can think of lately, I've sent her several emails where I've said, "have you told anyone lately" like very simply because when people ask her what she does she just kind of shrugs her shoulders and they think that she's, I don't know what they think, that she's unemployed, that she's embarrassed about what she does. And she really loves it, you know. But she can't own it because she doesn't have a traditional job she doesn't work a 9 to 5, she doesn't write a lot that has bylines attached. And so when people ask her "what do you write," "have I read anything that you've written" or "would I have seen anything that you've written" which I think is a really assumptive question anyway, as if you're reading everything that other people are writing. I mean, what?! And I'm not great at it either but I continue to have this conversation with other people. So all of that! [Laughing] To say, you know, I've been thinking about this a lot and I think the piece does a really nice job of dealing with a lot of those issues without blaming women for the state of things. I mean while acknowledging that we are not very good at owning this, exploring why, you know, culturally this has become the norm for women to just kind of be afraid to talk about what they do when they write or edit or whatever.

KJ: Are there other personal experiences you've had that you recognize in the article?

BS: For me it's just very much based on context. So, for instance, with my partner's parents, my in-laws, they're really encouraging and very, very... they validate what I do a lot. English is not their first language, and it's a little bit trickier for them to read some of the things that I write, but I know they go out of their way to try. So, for instance, I'm not afraid to tell them, "oh yeah I got a new writing gig. And they know I don't make a lot of money doing it, and that is a big issue for me, which we can talk about but, with them I feel really confident because I already know going into the situation that they're going to validate that. Whereas, I was at a dinner with some coworker-acquaintance types recently and someone said "what have you been working on" and I just couldn't speak because I was around people who were five or ten years older than me, who have sort of the "legitimate careers," just seem really stable compared to somebody like me. And I just didn't know what to say and I got really uncomfortable and I looked at my partner which, I mean, what is that about? I

mean, he's a guy and I said to him, "why don't you tell him?" I mean, what am I doing?! Why would I look to the man in my life and say, "well why don't you defend me now!" It was really- can I swear in the podcast? It was really really fucked up and I left feeling terrible and I was like, that was just as much my fault as it is everyone else's. I just like really fucked that up. I need to own what I do, you know and I just think it's a struggle for a lot of people.

KJ: You wanted to say something about money?

BS: I think that's actually a really big one. I make total shit as a writer. And if I were single, for instance, I think that the situation would be really different and I wouldn't be freelance full-time because I don't think that it would be sustainable. Quite frankly, it wouldn't have been this last year. I'm finally at the point now where it is, but, even then, what is sustainable? I'm still below what people would consider poverty level, what is that? And I'm not supposed to say that because then I'm acknowledging that I'm not "successful" by whatever peoples standards are. But, quite frankly, I really like what I do, and I don't wake up hating myself everyday. And I don't have to go to an office that I hate. And that's really where my priority is right now. So, what I get hung up on is the fact that, not that I don't make a lot of money, because I don't, that's not really what concerns me, but what does concern me is that other people will know that or will take that as a marker of my success. And if I'm not, if I don't either lie about what I make, or I don't somehow make as much as my male partner, which I'm probably never going to, I think that's where I get hung up a lot in not being able to own what I do, because I think to myself, "I know how much money I made today" and if that's my job, that's unfortunate! I know some people do fine but it seems to be that where I am and the women that I know, it's a struggle. It's like, man, am I going pay the bills, or am I going do x y and z? I don't know, because I'm in a position where I can keep doing this for a while, [but] I almost feel a need to represent some of those people, when I say this to you, my friends are just barely scraping by.

KJ: In the article Anna Clark mentions how the ambition condition manifests itself in other areas, like the National Book Award, and in the digital world, do you recognize it playing out elsewhere?

BS: [Laughing] You don't know who you asked, do you?! I used to be really involved with Internet video, pre-YouTube, it was all very special and cool. I'm not at all anymore, but I used to be involved in a lot of social movement tech stuff. I spoke at a couple conferences where I was one of a couple token women that were there. I saw it; it was one of the reasons that I left all of that behind. Because I was like, "this sucks!" and it made more sense to me to focus on writing, which I had done a decent amount of in the past, with some decent success and I said, "I don't want to be involved in this tech crap." And also

because my partner is, and I don't want to be, I didn't make the decision because of him, but at one point we had worked on something together related to video online and all of the responses we got were directed very specifically at him even though it had both of our names on it. I mean, people emailed him directly and were like, "great job", never acknowledging that I was apart of it, and I flipped out on him instead of dealing with the larger problem, which was to perhaps contact those people individually. He took it on immediately and would email them back and say "these are not emails I should be receiving, this is a collective work". Whatever, I've personally seen it in other arenas multiple times. Not just myself, but other friends. And I'm not really surprised, and I think one of the reasons I wanted to be a writer was because I really could write about gender issues and talk about what it means to do all of that. I've never written about doing something with my partner, but I probably should at some point because it was really fucked up too. The people just completely ignored my contribution.

