

## Heti collection lands on New Yorker best list

Adela Talbot

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Since its release last summer, co-authors Misha Glouberman and Western's writer-in-residence, Sheila Heti have enjoyed rave reviews of *The chairs are where the people go: How to live, work and play in the city* (Faber & Faber, 2011), a collection of 72 short chapters/essays chronicling Glouberman's thoughts and opinions on topics such as impostor syndrome and why wearing a suit every day might help you quit smoking. While Glouberman spoke, Heti wrote out his thoughts verbatim. Out of many, she hand-picked the 72 topics covered in the book.

Hailed for its wit, humour and articulate approach to sometimes inarticulate subjects, the work was named [one of the New Yorker's top non-fiction books of 2011](#).

*Western News* reporter Adela Talbot recently spoke with Heti about the book and its success.

WN: How did the book (or the idea for this type of book) come about?

SH: I wanted to write a book about everything my friend Misha knows. I was thinking it would be interesting to see how far, how wide, how deep one can get if one's subject is just the knowledge of a single person. I was curious to see what could be accomplished without recourse to research, or looking things up on the Internet. It seemed old-fashioned to me: to make the source of wisdom just one human. Not only old-fashioned, but very true. Many of us live on the thoughts and wisdom of the people closest to us. I wanted a warm, not a cold, book.

WN: If you wrote what he spoke verbatim, how do you define authorship?

SH: We share authorship. The idea for the book was mine. I went to Misha and said, "Let's write this book." He talked and I wrote down what he said, edited it, formed it, wrote the intro. Got it published. There's a hundred years of conceptual art in which the object is not the artist's own – starting with Duchamp, where the artist is the one who creates the terms of the art. This fits into that; think of it as conceptual art, but more like conceptual writing.

WN: How did you decide what to include and what to leave out? How was the order decided?

SH: The editing was simple; we put the best chapters in, and what 'best' means is just what Misha liked best and felt most comfortable with, the chapters I felt were the most interesting and relevant, and the chapters our editor liked. The things we left out were just not as interesting. It wasn't difficult. Ordering it was a bit more complex than deciding what should stay and what should go. That kind of task, I could have spent forever on. But I didn't have time to spend forever on it. In the end, I was just trying to get some interesting juxtapositions, and to reveal Misha slowly, in the way a person might reveal himself to you in friendship – the more difficult or awkward revelations coming later.

WN: How would you classify the book's genre? It was in 'general philosophy' in the Western bookstore and some reviews have classified it as self-help, comedy, etc.

SH: I don't know. Philosophy. Self-help. Literature. Business. They all work. I think it crosses genres, and makes up its own.

WN: Do you have a favourite essay/chapter?

SH: I like the Margaux chapter. I find it very moving, and so different from the conventional ways people have of thinking about relationships. Misha's point is that you don't go out looking for the perfect person (or that, anyway, what worked for him was not finding someone who corresponded to an idea he had in his head of who he might end up with, but rather, accepting "something new that came from the world"). That idea is something he talks about elsewhere in the book; the value of being open to surprise. I think many of us live with blinders on, only accepting what we have pre-ordained in our heads is what we want, missing a lot of what's there, that is also good.

WN: Why do you think the book is so popular?

SH: I think the intention behind it was very pure and simple and honest, and was based in love and curiosity and friendship. That has to come across. It wasn't a cynical project; I wanted to document the thoughts of someone I care about, who I admire and Misha, on his part, felt he was talking to someone he cares about and admires (both essential qualities of friendship). That warmth has to reach the reader, I think. As well, I think Misha has genuinely interesting things to say – real insights. But we didn't put them in some kind of artificial structure, and Misha isn't the sort of person who wants acolytes or followers, so you never feel like you're being forced to believe something. It's just Misha saying, "I think this might be true ..."