

Fall 2005

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Recommended Citation

Stevens, Jay and Abu-Jaber, Diana (2005) "An Interview with Diana Abu-Jaber," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 63 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss63/9>

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An Interview with Diana Abu-Jaber

Jay Stevens

*Diana Abu-Jaber is the author of **Crescent**, which was awarded the 2004 PEN Center USA Award for Literary Fiction and the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award and was named one of the twenty best novels of 2003 by The Christian Science Monitor, and **Arabian Jazz**, which won the 1994 Oregon Book Award and was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Her memoir, **The Language of Baklava**, was published in the spring of 2005. She teaches at Portland State University and divides her time between Portland and Miami.*

Jay Stevens: In your books, *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent*, the parent characters of your main protagonists resemble your parents in real life. And it seems like the father character – or in the case of *Crescent*, the uncle character – is a wonderful story teller. Did your father and other relatives tell a lot of stories? And was that an influence on why you became a writer?

Diana Abu-Jaber: Yes, I think that was really important growing up around story tellers like my dad and my uncles. I think it instilled a love of the beauty of the spoken story. Also, my mother was a reading teacher. She brought home a lot of fables and fairy tales, which also have an oral tradition behind them. It was a combination of those things that brought me the desire to tell stories, as opposed to a love of the beauty of writing.

JS: But the style of the books are Western-novel-like, not fables or spoken stories with the exception, of course, of the fable that's spun by the uncle in *Crescent*. What books influenced you? As a child, did you read a lot? What were your favorite books as a child?

DAJ: Definitely all the classic fairy tales. The Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, all the really dark, Germanic, bloody fairy tales. The ones that were violent and stuff (laughs), but very magical. And then as I got older I became interested in all kinds of weird books, I mean I read really weirdo things. I read all these Readers' Digest condensed books that my parents had lying around.

The Naked and the Dead and From Here to Eternity. These classics of – I don't even know – the seventies, I guess.

And then I got interested in Khalil Gibran. And that's because I liked the picture on the cover of the book. (laughs) You know, that mystical line drawing that he did of his face, a self-portrait, which is on the cover of *The Prophet*. I thought it was incredibly deep, I was really taken with it. But you know, I was eight (laughs). Actually, I started Gibran when I was probably about twelve, in middle school. And Kahlil Gibran was the first person I ever read who was Arab. That was really interesting, to find someone who was a reflection of my heritage. I had never encountered that before.

I was really interested in writing. I've always been. That's something that started from a very early age where I was thinking that's what I wanted to do. When I was in high school, I read everything that was put in front of me. I studied all the modernist writers of the time. All the people who were popular and who my teachers were reading. A lot of Phillip Roth, Saul Bellow, and classic Southern writers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty and Faulkner, of course. I remember trying to imitate what they did and thinking this is what literature is.

JS: And this was high school?

DAJ: Yes, high school. It continued into college. I had a traditional mainstream American education in literature, I would say. Especially reflective of the period. It wasn't until later in college and in graduate school that I started reading minority writers, people who were just coming at writing from different social and cultural perspectives. That was really important to me. That was when I started to figure out that I could write about my own experience. But it took me a long time.

JS: A lot of immigrant children do everything they can to become Americanized, to distance themselves from their heritage. But you seem to take the opposite tack. It's interesting that you have one American parent and one parent – your father – from Jordan. Why do you feel so connected to your father's past?

DAJ: When I was a kid, I didn't want to connect with my father's heritage. I was embarrassed about it. I did everything I could to be an American. I can remember being so snotty. (laughs) I used to go into this big grocery store in Syracuse with my father, where they had huge produce sections, and my dad would try to bargain about the price of the produce. (laughs) I'd think, this is

humiliating to me! I can remember being at the cash register and my father saying to the cashier "I'll give you a buck for three tomatoes, but not for each tomato." (laughs) And I pretended I didn't know him. (laughs) I pretended I didn't understand Arabic when he spoke to me in public places. Because when I was a younger child, Arabic was a secret code in the family – I think that's true for a lot of immigrant families. But then I didn't want to speak Arabic. I didn't want to be different from my friends at all. It wasn't until graduate school –

JS: Really?