KJ: Do you think a solution to this problem is more in the hands of the individual woman or writer or is the responsibility of institutions like writing programs, publishers, or conferences?

BS: Man, that's a really good question. I don't even know because I've gone to both- not writing specific- but I've gone to both types of tech conferences for instance where they were very gender specific, you know, "this is the women's conference." I went to BlogHer and Wam! and I did all that stuff and I also went to the ones where it's very mixed. I don't think the guys care when we have our own conference. I don't think they even know. So from that perspective, I would love to think that that space provides something that we need and builds community.. I really don't know because I like to think that I'm someone who doesn't believe that institutional change is very useful but that said, I'm not really convinced that me personally owning that I'm a writer to more people will somehow shift the dynamic because I do say it to people. And I do have that conversation. I will say that, while it we haven't talked specifically about this article, though I did pass it on to my writer friend recently who won't own that she's a writer, and I said, "you need to go read this and then we're going to talk about it because we got to get you owning this. You may not feel comfortable with it, but we'll get there.

But I do think that I tend to pretty much only correspond with and bump up against other women writers as I do what I do. Some of my editors are men but by and large I tend to, now that I think about it, work primarily with women. And I approach the writer-to-writer relationship with women differently because I feel correctly or otherwise that we're in it together in a very specific way because the only other people that I know that I know who are struggling writers are women. And the only guy that I've met recently who also was had a totally different approach about it. He had already written a novel but it wasn't published but he didn't seem to have a hang up about that, whereas I would NEVER tell someone

if I had written a novel, but it wasn't published. I just couldn't fathom telling people that because that to me... To him that was a success, but to me that was ultimate failure. Why would I tell someone that I worked so hard on something but nobody else cared about? But, I just don't feel like I would have the same conversation if I were around male writers because I just don't know what people would say. I think that they're perceived really differently and they get to call themselves poets and whatever and I would never in my life think of saying something like that.

KJ: That's interesting because to me there are certain parts of the article that really stand out. One of them is Dorothy Parker's proposed epithet, but the other is the example "I'm not really a poet, but..." were there any parts that were sort of, I don't know, burs in your soul like that?

BS: I do think that, and I've seen this conversation happening a lot again recently on blogs and whatnot where women are... I guess Anna doesn't deal with this specifically but there's sort of the idea that men can have this persona that goes along with being a writer. Whereas women don't necessarily have that because we don't do this sort of hyper-masculine thing about what we do.

I'm not some drinking, womanizing whatever and so that doesn't give people this idea of me being this heroic, sort of damaged, sort of brilliant writer and I don't really do sort of damaging things. I kind of wish I could but I get migraines! I can't do that! So I can't go out and binge drink and smoke all night and have all of these deep thoughts and make that part of who I am. That doesn't work for someone like me.

So that was a big part of it because, and sort of going off of that, I've seen some blog posts about it recently, maybe a couple of articles where women are sort of called upon, pretty consistently, to mine their personal lives in the same sort of way, but we're supposed to really write about it in this whole other way, whether its embarrassing or whether it's, like you have this failed relationship you're supposed to write about. And, to some degree, I have those stories to tell, but I sometimes think, maybe I should be writing about one of my deep dark secrets and then I have to really consider, I'm... First of all I'm not Norman Mailer and its not 75 years ago or you know whatever, you know what I mean? It's a time where I can't take it back, like, I'm going to write it, it's going be on the internet, my parents are going read it... I don't even talk to my parents... I don't have that freedom, I don't feel that I or I don't want to give it to myself or whatever. I want to hold myself back because I don't want my whole life to be online. I already went through that. I was in Internet video. Like, hello! I already went through that! I guess I think about that when I read the article because maybe it doesn't touch on that, quite as specifically, though it does, in part of the article that I didn't read. She talks about the piece from the New York Times Magazine a couples years ago that Emily Gould wrote and it was about publicizing yourself on the internet and what that meant and how people treated that as if it wasn't legitimate or

worthy. And I think that there's a lot of truth to that, you know, I mean at what point can I write about, like, this is my relationship and people will say "oh that's valid." What's my relationship? Of course it's valid! But I just think it gets treated really differently.

KJ: What do you think of Anna Clark's proposed alternative literary landscape at the end of the article where she says writing would be welcomed with an open and generous mind where only words would determine its value, and what you think about that, and how that might effect feminist writing, and what erasing the gender of the writer would do.

BS: I haven't really thought about it that way. That would be ideal, but that said, I'm sort of a chronic cynic that it's tough for me to say, "oh we will just share ideas and we will have this utopian genderless byline-less space where it won't matter." And that sounds great, but I have no conceivable idea of how that will happen. And again, I'm not the person to ask because I think the world is going to end. I mean I'm the hardcore cynic.

