



To help you grow your creative practice, our website is available as an email.

Subscribe

September 6, 2024 -

As told to Lily Hyde, 2529 words.

Tags: Writing, Mental health, Mentorship, Time management, Income, Day jobs.

# On exploring, subverting, and setting boundaries

**Author Genevieve Jagger discusses the importance of boundaries both within her work and writing practice and letting go of romanticized ideas of being an author.**

**Like all great gothic novels, *Fragile Animals* plays a lot with the transgression of boundaries, and I wanted to ask you about the relationship that you have with setting boundaries as a writer.**

In some ways, choosing to become a writer has been an exercise of boundary-setting with the world. I choose to write because there's a level of personal control and freedom attached to it. A nine-to-five, Monday to Friday job is not achievable for me because I physically cannot wear my work mask for that length of time. My office job must give me enough time, space and emotional energy to write, so that sets a boundary in what work choices I can make. I could not, for instance, write and also be a surgeon.

I've got spiritual boundaries, too. The idea that you should never talk about the specifics of any manuscript [when you are first drafting it], because by talking about it, you satisfy your urge to create it. I spoke extensively to other people about this one novel, but 30,000 words in, it just pattered out. With the manuscript I'm currently working on, I haven't been speaking it into the world, and that's returned a lot of the personal joy in writing as pure expression.

There are still other writing boundaries that need work. There's a dream of being a writer, where you write for 12 hours a day, but I've had to really let go of the romanticization of writing in order to write within my physical means.

Sometimes I need to sit down and play games or make collages, and do things that fuel me creatively, but don't ask anything further of me. I was really caught up in this idea of a writer being disciplined and writing 6,000 words a day. But actually, my creative process needs me to look at cartoon animals.

**Have you applied any boundaries within your writing, and do you feel having these boundaries in place enhances your creative process or hinders it?**

In some ways, boundary setting enhances my creative process. The biggest boundary that I set over the course of my writing was between myself and the Catholic Church. I don't think I realized I needed that boundary to be drawn more formally until themes of Catholicism started cropping up in my writing. I guess I needed to be boundaryless to discover my boundary. It's a real interplay.

Writing can be about discovering boundaries and pushing boundaries, but it's also about accessing that part of myself that's really open to whatever is going on subconsciously.

I never want to set too many boundaries in my writing because a large part of the writing process is discovery and being open to what you haven't realised yet. I think as writers we're lured in by these much more intangible, undefinable feelings and ideas—that's the impetus to write a book and not a sentence. When I write a book, I always have a vague idea of where I'm headed, but I don't want to set too many outlines or parameters. I want the character to be able to talk to me so that I can understand as well.

**In your press releases and other materials, you refer to yourself as "quite distinctly autistic." As a debut writer, did you feel the need to immediately set that boundary between you and your audience?**

In some ways defining myself as autistic is boundary-setting, and in others, it's aimed at broadening a collective boundary. If I'm willing to name myself as autistic, then my success becomes autistic success, and in a world where we're underrepresented, that's important. Also, it would be autistic success in a creative realm, which breaks a further boundary about what autistic people can be and what they can do. And if in my small little life, I can push against narratives of the collective whole, then I'm happy with that as my contribution.

I kept neurodivergence in mind when I was talking to agents, and I needed whoever was working with me on that kind of intimate level to have an understanding of autism and burnout, and reasonable adjustments and boundaries.

I do wonder if I state my autism as an apology for myself before people meet me, or as an explanation for who I am. I'm trying to move past that—it's definitely an ongoing conversation with myself.

**You mentioned making reasonable adjustments for yourself, can you speak about some that you've made?**

I've focused on the wider routine of my life. Like I said, I don't work full-time, so I have not just enough time to write, but enough time to brood over my writing and to think. I don't aim or set any word or time limits on my writing. I don't want it to be a checkbox exercise. My best writing comes when it's just what I want to do and I do it for however long I want to. If I'm trying to induce it, I put myself in a place that's really enjoyable for me to write, whether that be my bed or my favorite cafe.

But, if I tell myself, "You're going to sit down and write for four hours," I won't. It needs to be something I do because the story needs to be told, not because I'm trying to meet some quota.

**And going from these adjustments which seem really healthy and balanced, to an extreme; how do you avoid burnout?**

How do I avoid burnout? I don't, but I take more care in my life now to avoid burnout than before. I'm very interested in faith, and the Taoistic ideas of yin and yang have become a guiding force; I cannot be all hard and no soft, all writing and working and people-pleasing, and then none of the resting and soothing.

I've accepted that I can only make so much money at any given time because of my autistic body and because I need to protect my ability to emotionally regulate. I know that yoga and meditation can help, but I don't consistently do them because I live in the real world and get interrupted. Sometimes the thrills of task completion are simply too enticing and then I work endlessly and forget to eat vegetables.

I've found a lot of myself in Buddhism, especially when it comes to avoiding burnout. I need to be able to center this idea that I'm as pointless and purposeful as a flower is. I can just be and not achieve, and that is still worthy. And if I get burnt out, I tend to focus a lot on my cat because cats are like tiny Buddhas, and they do everything with utmost intention and then chill.

**Writing can be a very insular process, but in the acknowledgements of *Fragile Animals* which you called a Love List, I was struck by how vulnerable you were in your gratitude. In it, you wrote that, "No book exists in isolation," and I wanted to know how you manage the insularity of writing with the rest of your life?**

I love that you took the time to read the acknowledgements because I think when I wrote them, I was aware that I don't always read them, especially if they're quite dry. It's a shame I don't, because I think the people contained within them had a big effect on what the book is.

