



*Nauman's Nautica*

## NAUMAN'S NAUTICA

by A.D. Nauman

Thoughts on navigating the turbulent life of an author

*(Nautica [noun] /'nawtika/-- navigation, seamanship)*

*(Nauman [noun] /'nawman/-- my last name)*

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Hi Friends,

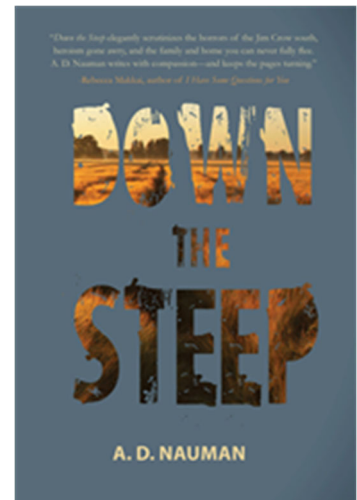
Over the past few months, I've been thinking about friendship. When I was a kid, making friends was not easy for me. My family moved every few years, so I grew up as an outsider, frequently lost in a new school building, ill-informed of procedures and expectations, generally clueless. I was also a quiet kid, what people called "shy," which wasn't acceptable. I was too skinny, which people felt free to point out in embarrassing ways. I came across as weird. Honestly, my whole family was weird—all of us anxious and lacking in social skills.

So, my current friends mean the world to me. I feel grateful, lucky, blessed to have so many cool people in my life. Many of them are not writers, but many are, and I've been thinking about them in particular—my writing friends, present and past. If you'd like to know what I've been thinking, read on!

### Thoughts on Friendships with Other Writers

by A.D. Nauman

Everyone needs friends and community; writers are no exception. Specifically, writers need friends who are also writers, people with whom to revel in long conversations about narrative structure, the nature of perspective, plotting, pacing, and semi-colons. Only other authors can



understand the unique frustrations of the writing life. Yet friendships between writers are tricky, often precarious, even fraught. Why are they like this?



First, writers are odd people. I include myself in this description. I don't mean this in a pejorative sense, nor am I secretly flattering us. We're different from most people—not "special," not better than—just different. I don't know if we're writers because we're odd, or we're odd because we're writers, but I do know that spending extended periods of your life alone with your laptop, immersed in a made-up world in your head, is not known to improve anyone's mental health. For those of us who write fiction, our relationship to reality is suspect. How best to articulate how I view fiction versus reality? Saying there's a blurry line between the two does not capture it. Chunks of one seem to be floating around in the other. Or perhaps we overlay our fictions—our unique understandings of experience—onto the real world, as various philosophers have posited. After all, what is reality? This is not a question most adults sitting in a coffee shop are obsessing over. See? We're odd.

Moreover, lurking in every writer's backstory, I would bet big money, is a terrible childhood. Narcissistic fathers, negligent mothers, violent siblings, neighborhood bullies, family friends who turn out to be pedophiles. Chronic childhood illness, the sudden death of a loved one, the lingering death of a loved one, house fires, hurricanes, poverty. Family members with addictions, suicidal ideation, bipolar disorder, debilitating depression, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder. Troubled childhoods spawn tenacious demons. Navigating demons and friendships at the same time is challenging, especially when our impulse is to shut a door on the world and live in our imaginations.

Even further complicating these complicated writer friendships—so far we have the fact that we're all odd, somewhat mentally disturbed, and sometimes antisocial—is the element of competition. Two writers who are friends will inevitably fall out of sync—one will have more publications and accolades; one will have fewer.

Of course, I'm speaking from experience, as someone who has befriended lots of writers over the years and lost a few along the way. I'm sharing what I think I've learned in the interest of helping us all maintain relationships with one another, because we do need one another, very much.



The first thing I learned, in my twenties and thirties, is that being an obnoxious drunk does not improve friendships. Nor does being obnoxious when you're sober. Arrogance is like a skin condition—you need to get rid of it as soon as you can. Apologies to past friends who had to put up with me.

Since becoming a better person in general, I've grown aware of other hazards in writer friendships, the main one being the inevitably asynchronous progress in publishing and accolades. In an ideal situation, you and your writer friends would enjoy equal amounts of success, coming to each of you in a turn-taking fashion, alternating so fairly that five-year-olds would be pleased. I think that's pretty uncommon. Usually one or two people seem to pull ahead while others feel left behind.

When a friend is "ahead" of you, it can be hard to sustain enthusiasm for her successes, especially if they seem nonstop. When you're struggling with rejections and agent queries that yield no response and more rejections, it's easy to feel pummeled by someone else's good news. And it's difficult to remember that, even when a writer does have successes, that doesn't mean all his problems are solved, all his dreams come true. The process of releasing a book, for example, is

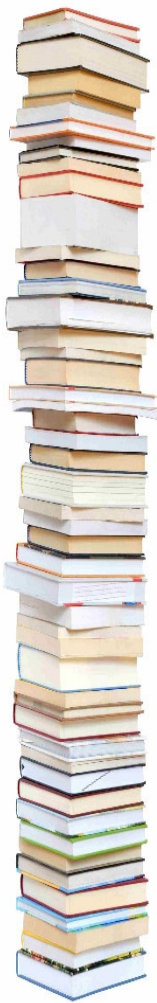
stressful, especially for people who struggle with mental health issues. Speaking engagements and book festival appearances are (1) a lot of work to prepare for, which puts pressure on a person, and (2) new opportunities to fail.

The goal here is to look from your friend's perspective, to the best of your ability, and not let envy and resentment build a wall between you.

When a friend is "behind" you in publications and accolades, and if you truly care about this person, you need to remember how painful it is to lack that success, to fend off those relentless rejections and disappointments. Remember, too, that more publishing success does not necessarily mean you're a better writer than your friend. Be aware of shifts in how you're treating her. Have you slipped into thinking of yourself as the "senior partner," who is now stooping down to help your friend? That's really annoying!

Again, the goal here is to look from the other person's perspective. Your friend is living in his own world with all his various troubles and stresses—many of which may be unrelated to writing. Allow your friend the grace to *not* express enormous enthusiasm for all your achievements all the time. She doesn't exist on the planet to be your fan.

Over time I've come to appreciate the need for writer friends to have a genuine respect for one another's work. You can't achieve a close friendship with



someone whose work you don't sincerely admire, or with someone who doesn't sincerely admire yours. You don't have to like everything she writes, or vice versa, but a general respect needs to be apparent. I've also come to appreciate the importance of basic relationship communication skills. I hope that, if your friend says or does something that hurts you, you'll be able to talk with him about it. And I hope he'll be able to listen with an open mind and an ability to make a change. Holding grudges poisons any human relationship.

It's easy to get stuck in our heads—inside that upside-down bowl of bone where we invent people and worlds that may or may not match real people or the real world. It's harder to look from someone else's point of view, to listen, to check ourselves, to offer grace, to stay. It's easy to take offense. It's hard to be vulnerable.



I've learned and finally accepted that people in our lives come and go: friendships wax and wane and sometimes vanish. In my experience, lifelong friendships are rare. Their value, of course, is immeasurable—what a joy to have a friend who's seen you through all your years and decades, through the bad (obnoxious drunk) periods and the better times, who's cried with you and celebrated with you.

So I wish you all long friendships with other writers: may you laugh together, raise a glass (maybe just one), and talk about semi-colons to your hearts' content.

--ADN



At AWP in Kansas City with Mark Spann (fiction), Beth Uznis Johnson (with her new novel, *Coming Clean*), and Laurel DiGangi (creative nonfiction).