DAJ: I think it's related to the fact that I didn't find literature that reflected other cultural perspectives. I didn't find that many images of other cultures coming up in my experience. And I was raised in this backwoods place outside Syracuse. So the notion of multi-culturalism wasn't something that I was aware of until college. Maybe it really wasn't part of the popular culture until I was in college. We're talking late seventies.

JS: Your parents are alive. In your books, your parents are missing, usually dead. What's the deal? How do your parents feel about that?

DAJ: I have theory about that actually. Again it's one of those things that I didn't plan to do. But I think that when you're the child of immigrants, if your parents are from a really traditional authoritarian culture – as my father is – you have to work so hard to kind of break through – I did – and find your voice and establish your identity, it's almost like you have to metaphorically kill them off. I have been writing about – I always seem to write about children who are from these kinds of backgrounds. Adults who have had to go through this struggle, the great struggle, to form an identity. So I always think when I'm writing, like I don't want to get into the whole parental thing because that's a whole other dimension. So I'll just kill them. (laughs) But it becomes an even bigger element of the book because of their death, and they're more present in their death than they are when they're alive. It's an ironic effect that I never intend.

JS: How do your parents feel about their killings?

DAJ: My mom said...one of my aunties called her up, 'Pat, Pat, they've killed you!' (laughs) Very discreet. I have the most discreet relatives in the world. My mom said, 'you know, I'm so glad!' (laughs) Because she feels she doesn't have to answer to anything, it removes her from the equation. And my dad, the great thing about dad, I think this is true for anyone who's the child of immigrants, if

you write in a language that your parent doesn't speak fluently or read fluently that you have all this freedom. (laughs) He reads my books, but he doesn't really get what's going on in them.

JS: Until they're translated into Arabic.

DAJ: Yeah, right! (laughs) Ooo. He has the pride of knowing that I publish books, but he doesn't have to deal with some of the more complicated personal questions in them.

JS: Was there an event or that pushed you into exploring your father's past?

DAJ: Yes. I had a teacher in grad school. He's a North Dakota writer. Larry Woiwode. He's a wonderful writer. He wrote a beautiful book, called *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, which I wildly recommend, and a lot of beautiful books. And he was an important professor for me.

We met regularly, we had tutorial sessions. And I used to bring stories I wrote imitating John Cheever. I wrote about things that I didn't know anything about, things totally outside my experience that I thought were literary. One day Larry said, 'you know, you come in here and tell me really interesting stories about your family, this wild Arab-American community that you're from. And then you write these really boring stories (laughs), about cocktail parties on Long Island. What are you doing? Why don't you write about this interesting stuff in your life?'

That felt risky and strange, and I didn't want to do it. I resisted. But then I decided I'd take a chance. I guess part of the problem for me is that when I was growing up, my father was always so insistent that my identity and my siblings' identity was Arab. We moved back to Jordan several times when I was a kid, and it was almost scary to me, because I felt so pulled apart by my two cultures that I felt I had to claim one and insist on one – trying to be an American.

But I started writing about some of my relatives and my experiences. It was all fictionalized. I wrote a little about Islam and I wrote a little about gender roles in Arab families. And lo and behold it seemed to work. But it was a really specific moment where I was given permission to write about what I know. I think a lot of writers have talked about that moment of being given permission....

JS: That's interesting. On that note, a lot of interviews I've seen stereotype you as the 'Arab-American' writer. In your interview with NPR, for example, they asked you your opinions about political events in Iraq. How does that make

you feel, that you're solidly identified with the public as 'Arab American Writer.' Who are you really? What's your real identity?

DAJ: I want to be John Cheever. (laughs) I mean it's funny – isn't it? – how that happens. I think for all writers it's true that having some kind of a niche gives them a good starting place. That was useful for me with my first book. [Arabian Jazz]

When I first had the manuscript for the first book, I didn't know if anybody was going to be interested in it or how it was going to do. I didn't have any contacts, I had no connections, I didn't know anything about the publishing industry. I did have an agent, though, and the agent was sending the book around, but I got weird responses to it. One editor who looked at it said she liked the writing, but that Arabs were politically inappropriate. She just came right out and said that.

JS: This in nineteen – the early nineties...

DAJ: Ninety-three. Not that long ago.

JS: "Politically inappropriate." Did you ever find out what that meant?

