

What How & With Whom: Two Questions for Rowland Saifi

written by Christopher Higgs | January 22, 2015



Welcome to my micro-interview series, which focuses on recent releases I've found noteworthy. Past entries are archived [here](#).

In this series I'm asking writers to respond to the two questions I most frequently ask when I'm teaching a book in the classroom: (1) what is the text doing / how is the text doing it, and (2) with what does the text connect?

These questions arise from my particular approach to reading and critical analysis, which is deeply indebted to Deleuze & Guattari's [A Thousand Plateaus](#). As they put it, "Literature is an assemblage...a book itself is a little machine...writing has nothing to do with signifying...it has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come."

So, without further delay...

I present Roland Saifi, whose recent book [The Minotaur's Daughter](#) has been described thusly:

"The commercial world subjugates and trivializes. What defense can we mount? How can our lives unfurl in the finest ways? Rowland Saifi's *The Minotaur's Daughter* is a primer on how to make meaning. With an elegance that is itself a kind of understanding, Saifi's prose delineates a sharp path of words that leads out into a concourse of startling beauty."

–Jesse Ball, author of *Silence Once Begun*

"This book of beautiful sentences and powerful mysteries, of hard-hitting subtleties and curious deceptions, this *The Minotaur's Daughter* by Rowland Saifi is a gem, the many-faceted, glass-carving, frighteningly, bracingly intricate kind."

–Laird Hunt, author of *Neverhome*

"There's great pleasure in getting lost inside Rowland Saifi's labyrinth. How will you find your way out? 'You a you, but not all at once.' I think the best thing to do is surrender; let yourself be swept along by his rhythmical, probing prose."

–Danielle Dutton, author of *S p r a w l*

QUESTION ONE

What does your book do and how does your book do it?

ANSWER

With *Minotaur's Daughter*, I set out to create a text that is structured like the experience of moving through a labyrinth: there are switchbacks, dead-ends, and backtracks; and so the text becomes recursive early on. But the recursion lessens and the path to the center (or the exit) becomes increasingly clear and slowly the mystery of location becomes less so as we accept our surroundings and learn to live. This structure exists only to activate what in many ways is a coming of age story. The main character is, in the beginning, on the verge of puberty, but it takes place in isolation. Time passes, the body changes, the concept of value changes, and the terms of commerce are shifted, etc. How does one define oneself when there is no one looking and when we lose the hope that someone will ever look again? What are the terms of commerce when there is no one to trade with? What is the value of things when an audience is removed? The labyrinth can also be seen as a mapping of recursive negative thoughts, one that we move through alone. I wanted to write a fragmented text that was deceptively whole on the page. But really, it may be something else all together.

QUESTION TWO

Having identified your book's compartment, could you bring it into focus by describing its relationship to other texts? (By "texts" I mean any relatable objects.) Put another way: if we think about a book as a star in a constellation, or a node in a circuit, I'm interested in hearing about the constellation or circuit in which readers might find your book. Put yet another way: if we think about your book as contributing to particular conversations, could you describe those conversations and their other participants?

ANSWER

A lot went into *The Minotaur's Daughter* as short as it is. Central is perhaps *The Waves*, by Virginia Woolf, which shows that a book can be built on the rhythm of its prose. *The Waves* is also a strangely isolated book and even though it is narrated by multiple characters, who are all friends, each monologue feels alone. Emily Dickinson's eye on the windowsill, her mystery, and more the absence of Emily Dickinson is a large part of the book's influence. The incompleteness and constant state of becoming that her poems and life are in force us all to be editors, to remake her each time we make a choice in reading her. I got the facsimile of her manuscripts from interlibrary loan and tried to write each poem as a group of poems with all the variants included, a remaking of a poem over and over with slight variations. She is essential to the mystery of the book. A friend put the

song "Sylvia" by Marissa Nadler on a mixed CD and I listened to that song on repeat when I wrote the book. There is a lot of texture and color from the song that makes it into its pages. Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* and Beckett's *Company* are satellites controlling the tides.

BIO

[Rowland Saifi](#) is the cousin of an Arkansas state champion duck caller. Not knowing how to call ducks himself, he has settled for writing. He is the author of [The Minotaur's Daughter](#) (Spuyten Duyvil, 2014) and *Karner Blue Estates*, a novella (Black Lodge Press, 2009). Despite nomadic daydreams, he teaches writing and literature in Chicago.