Writing looks deceptively individualistic, but it happens in the context of the collective, whether that's because I'm writing about things that have happened to me, or a loved one has supported me to process emotions that then end up on the page, or read my work and given me feedback. I definitely thought writing was a lone thing to begin with, but that's not necessarily true. I think I write as an effort to understand the collective, which might be the autistic experience talking, but it suits me to be able to understand people in my own time and on my own terms and to put social interactions in place like a jigsaw. I feel the most socially capable and also insular on the page, but then as the writing progresses, it just isn't insular. I am the product of the people around me and I think the writing process is a journey from believing in the individual to believing in the collective.

**I love that answer so much. As an early creative, you're doing lots of different things. You have an office job and you're a tarot reader. How do you set boundaries for these roles?**

At my office job, I'm a highly masked person—I go there, I complete my tasks, I earn my wage, and I leave at the end of the day. A big boundary was that I care about that job, but only when I do it, because it cannot be my absolute focus.

When I was writing my novel, it was a very private thing, and at that point, the idea of me as a writer and doing all these interviews and articles was a dream that happened safely in my mind, but now it's a real thing that interacts with other parts of my life. That's been jarring.

My co-workers are all very supportive of me and my writing, but it doesn't stop me from feeling weird when I have to explain my work. There's a boundary to letting people in on it and it's being able to say, "This is who I am, proceed at your own risk, but I won't be held responsible for your own emotions toward this

work.”

Tarot was a huge exercise in boundary setting because I used to think I could be a full-time tarot reader, but it makes me so burnt out because it’s divination and people combined. But, it creatively feeds me, and in the same way that writing a book does, it allows me to play at being socially capable. I’m really interested in the secret and intimate side of people, and giving tarot readings allows me to maybe snoop a little bit. I get to hear a lot of stories. It’s a balancing act for sure, but I think I need multitudes.

**Your writing seems to focus on the dual themes of consuming and consumption, and how blurred those concepts can become. How does consumption feature in your writing practice?**

I think about consuming in the context of being swallowed, and when you get swallowed, there’s nothing else you can see but stomach, right? So there’s a closedness to this idea of being consumed. My own perspectives had consumed me, and I think writing was an act of regurgitating these things within me that needed to be looked at instead of felt inside.

To write is to be consumed; it’s the literal act in terms of entering a trance state. At Elle [Nash]’s recommendation, I listen to a lot of Russian Orthodox chanting while writing, or just any noise that helps me to really be consumed by the flow of writing, sometimes the Animal Crossing soundtrack. Stories, when I write them, consume me. I daydream a lot. I think about my characters a lot. That’s why I consider all of these things, even playing stupid video games, to be writing, because I do those things with my characters doing them with me. They try on my life as I try on theirs.

**You write about the inevitability of artists wanting to be a success. Do you find yourself consumed by that desire and, if so, how do you manage it?**

In the querying stages, the desire to be a success consumed me. I couldn’t read another book without feeling jealous. But you can’t be too consumed by your desire to be a success or it kills the fun. Wanting to write is not just wanting to be a success, it’s wanting to do the whole, long process, which takes stamina and resilience. When I set out, I wanted to be published by 23. I had to let go of that. I’ve realised that my desire to be massively successful at a young age is part of death denial—it’s very egoic. It’s the reputation thing and this idea that a life worth living is one that has structures of it to be remembered. We write a book to build our own Great Wall of China, I guess.

I am really trying to let go of puritanical ideas of being a writer. I am a writer, but I’m also a cat owner, and a partner and someone with laundry, and I need to not overwater the writer plant for it to thrive. It’s difficult though, because releasing a book is hugely validating. I’ve never before been inundated with the validation I’ve craved, which is now being offered to me. I love it. I’m not going to sit here and say, “I’m above this.” I’m not. Yeah, I check my Goodreads reviews and wonder, “Is there a five-star review today that’s going to feed my little ego?” That’s a boundary that needs to be worked on.

**You said in an interview that you began to write fiction from a need to confront yourself. What has the process of writing *Fragile Animals* made you learn about yourself?**

It’s been life-defining. I think it’s interesting that you decided to talk about boundaries because I learned so much about boundary-setting writing *Fragile Animals*. I can’t understate how much this book has changed the landscape of my life. I’ve learned that setting boundaries doesn’t make me evil or selfish. I’ve learned that I’m a witch. I’ve made every effort to exit the closet with my queerness. I’ve learned that I have all of these propensities for self-harm and how to spot them and negate them. I’ve learned stamina and resilience, and that self-worth is a practice more than it’s a feeling.

I feel like I’m just fascinated by these implicit rules that we live by. Catholicism is maybe an obvious version of that because it literally has rules and commandments, but there are more boundaries I want to question and interrogate.

**Genevieve Jagger recommends:**

Wrist Oils. I got these weird wrist oils from my local occult shop, named things like “focus” and “chill,” and they really help me to ritualistically transition through emotional states.

Jen Beagin (author of *Pretend I’m Dead*, *Vacuum In The Dark*, and *Big Swiss*): Jen Beagin is my all-time favorite author, and I am constantly re-reading her books. I think if I met her, I would fall mute with awe.

Tea Hacic-Vlahovic (author of *Life of the Party* and *A Cigarette Lit Backwards*): Her books are delicious, and her whole vibe is serving it-lit writer girl style and magnificence.

Nintendo Switch Farming Games. *Stardew Valley*, *Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town*, *Roots of Pacha*, *Ooblets*. If it comes with a virtual watering can, I’m in.

Have a cat sit on your chest and purr into your face.

Name

Genevieve Jagger

Vocation

author

Fact

---

David Ronan

---

Related to Author Genevieve Jagger on exploring, subverting, and setting boundaries:

■ Actor and writer Brennan Lee Mulligan on balancing art and stamina

■ Writer Emerson Whitney on knowing your calling

■ Author Gretchen Felker-Martin on translating your experience into art

---

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



1