



July 2023

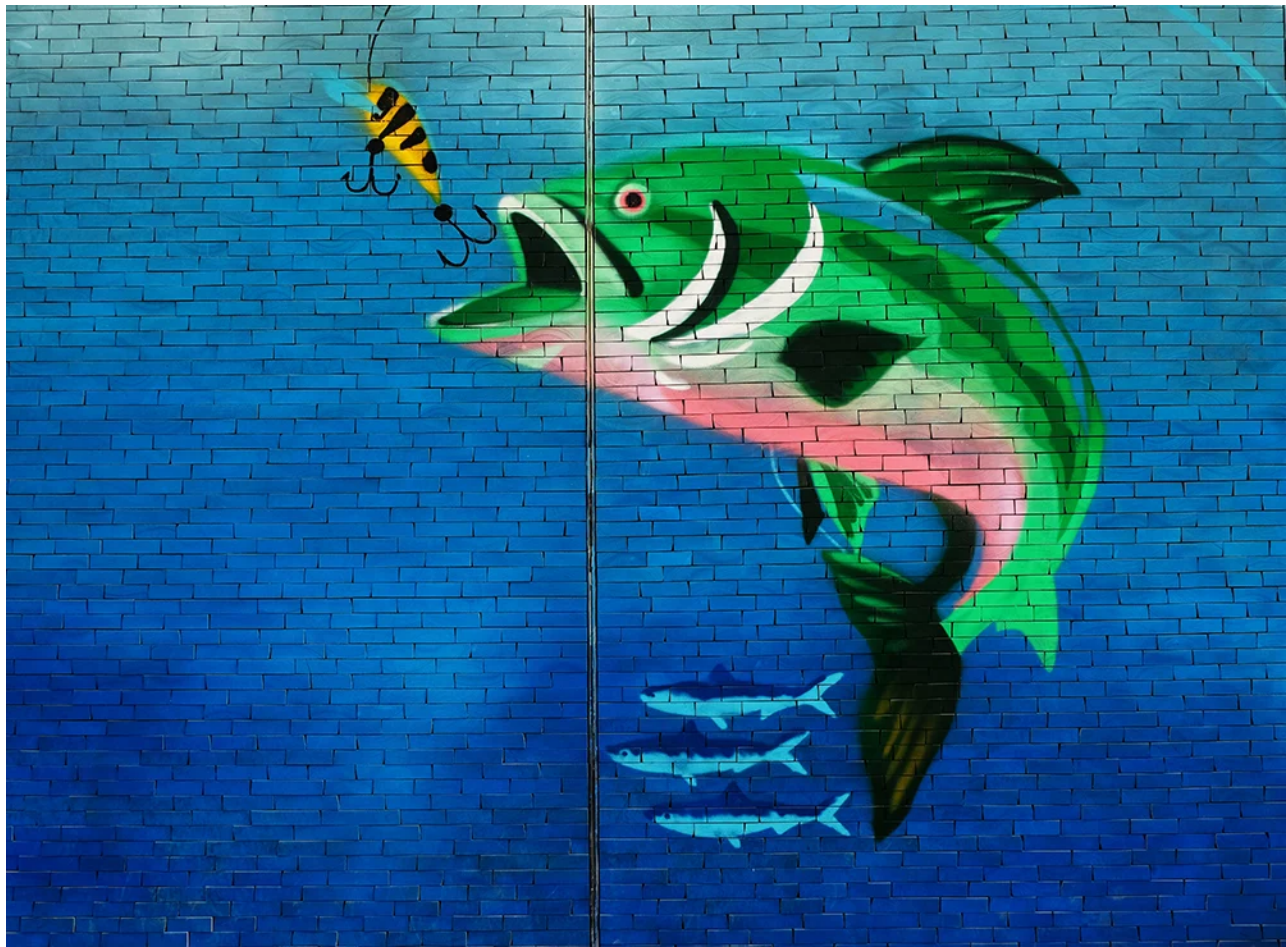
Have works addressing universal matters been replaced by sociocultural issues as click bait?

Dustin Grinnell discusses whether the current emphasis on publishing topical works addressing sociocultural issues eliminated the need for works that deal with universal matters that affect us all.



During the [#PitMad Twitter](#) contest, writers submit pitches for their projects to try to gain interest from [literary agents](#) and publishers. I participated twice in 2021, pitching my third novel and a collection of essays, neither of which gained traction. What did seem popular, evidenced by likes, shares, and positive comments, were stories about race, [gender identity](#), and other contemporary social and political issues I hadn't written about.

Now, I fully realize my projects might have been overlooked for any number of reasons: the marketing materials might've been weak, the subjects might not be considered interesting to a broad enough audience, or the writing might just not be where it needs to be. **However, we also seem to be living in a time when the subjects that matter most are polarizing social and political issues, which, for better or worse, I don't gravitate toward.**



As a straight, white man, I might not have had to face the discrimination and injustice others have, but I still have problems universal to all humans. I get anxious, insecure, and discontent, just like anyone else. I sometimes feel alienated from myself in the workforce and wonder if I'm spending my time well. I despair over how fragile and short life seems to be. And I'm still trying to figure out what I really want, searching for my place, hoping to have a positive impact on the world through the written word.