KJ: I think that's valid outlook. Do you have any tips for writers despite your cynicism? Any tips for surviving getting through the gender bias? I mean you're doing it.

BS: I don't want recommend this but I'm going to: if you have a name like mine, use your initials. Which is, again, really not where I want to go with that, but I wish I had. One of the things I think can be really helpful is if you write for free - which sounds really counter-intuitive and I know a lot of people will think that's a bad idea. But, in my limited experience, occasionally, very occasionally, writing for free can be really good, because it does a couple of things: it makes connections, it shows people that you believe in what you're doing, and it gives you clips. If you haven't written before, and you want to move up into writing for certain publications or magazines or whatever, you're going need something to show them, very simply put. So, I think it is okay to write for free. Sometimes when you write for free people are also more transparent about the editing process, and they may have time to guide you a little bit in a way that editors who are paying you a lot may assume that you already know how to do a lot of things that they take for granted.

Again, this is just my experience, but I have a small community of writers and editors based on a website that I help edit and I think that one of the things that has been so helpful for me is that even if I don't know those people that well I can still go to them for advice. I've very recently emailed a writer that works on the site and I know that we both write for similar publications and I had what I thought was a really great idea and I wanted to break it into a new publication that I know that she writes for. So I emailed her and said, "their submission guidelines say write on spec and turn in a finished piece. I don't usually do that,

do you think I would be okay to pitch first because you've worked with them before?" And not only did she write back and tell me what she would do, which was to pitch first, but she gave me her editors' information which I thought was really generous and not something that everyone would do. You know, people would expect you to find that stuff on your own, that's part of your job.

Then a few days later I turned around and did something really similar for a writer who contacted me. She had just read my latest thing in Bitch, actually, and said, "How could I achieve that someday?" And I said, well, if you've never pitched anyone before, and you've never written things except for the website that we work on, here are some general guidelines that you might want consider when it comes to formulating ideas, writing letters to editors... And then I said, "if you have any specific questions you can feel free to email me any time" and she can because people do that for me! There have been so many people who have helped me along the way, and helped me put my foot in the door and helped me, you know, whatever. I think that it is also important that people talk about money, because I don't think that very many people do it and I think that people need to understand that sometimes writers are paying the bills. I'm not saying that you should write inflammatory crap, and I know that a lot of people pay the bills writing fluffy stuff, and, quite frankly a gig is a gig... And I think that if people want to hold up a certain writer and say "oh she's so prolific she's so idealistic" but she might also be broke. And I think it is important to recognize that sometimes you just need work. On the flip side, there are people who have made their names writing fluffy stuff. And that's always really frustrating to someone like me because I see that and I think [that] I'd probably kill for the paychecks that she brings in. But, you know, that is what it is.

I think that there is also, this is unrelated, but I think that one of the reasons it is so hard to own being a writer for some women is that the job is so much more public than some other positions can be. I for instance have done my fair share of clerical work and administrative stuff over the years and that (to me at least) never felt like it had a real representation of who I was. My job didn't really reflect my identity or my goals in life or my ideals or any of that stuff. And It can be any job, and you know that you don't feel as representative. I'm not hitting on clerical work, I'm just saying when you're a writer, again in my experience, because I primarily do stuff that has bylines attached, I think it changes the dynamic a lot because then people do think that they have a sense of who you are or what your ideals are or what you stand for or what your politics are, and the job is really public in a way that many jobs are not, even if you were a public servant, maybe you work in the government, it's still I think just a really different experience.

And that said I used to be really offended when people didn't read what I wrote because I thought that they were somehow turning their backs on my identity. But I have a good friend who is a pharmacist for instance and I don't call and ask him what prescriptions he filled today, you know? It's a totally different thing. So I had to change my expectations of what it meant to have a job that was

sort of public and one that is, to some degree, misunderstood for that reason because people just don't, people know that they read... I guess a lot of people don't read and that is sort of a stressful part of being a writer because you realize that a lot of people don't read very much. But I just had to change how I felt about it. I had to assume that no one was reading and that was okay. And I'm always really pleasantly surprised when they do, you know? My best friend called me the other day and said, "hey you know I read this recent thing that you wrote and I showed it to my boyfriend and it was really nice. And I was like, "well, thank you!" And then I felt really good about it. I sort of had a really negative attitude for a positive life, which is the phrase, I'm directly borrowing from her even. You just don't expect very much and then you're really happy when people come through.

You can read the entire article by Anna Clark by browsing at bitchmedia.org/articles. You can also read Brittany Shoot's guest blog, The Biotic Woman, at bitchmedia.org/profile/b. An article by Emily Gould on confessional writing by women will be appearing in the fall issue of Bitch magazine. Subscribe online at bitchmedia.org/subscribe

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