

On reconnecting with your ambition



Author Caro Claire Burke discusses opportunity, perseverance, and the importance of having people who believe in you.

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As told to Diana Ruzova, 3002 words.

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Your critically acclaimed debut novel, Yesteryear comes out in April. It's also being made into a film starring Anne Hathaway. It's about a contemporary trad wife that wakes up one morning in 1855. An excellent elevator pitch. Did you ever in your wildest dream imagine this amount of buzz for your first book?

God, no. I still don't believe it. I sold the book in 2024 so it's almost been two years, and it took me a year after selling it [to fully believe it]. I would wake up and check my email because I was so certain that it hadn't happened. I was writing for a decade before this. I used to have dreams that a literary agent finally emailed me back. I would wake up and be like, "did I just make all of that up?" So no, not even in a million years...

How has your life changed and/or stayed the same since Yesteryear?

First and foremost, I get to write full time now. I think that's the greatest privilege a writer can have. When I was writing Yesteryear, I would get up at five in the morning and work on it before work. And so being able to actually dedicate a full amount of time to creativity is crazy. I would say that's the biggest outcome. And then I ended up with a team of people who really believe in my work, which I also think is a really big privilege. When you're writing, sometimes before you sell a book and sometimes after, it can be really hard to maintain a sense of belief in yourself, like when you're dealing with rejections from literary mags or from agents or from editors or whatever. Through the Yesteryear process, I now have a team who believe in me as a writer, and not just in Yesteryear. And that makes a big difference.

Were you always a writer? Would love to hear a bit about your journey to the page. Your creative origin story.

I was not always a writer. I enjoyed writing. I read and I wrote on the side, but I barely did any creative writing in college. I got a job at a startup. I wish I had journaled, because I would love to be able to go back in time. But when I was 23, I was just like, "I want to write a novel." I became obsessed with it. Since then, it's become the thing that I've been obsessed with. Depending on who you are, that might sound like a late onset or an early onset.

What was your relationship with creativity growing up? Was it something that felt available to you, or was it something you had to reach for?

I think that I always had an inclination towards fiction in particular. Sometimes I would write little short stories as a kid, but I was not aware that it could be something that you could do as a craft or that it could be a full-time job. I grew up in an area where most people became doctors or lawyers or went into business. Then I

went to a prep school in New England, and then UVA. Ironically, UVA has a great MFA program and a great English program, but UVA also is a place with a lot of mainstream strivers, the kids who are going to go into consulting, kids who are going to law school. I thought I was prelaw for a while. I just didn't know that you could be a full time writer. That wasn't something that I knew about until maybe 22 or 23. I remember reading a book by Emily Giffin and seeing in her bio that she was a lawyer, and she wrote books. And I was like, "oh, that's how it happens. You have a job, and then you get to write books." So I just didn't grow up in that space. I enjoyed creativity, but like the NFL, I thought "you're not going to be a professional football player," you know? So it took me a while to realize that maybe you could be a professional football player.

We both got our MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars. Do you think an MFA is necessary to write professionally in this day and age?

The only thing you need to be a writer is you have to write. You just have to write a lot. And obviously, then you have to figure out how to climb the ladder. An MFA is a place that helps you facilitate writing. If you want that, that's great. But at the end of the day, you just have to write.

For me, the biggest advantage of going to Bennington was gaining access to people who cared about what I cared about. And now I do stay in touch with a lot of those people and reach out to them and be like, "What books are you reading?" Or, "Hey, do you know anyone who knows this agent?" Or, "My book is coming out, what should I prepare for?" That stuff is great, but that's a function of networking. Some people get that in undergrad. Some people get that just from being in a city. For me, I got that at Bennington.

I needed someone to tell me I was a writer.

The legitimacy, too. It's not nothing to make a decision that reinforces your own sense of legitimacy. When you're an artist, everything feels so illegitimate all the time. So anything that reinforces that what you're doing matters and deserves carving out time, is useful.

I know you used to write short stories based on Taylor Swift songs and built a huge audience. Where did that idea come from? Was this creative constraint helpful for generating new work? What did you learn about the internet, writing, social media, and building an audience through this project?

