



Being Genre Fluid

Zoë Howe

WRITERS ARE INNATELY CREATIVE; madcap professors endlessly experimenting in our laptop laboratories. The outside world, on the other hand, loves a tidy pigeonhole. These two elements inevitably clash, but here's the thing: pigeonholes are for letters and...well, pigeons. Writers don't fit into them easily, nor should we. We should be able to flex and shift and expand. So should readers. So should everyone. I identify as genre fluid and, if that is puzzling for editors, publishers and booksellers, so be it.

Being expected to write about only one theme makes no sense to me. However, in my early years as an author, I was often expected to write exclusively about women musicians because my first book was about The Slits — a band that happened to be female. Interestingly, they too were 'genre fluid', to the extent that before long, no one knew what to do with them. They just didn't fit into any of the prescribed boxes.

I quickly spotted the pigeonhole closing in on *me*, and was determined to break the stricture by immediately writing a book that involved both male *and* female artists. I realise we are discussing genre rather than gender, but it is worthy of note that women are often expected to stick to one area of interest – often a 'female-centric' one – possibly because we're not expected to be versatile in the first place. We're expected to continue doing the first thing we become known for, or variations on that theme, and people can get *very* confused if we deviate. But, whatever our gender, other people's limited perceptions have nothing to do with us. As long



as our own perceptions aren't limited, that's all that matters. It's good to continue to stretch and explore and surprise yourself. Surprising others is quite fun too.

All of this does depend upon your own character and the work that you have chosen; some people feel they won't progress if they diversify, because doing so will dilute their efforts and detract from their path. I respect that. I also respect that other people – people like me – would feel stifled by such a lifestyle.

We should specialise, but the nature of creativity is to be curious, to broaden rather than narrow the vision. Look at everything, see what calls you, follow the breadcrumbs. It is essential to replenish your creative larder by looking outside of your own work and usual subject matter. You never know what will spark your next project, and where that will take you in turn.

We contain multitudes, as Walt Whitman observed in his poem 'Song of Myself', and life needs us in all of our many-coloured, ever-shifting, creatively greedy glory. You're not only going to be lit up by one theme, and we need different flavours at different times in our lives. But if you do pick one, and only one, let it be because that's what *you* want, not because it makes other people feel more comfortable.