To be clear, I hold no resentment toward writers who give voices to those who have been unheard for generations. Combating oppression, disparity, and injustice is right, noble, and courageous work—and I myself am quick to champion and fight for more equality, diversity, and freedom in the world. It's just that the topics I like to explore in my own writing, especially in fiction, aren't sociocultural, but universal.

As an example, I admire literary works from the existentialist tradition, which prompt us to examine our lives through the lens of the universal concerns of human existence: anxiety, isolation, death, freedom, and meaninglessness. Such works often zoom out from current events to matters that concern all humankind—matters that aren't limited by race, gender, gender identity, class, or sociocultural background: Who are we? Where are we going? For what purpose?



WE ALL BLEED
THE SAME
COLOR

Such works include [Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*](#), which examines the quest for [meaning in life's absurdity](#), and [Albert Camus's *The Stranger*](#), which dramatizes the futile attempt to impose rationality on an irrational universe. [Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*](#) encourages us to avoid conformity, become individuals, and strive to fulfill our highest potential. In [The Death of Ivan Ilyich](#), Leo Tolstoy reminds us that death is inevitable and encourages us to remember this to live more fully. In the novel I submitted to #PitMad, [The Empathy Academy](#), which has since found a home through other channels, I explore whether society would be possible without empathy and whether empathy could be taught to those who might be born without it.

If those books are too heavy—and I'll admit, they can be for me—consider [popular fiction](#) that deals with existential matters, like [Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*](#) about a fictional space between life and death where you can live out different lives that you would've lived had you made different choices in your life. Or [Nikki Erlick's *The Measure*](#) where everyone in the story receives a box that contains a strand of rope that indicates their lifespan. These novels make you think about your life and what you should do with it. You don't have to be a certain race, gender, or age to recognize yourself in story—you just have to be human. It's no wonder books like these have become book club favorites.

I'm not suggesting that [social issues](#) don't represent [existential threats](#) for those affected by them. But if the #PitMad contest is any judge of what's popular in the publishing industry right now, social issues aren't being approached through an existential lens. Yet one could argue that existential works are especially timely for the current state of our world. Over the last three years, a good portion of our population has experienced an increase in universal dilemmas, such as general anxiety, isolation, death, loss of rights and freedoms, and questions concerning the meaning of life. Works that contemplate universal themes could help us navigate the complexities of such a difficult time, perhaps even help us deal with the mess and mystery of living.



A book that does this powerfully is the 2016 piercing memoir *When Breath Becomes Air* by neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi, who writes about his diagnosis with terminal cancer at the peak of his surgical career.

Kalanithi weaves together philosophical reflections and stories of his patients to illuminate the only thing we have in common—our mortality—and how it spurs us all, in ways both minute and monumental, to pursue lives of meaning. The book inspired me to make the best use of my time.

Beyond the power such books could have on us individually, there's a possibility that if we focused more on universal topics, current events might lose the power to cause so much outrage. **Opening ourselves to broader perspectives could make us less reactive. Taking a broader perspective often breeds pro-social qualities, like compassion and forgiveness. At best, it might promote understanding, not judgment, and lead to reconciliation, not cancellation.**

Humbly, I'd like to call for the publication of more writing that aims to lift our hearts and bring us together. That pushes us to create, to live more fully, to love more deeply. That helps us better deal with our anxiety, guilt, and boredom. That helps us avoid feeling alienated from ourselves. That reminds us to not lose our souls as we gain the world.



The point of today's reckoning with issues of race, gender, and gender identity is to invite in more voices for diversity of thought, not to exclude those who don't speak expressly to today's most controversial topics. **As we work to make all people's lives better and more equal, perhaps we can find a balance that allows us to value work that not only raises awareness or punishes wrongdoing but goes beyond gender identity, gender, political affiliation, and even race and class to focus on issues that affect us all.**

About the Author

Dustin Grinnell

Dustin is an essayist and fiction writer based in Boston.

His creative writing has appeared in many popular and literary publications, including *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, *New Scientist*, *Salon*, *VICE*, and *Writer's Digest*, among others. He's the author of *The Genius Dilemma*, *Without Limits*, and *The Empathy Academy*, and he has an MFA in fiction from the Solstice MFA Program, and an MS in physiology from Penn State.



Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of [Vine Leaves Press](#). Any content provided by our contributors are of their opinion, and are not intended to malign any religion, ethnic group, club, organization, company, or individual.



Want to continue the conversation?

Submit your **BACK TALK**

Instead of just emailing us your opinion, why don't you consider writing an opinion article to continue the conversation publicly? Payment is \$30. Articles should be between 700-1000 words. Just hit reply to this email with your pitch.

Do you like this SPILL IT? Share it and have your say!



Vine Leaves Press

Konopisopoulou 31, 6th Floor, [Athens](#)
[Greece](#)

If you no longer wish to receive our emails, please click the link below to [unsubscribe](#) or change your reader preferences.



[Update Subscriber Status](#)