

## Writing Prompt: **Strategic Opacity**

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"What happened to me that got me thinking about what I later started calling **"strategic opacity,"** is I wrote this book called *Detransition Baby*... There's this trans woman named Reese, and she's kind of a mess... When I brought it first to agents and editors, I got two questions always... why would Reese want to be a mother? And this question always annoyed me so much because I was like, well, why does anybody want to be a mother?"

"I happened to be reading a biography of Shakespeare ... I came to this section on *Hamlet*, and why *Hamlet* actually makes no sense as a play. And I realized that the fact that *Hamlet* makes no sense was actually the answer to my problems. That Shakespeare actually had the same problem as I did, which is like, your play makes no sense, how are we going to do it?"

"The whole play actually doesn't make any sense for this, because why would he pretend to be insane? Nobody suspects him of anything. It was a ghost who told him there was a murder. There's no reason to pretend to be insane. It makes no sense whatsoever. And the entire play is based on this decision that is inexplicable."

"This is the opacity that we're going to begin to explore. The book that I was reading Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World*, argues that there was this decision that made *Hamlet* a really different play from the ones that came before because essentially *Hamlet* becomes both suspended in doubt and unknowable. And that unknowableness translate to the stage... by excising the reason for him to pretend to be made, the entire play becomes about the interiority of madness.

"So that **we feel by making no sense, we feel that there's something going on inside of this character**... there's all these things that are contradictions that make no sense whatsoever. And to me, I read this and I was like, oh, I think this is actually the explanation for what I'm doing, that other people in fact do these things that make no sense and are unknowable and are completely opaque. **It's because of that, I tend to feel that they have something going on inside of them. It's their inexplicableness, rather than the motive... that makes me understand them as full people**... because generally, when you encounter one another, you can't know what they're thinking. You can't know why they're doing what they're doing. You can take guesses and it's... oftentimes the people I'm most interested in... if you think about gossip... **it's people who are doing stuff that's inexplicable... they make a choice, they do a weird thing, and then you go, why did they do that? Something is going on inside of them, and I must know, you know?** And then you gossip and you investigate and you look at all those things, but it is the lack of motive that actually makes people begin to feel like... what it feels like to encounter people in life. And oftentimes even in life, when people tell you, here's my motive, you go, that's not your motive. That's not really what you're doing... and then you're trying to find it. Their opacity is what makes them so vibrant."

**“It’s the opacity of it, that it’s like, how did this happen? And the fact that I want to return to it over and over. I want to look at it this way and that way, and I want to fill in myself to be like, *how could this possibly be?* that gives it the power of it. It it’s just like well, he’s the the thwarted art student, that isn’t an answer that keeps me coming back over and over, that keeps me riveted and sticky, whereas the characters who are opaque, keep bringing me back.”**

**“The lack of reason... is the whole book... when you take [the reason] away everything else in it becomes about it. The images that surround that opacity begin to fill in the opacity.”**

“All these things that I had been trying to do in my writing, oftentimes with backstory, where I was like, well, why are they doing this? Who are they? I would write whole backstories for these characters to explain why they might do a thing.

I started just cutting them all in this new work that I'm doing. I found that each time I cut something and explains less, I mean, not that many people have read it, so maybe it doesn't make sense. But for me, it felt more and more epic.

It felt more and more powerful. It felt more and more like, oh, these questions appear and the missing pieces give them not just mystery, but become larger than I could ever write. If I wrote a backstory to explain Hamlet, suddenly Hamlet becomes a small play.

**Whereas if I just leave it open, it can encompass so much. And so I started cutting things away and I began to try to figure out how much you can cut away to make something opaque and what kinds of things seem to steady that opacity...”**

“What I hope with this is that if you write a book and you get an editor... or whoever says, I really want a motive for this thing, and **if the thing is like something that you're like, yeah, the characters have a motive for that, great, the motive.**

**But if you're like, this is actually something bigger than can be answered, don't give a motive, leave it opaque and then be strategic about it. Leave that opacity, build everything around it, build in images, build in everything to hold that emptiness. But leave it empty and be like, this is a good ending, I didn't even mean it, be like Iago, say I'll never speak again.”**