DAJ: My agent was so appalled, he just said we're moving on. The book was optioned, which was (laughs) a way to make ten thousand dollars. (laughs)

JS: Every writer's dream.

DAJ: (laughs) They had me fly down and do 'lunch.' I sat at this meeting with a group of Hollywood people who said, "Great story! We love the idea of the family, but do they have to be Arab?" They said things like, "I heard Lithuanians are really hot these days. A story on Arabs, I don't know, it's unattractive, people won't want to go..." The title of the book is Arabian Jazz!

So it's always been a double-edged sword for me. It has not in any way guaranteed acceptance. I think it's probably made things challenging for me as often as it's given me a special foothold.

JS: So do you feel like you have different identities, like, the writer, and then the person?

DAJ: I do. As I've gotten older, I've made more of an identity as an adult away from my parents. But my father's culture, it's always going to be important

to me and central to me, but it's no longer the operating principle of my life. That makes me interested in moving into a larger arena.

JS: Arabian Jazz. One of the themes in that is the idea of racism in the United States. Did you encounter much racism as a child in Syracuse?

DAJ: Oh, yes!

JS: Was that a pretty accurate depiction of what it was like to grow up in Syracuse?

DAJ: That was a touch of it, definitely. We lived in a few places. Every time we would go to the Middle East we would come back to the States and live in a different place in the Northeast. Usually it was in or around Syracuse. In upstate New York it's very blue collar, it's kind of Appalachian. And we lived in the country for a lot of my growing up years, where the other kids were exposed to nothing. They barely had television sets, if they had any exposure to the outside world. And so the racism was always subtle and strange. People didn't even know they were being racist. Maybe that's how racism is always is, it takes itself for granted that this is how the world is, and I just am superior to you (laughs) because of how I look or where I'm from. I can remember we were targeted during the energy crisis in the seventies. People left notes about Arabs and the oil, 'give us back our oil!' (laughs) Like we had it in the back yard, you know? My dad encountered weird racism at work....

JS: What'd he do?

DAJ: He did a lot of different things, he was all over the place. He was a custodian for a long time, he sold carpets, he was a court bailiff, he sold cars, security guard...

JS: So the racism he encountered at work?

DAJ: Well, he started moving into more professional work. After a while he settled into an administrative job at a hospital. But what he always wanted to do was to own his own restaurant. And people – he cooked professionally for a long time, too, he worked at Hotel Syracuse – people would say things like "I don't know if I want an A-rab touching my food. You people are dirty." He'd hear comments like that. When he worked as an administrator, the union was always going on strike, and because he was in management, he got targeted. People would call

the house and make horrible racist threats on the phone. My sisters and I were little kids, we'd pick up the phone, and they'd say this stuff to us on the phone. It was amazing what people felt it was okay to do, or right to do. I didn't encounter it as much from the other children. I think Arab was too subtle of a racism for them yet. You had to get a little older before you learn some of the finer nuances of racism. (laughs) I would not have wanted to have been African American in that community, I tell you. So, on the one hand I was able to pass, because I was so light skinned, but not my dad and sisters, who were Arab-looking.

JS: Why did you stick around? Why did you keep going back to the Syracuse area? There were Arab communities elsewhere in the States, like Miami, where you would've fit in better. Where your dad could have started his own business.

DAJ: There was a feeling that racism was everywhere and that this was what America was, you know? My dad had family in Syracuse. For him, family is the most important thing. The idea of moving to a place in the United States where the immediate family was not, was almost unthinkable for him. My mom wanted to move to California...(laughs) I wish! She wanted to move to Santa Monica, back when they could've bought property, and made a killing years later. (laughs) My dad said that we had to stay where the family was.

JS: In Arabian Jazz, there's also a sense of – I wouldn't call it racism – in Jordan against Americans. I guess 'prejudice' is the word I'm looking for. Did you feel that when you would go to Jordan with your family?

DAJ: Well, it was always a sense of insider/outsider. And definitely there is race consciousness in the Middle East, for sure.

JS: Was it different than in the United States?

DAJ: It didn't feel as much like a value judgment to me as just a qualitative difference. The Arabs don't call themselves "white," they call themselves teem, which means "wheat." And they're more accepting of the variations in skin color, because there are so many variations in the Arab complexion. So, you can be a black Arab and you can be a white Arab and you're considered part of the same race. That's kind of liberating in a way.