I view myself primarily as a novelist. I was in the middle of working on my second manuscript. This is the one that came before *Yesteryear*. When you have a full manuscript, you've edited it a million times, you're like, "I don't know if my agent likes it." (This is a different agent than the one I have now.) And I was just feeling really low. The folklore album came out, and I remember being like, "Oh my god, there are so many good stories in this." Like [Seven by Taylor Swift](#). There was such a story there. And, [My Tears Ricochet](#). I was already a big Taylor Swift fan, and I had written some short stories and I had played around with formatting them and sharing them online, but I had never figured out a way to serialize them.

I started with all the songs in *Folklore*. I really couldn't tell if there was any function to it, but now I realize that it was such a boot camp in writing. Every week you just have to write something, and you're not waiting for the muse to speak to you. And that was 100 percent why I was able to write *Yesteryear* pretty quickly. I got used to a deadline, and I became much less precious about it, and that was a huge turning point for me. As opposed to being like, "each sentence has to be beautiful to get to the next one." It was like, "No, get the story out, and then you can worry about the sentences after." That was a massive transition for me in terms of how I thought about writing.

Your podcast [Diabolical Lies](#) covers the full gamut of contemporary takes, from ICE Raids to zeitgeist-y HBO shows like *Heated Rivalry*. What do you love most about this particular platform? What is different about a podcast vs. social media vs. traditional publishing? What was the initial intent of the podcast? Has anything surprised you along the way?

I never would have done the podcast if I didn't sell *Yesteryear* and have a financial footing to try something new. Selling *Yesteryear* didn't just give me the chance to work on other writing, it gave me the chance to ask

myself, "what do you want to make if you're not beholden to a company?" [My co-host and I] had only known each other for a few weeks. We would send each other voice notes just talking about shit. And so it was very, very much a soft launch. The whole thing is pretty lofi. We don't have a theme song. It just started with us sharing thoughts about culture in a way that we didn't see elsewhere. I think there's a lot of crossover between *Yesteryear* and *Diabolical Lies*.

I have an urge to write, but more than that, I have an urge to communicate. And I think that's why I started a TikTok. I didn't always know I was going to succeed as a writer. Each platform has different value. A novel has staying power. I like to dream that maybe 50 or 100 years from now, someone could be reading my book. No one's gonna be watching my TikToks. With short form, you can reach a lot of people, but it's very ephemeral. As for podcasts, I got into it when it was already dead. I think that podcasts have mid-level staying power. What's fun about podcasts is that we can do whatever we want. As soon as you write and sell a novel, it becomes a product. It no longer belongs to me, but the podcast, it belongs to me and my co-host, and that is a lot of fun. It has been very helpful for me as a creative, to have certain things that I know are only mine and that I'm actually not producing with a team, and that are not a commercial product.

What about the *Yesteryear* film project with Anne Hathaway? I don't know what you're allowed to say about it, but how involved do you get to be? Do you feel like your project is out of your hands?

I'm an executive producer, so I'm involved, but I'm not the script writer, and that was a decision that I tortured over for two weeks during the film rights. My agent, God bless her, was like, "Carolyn, you don't want to be a screenwriter, you want to be a novelist and if you want to be a screenwriter, then this is going to take up all your time for years." It was really useful to have someone in my ear at that moment. "You've written one book, but now you have to have a career. It's time for you to be thinking and developing stuff." And so I'm so happy that I am not the screenwriter. We have an amazing screenwriter. She's a genius. I'm so happy they gave it to her. We have a script, and it's being shopped, and it's super cool.

I can't stress enough the importance of a good agent. Agents become more important after you sell your book. So if your agent is not emailing you back the same day, if they are not very interested in your work, that will become more important after you sell the book. It's so important to have someone who is genuinely invested in your career.

What sparked the idea for *Yesteryear*? And what did the creative process look like when writing it?

Fiction is very meditative for me. It's like prayer.

I was working on my second manuscript. No one wanted it. Dead on arrival. I switched agents. It was the winter of 2024. I was like, "I'm just going to stop writing for a while. I just need to take a breath." So I downloaded TikTok on a whim. None of my friends were on it. And I was like, "this is kind of fun." Tradwives were becoming this whole cultural thing, and so I started sharing my opinion, and it ballooned until it was something where I was very much a part of that cultural moment. Because I was thinking about it all the time, I literally woke up one morning and was like, "*Yesteryear*." It was such a world. Like, *Westworld*.