But there are permutations within skin color of beauty, and if you are white, that's considered more beautiful. In my family that was very confusing. My aunties and strangers would make a big deal out of me being the "white one." And my sisters, who were darker, they called them "the Arabs." They'd say, "oh,

they're the Arabs, she's the American." And they used to tell me to stay out of the sun, and "oh, your skin is so fabulous (laughs), you're so lucky, blah blah." And of course that totally messes you up for the rest of your life.

JS: One of the interesting things about *Crescent* is that it's a book about an Arab community in the United States and it was published in 2003. Obviously much has changed in the Arab community since 9/11. There seemed to be some small nod to 9/11 in the book. Tell me where 9/11 occurred in the process of the book and how you decided to change the book because of it.

DAJ: Well, I actually finished it before 9/11. There's one scene where – and I can remember working on it – where there's a lecturer talking about that something bad is coming –

JS: Something bad is coming because of the United States' treatment of Iraq.

DAJ: Because of American foreign policy, right. Everything in that book is based on America's foreign policy towards Iraq since the first Persian Gulf War. And to me...9/11 was shocking, but it was not surprising. I feel like all you have to do is look at our foreign policy to see exactly what was coming.

JS: So you wrote that scene of the lecture before 9/11?

DAJ: I did!

JS: Because it reads like you wrote it afterward...

DAJ: Everybody says that! I know! (laughs)

JS: The gift of prophecy!

DAJ: Right! (laughs) I know!

JS: Like you're on a highway, and you prophesize a car's going to come along!

DAJ: Exactly! I've felt like that all along. And people have been saying that for years. I'm not the first person to make that observation. That's something that I encountered as I was researching the novel. I would read political analysts

who would say over and over and over again, it's only a matter of time before terrorism hits our shores, we've got to beef up security, we've got to beef up airport security. There were people who talked about Osama bin Laden, and who talked about the plots of al Qaeda against America to strike the airlines! I mean, that specific! But nobody was listening, nobody believed it. It came with the territory that I was researching for the book. It was all right there.

Then 9/11 happened, practically the day after I turned in the manuscript. I had been working and working and working, I finally got it done, I gave it to my agent, I got married (laughs)...my husband and I got married the day before 9/11. Then that happened.

JS: The day before? You got married on the tenth of September? 2001? (laughs) That's not funny! (laughs)

DAJ: I know! (laughs)

JS: It's ironic.

DAJ: It's very weird. It's very ironic and weird. So I called my agent, and I said, "should we burn the manuscript?" I thought, no one's going to want to read this. This is a national catastrophe, this is horrible, and the last thing anybody's going to want to read is a book about the Arab culture, the unfairness of American foreign policy, how we need to treat Arabs better, et cetera. I really was ready to just put the thing in the shredder. You know? And I had a kind of bad experience with another novel before that, about the Palestinians...

So my agent said, "no, you have to stick with it." She was prescient to say, "I think people are really going to be interested in this now. This is actually the time for this kind of story." It was really her call that we stayed with it.

It didn't get published right away. There was like another year of work – we edited it and talked about putting in 9/11 or changing the timeline, because it's really set right before 9/11. But I didn't want to do that. It felt too false....I still feel like it takes a while to write about something like that. You need to process it, you need to try to understand what happened. I did. Basically the edits were about the story. And we kept it as it was.

JS: I also read in the interview at the end of my copy of *Crescent* that there was a strong reaction to *Arabian Jazz*. And I was wondering if you'd talk about that. Who was wronged and what kind of reaction did you get?

DAJ: Well...eww!

JS: We can pretend this question never existed.

DAJ: (laughs) I don't mind talking about it. It's very...it's weird in a way because...it's so much about my feeling about the family...and...I was really taken aback. When I wrote *Arabian Jazz*, I meant it very affectionately, I meant it to be a humorous tribute.

JS: To the Arab-American community?

DAJ: Yes. I always took it for granted that it was my people, my community, my family. And to me, humor is an affectionate thing. I think humor can also have an edge to it, certainly, but I thought that was going to be okay. A lot of the Arab-American community – not all, a lot of them loved the book and were very excited – a number of them felt that the humor was mocking, glib. And that really surprised me. I wasn't prepared for that. I got a wide range of responses from people. The first review for the book was in the *Washington Post* written by an Arab man who was enraged with the book. It was a scalding review. It was so angry that my editor actually wrote a response to the newspaper. It had to be the first review, too, it was really hard. We were both like, "uh oh..."

JS: Guaranteed sales! Sorry, just thinking positively....

DAJ: I learned from that experience the expression, "there's no such thing as bad publicity." I didn't know that expression before *Arabian Jazz*. (laughs) Occasionally a critic would read the book – an Arab critic –and be enraged by it. Also there's a female infanticide in the book, and one critic in particular was really upset about it because she said it misrepresented Islam, that Islam does not endorse infanticide.

JS: Where did you come up with the idea for that?

DAJ: That's the thing! It's true, Islam forbids infanticide, but there were rumors I heard in the community that my family was from of female infanticide. And just like any society, there are the laws of the culture and then there is what people in their day-to-day lives do. And that's what you want to write about, you want to write about what's weird and exceptional.

Part of the problem is that there are few representations of Arabs in this culture, and you can't assume that there's a counter-balance about what most Arabs are really like. So for me to write about my family or the individuals that

I knew in all their complexities and nuances and strangeness meant that I had to do it in a bit of a vacuum. And that people would read these books and not know that really most of the general Arab culture is not like this. Most Arabs are much more normal, they're much more ordinary, just like in America. That was a problem for me with Arabian Jazz. I learned a lot from that early experience, and I responded to it with a novel, the second one [Crescent]....

JS: This is probably a good time to talk to you about Crescent. I felt there was a huge leap in craft from Arabian Jazz to Crescent. Talk to me about that. What did you learn from writing Arabian Jazz and how did you apply that to writing Crescent? What did you work on, specifically, to make Crescent a damn good book?

DAJ: I think a lot of Arabian Jazz was written...I hate to put it this way, but to perfectly frank, I think a lot of it was written in a state of fearfulness. I didn't know if I was allowed to tell these stories. I didn't know if I was allowed to write in my own voice. I didn't know if this book was acceptable. I was worried about not offending anybody, not being a bad girl. And that's just poison to writing. Writers have to be audacious. They have to really take risks. Arabian Jazz is constantly moving back and forth between its voices. Sometimes it's humorous, sometimes it's serious, sometimes there's poetry, sometimes there's goofiness. I feel like that reflects my own process of second-guessing myself. I had this "oh fuck it" attitude (laughs) by the time I was writing Crescent....(laughs) I don't know if you can put that in the interview.

JS: I hope so!

DAJ: Ah, the "ol' fuck it attitude." (laughs) It's a literary term.

JS: I'll spell it differently, italicize it, pretend it's Arabic...

DAJ: As we say in the Middle East, oaphuket! (laughs) You know I've gone through the wars with Arabian Jazz, I wrote this other novel that has not been published that was an incredible painful process. By the time I was writing Crescent, I felt like I really didn't care what anybody thought. I just wanted to write the truest story I could. And I wanted to write out of my obsessions and I wanted to be audacious. So it was that freedom – and I was just older! I was in my late thirties then, it was just time to go for it. I think that was a huge, huge thing, getting older and feeling braver. The "oh fuck it" principle. (laughs)

JS: There were a number of things you did in *Crescent* that made it a solid book. For example, all the characters remained throughout in the book and each played an integral part to the story. The characters were treated more seriously. The big thing I noticed – I mean, writer-to-writer – the descriptions of people, the pauses between dialog, those things were vastly improved....

DAJ: Oh! That's interesting!

JS: What's the secret? What's the elixir? Did you know this stuff?

DAJ: No!

JS: Should I end the question here, so I don't ruin it for you?

DAJ: Oh, no, that's fine. That's really very interesting. I really learn a lot about my writing from talking to people who've read my work. I did a reading recently where a student raised her hand and she said, "I want you to please talk to us about the significance of the color blue in your work." And I said, "what do you mean?" And she said, "the color blue and all its variations, how it comes up over and over and how it's there –"

JS: [Referring to a passage from "*Crescent*"] Blue wards off the evil eye!