I had the elevator pitch, and I didn't know yet how she was going to get out, but I loved the idea of pushing this woman to her farthest constraints. I emailed my agent, and she was like, "Absolutely, go for it." I don't know if I would have written it in the same way if I didn't have her in that moment, because I was feeling very burned out. I was feeling like a huge failure. So I was really lucky to have someone who believed in me as a writer. It's hard to be the sole engine of your own belief system.

I wrote it all that winter. And then we sold it that spring. It was a crazy experience, so unlike the first two manuscripts I had written. And it's a totally different book. My first two books had been a little bit more quiet. One was a family story/coming of age, and then one was a campus novel. And so this was like, "I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here. I've never written a thriller, I've never written a comedy, I've never done dual timelines." And so I think because it was so foreign, it didn't feel like there were any stakes.

I recently wrote a [craft essay](#) about where ideas come from. I'm interested in Elizabeth Gilbert's ideas cloud from [Big Magic](#). How there's this ideas cloud, and we're all kind of sitting under it, and at any point an idea can strike you or pass you by and you have to stick around for the next one. What do you think?

Yeah, I love that idea. I think that's true. I think that so much of writing is just not being the person who quits. I think Ta-Nehisi Coates said something like, "I only began to pick up steam as a writer at 35, but by then, most of my peers had given up." So eventually you become the most talented person, because you're taking the most time. I am not Ta-Nehisi Coates, but I very much relate to that, because I have been, almost to an embarrassing degree, constantly trying to put myself in the way of the moment. With *Yesteryear*, I felt this almost panicked push forward, "you're finally in the right place at the right time."

I will take your Liz Gilbert theory and give you a [Cormac McCarthy theory](#) that I recently came across. Basically, Cormac McCarthy theorized that our subconscious mind is the oldest tool we have, like it's arguably millions of years old. We only began to communicate via language very recently, and when you're writing fiction, you are bridging the gap between your oldest tool and your newest tool. And we don't understand why that happens. And every writer understands you're not in control of the sentences that come out. You might have an idea. You might get struck by the Liz Gilbert ideas cloud. But then when you start—and this is why I think it's kind of like a form of prayer or meditation—you're not in control. And with *Yesteryear*, it's almost a combination of those two things: 1. I was in the right place at the right time. I got hit by the ideas cloud. 2. But I had no idea that I was going to write Natalie's voice the way that I did. That really just came out as I was typing, and I was like, "Who is this woman?" There was something taking place in my subconscious that I have no control over that I don't understand or have the words for because our newest tool is not yet able to fully bridge that. It's a magical thing that happens, and fiction is such an expression of the subconscious in that way.

On your Instagram stories the other day you were discussing reconnecting with your old ambition. Why are women so allergic to outwardly exploring their ambitions? How have you reconnected with your own ambition?

I think ambition requires centering yourself in your own story, and I think that women are cultured from a very young age to associate that with selfishness. And as you get older, that tension becomes more and more uncomfortable, to the point of being unbearable. So, if you have children, if you want to have children, if you get married, even if you're single, there is a lot of stigmatization around ambitious women as being selfish women or narcissistic women, and you have to kind of overcome that. Actually, it's perfectly appropriate for me to center myself in my own life.

Yesteryear continues to be a very shocking experience. I hope people are going to like the book, but that doesn't mean that they're going to think that I earned it, or maybe that's just in my head.

Since selling *Yesteryear*, I've been the recipient of a lot of attention, and now I really want to prove to people that I deserve it. And that is something that can only happen over a career. I want *Yesteryear* to succeed, but more than that, I want to have a successful career. It has been really scary and sometimes gives me an anxiety attack. But more often than not, it's exciting to be given an opportunity.

Five Things Caro Recommends

A novel: [Whidbey](#), by T Kira Madden

A podcast: [In the Dark, Season Three](#)

A movie: [The Last Black Man in San Francisco](#)

An album: [West End Girl](#), Lily Allen

An activity: going on a walk and leaving your phone in the car

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