DAJ: Yes...I...wish I had thought of that. (laughs) I was completely unaware that blue was an operating symbol, and she had done this analysis of it. Somebody else wrote to me about the significance of the gaze and of eyes. I think a lot of writers write so much out of the unconscious that they're not always aware of their technique. For me, it's always a struggle to grasp the idea of craft. I have deliberately, in some way, isolated myself from the study of craft, not meaning to, but it's not the way I innately approach writing. It's very challenging for me to conceptualize my technique and writing process. I guess that is true for a lot of writers. When you teach writing or when you're learning about it, you go through this unnatural process of making what you do unconsciously, conscious. That's a long-winded way of saying –

JS: You don't know.

DAJ: I don't know.

JS: Let's talk about the missing book for a second. I had no idea that it ex-

isted. Do you want to talk about it? What was it about? Why was it painful? What happened to it?

DAJ: It's hard to tell. I can tell you the circumstances. It was a book about a Palestinian family. And I wrote it when Palestine and Israel were in the news a lot in the mid-nineties. When there was a lot of tension and fighting and some of the worst violence. It was a very heavy book. After the humor of *Arabian Jazz* I wanted to take on a more adult style. Grief. I wanted to get more serious. I felt emboldened after actually managing to publish a book. It made me feel more confident about trying on this more grown-up feeling. Authority. Sadness. So I wrote this book, a very brooding, very heavy book, and a lot of family experiences went into it.

Palestinians have always struggled with their representation in the news in the American media. I finished it, and a lot of complicated things went on with whether or not it was going to be published. And I can't go on the record and tell you these things. I don't know if the things that happened were more about the prose of the book or the politics. It was a really hard experience for me, and it meant that that book didn't get published. I worked on it for five years, I really put a lot into it. So, I've got this second book out there. People say, 'there's a huge gap between your two novels!' It was another book, actually.

JS: Would you like plug your new book coming out?

DAJ: Oh, yeah! I've got a new book coming out! (laughs) [*The Language of Baklava*] will be out this March. It was my editor's idea. We were talking a lot about cooking, and my dad's obsessions with food, and my family experiences. It was because I was working on all that when I was writing *Crescent*, and [the editor] said "you really should just go for it, tell your own family experiences." At the time, memoirs were still of interest. (Laughs.) Not like now.

JS: So, lots of recipes...

DAJ: Each chapter is based on a dish or an ingredient, and there's family stories around it, and then there are the recipes that use the ingredients.

JS: One of the things I noticed about *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent* was that the protagonists from the books – Jemorah and Sirine – they're very similar characters. In fact in the progression of storyline is very similar as well. Where do you go from there?

DAJ: Oh, God!

JS: Are you working on a new novel? Do you want me to ask this question?

DAJ: I am, I am.

JS: I hope you're not working on another character like that...I'd be stabbing you in the back...

DAJ: It's scary, I kind of have the feeling that I must be doomed to be writing the same book over and over again. Maybe that's just what it is to be a writer. You try to re-do it. I do notice that I have very similar traits in my heroines. I'm trying to do something new with this new novel...I started a new novel....

JS: Do you want to talk about it, or are you superstitious?

DAJ: I'd be happy to. What's most interesting about it, is that I'm trying to write a book with no Arab-American. My husband for years now has been telling me to stop writing about my heritage. He's like, 'what have the Arabs done for you?' (laughs) I have to say, he has a point. Because it's like you cannot set yourself up for the spokesperson for your people. Nobody wants you to do that. I want to try and expand my platform. I would really like to have a larger voice from which to write. So this new one, it's set entirely in the United States, it's set in Syracuse. Heritage is...the idea of heritage or culture is done entirely through the metaphor of personal identity rather than race or culture. I think my obsessions in the way are the still the same. It's still...I keep going back to certain types of questions, like the question of parentage...all those things are back again, despite my best efforts. This new book has elements of genre elements. It's a little bit Gothic...

JS: Which genre elements?

DAJ: There's some detective – it's very much a literary book, it's really a literary book, not really a detective book. The main character is a fingerprint specialist. I'm working off the idea of a fingerprint as a kind of identity blueprint. It's still really, really rough. I'm excited to be trying something new...