

# On writing for yourself



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As told to Maura M. Lynch , 2474 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Mental health](#).

## **What inspired you to first share your fiction with other people?**

I was writing fiction quietly from a very young age, but I didn't like to share it at all. It was the anonymity of the internet—the literary internet, the 2007 to 2010 era, which was a very specific, weird little enclave of fiction writers spread all over the country that were making Blogspot blogs. People were publishing stories and posting each other's stories on these online magazines, many of which don't exist on the internet anymore. I had this community there. That was the first time that I'd thought about sharing my work with other people.

## **Were you in touch with them in real life, or were you just reading their work online?**

For me, it wasn't so much about making friends or anything. We all wrote for free. There was no money being made. For me, that was a second education. Even then, I wasn't like, "I'm going to be a novelist." Now, it seems so funny because I'm not really suited for anything else.

## **Do you have a structured schedule for writing?**

I tend to keep it structured. The ideal day is, I wake up—my partner knows to not talk to me—and I generally get to work by like 6 a.m. and then I'm done at 11 a.m. or noon. Then, I get to have a life. When I keep that schedule, I'm happier.

Often it's not very productive. Sometimes I'm reading 10 pages of a book, putting it down and writing something, reading 30 pages of a different book, doing push-ups, staring off. It's not always like I'm sitting there hammering away at the keyboard. I don't think anybody has six hours every day of their life full of good things that they need to share with other people. A lot of it is waiting or sorting things out, or letting things come to you slowly. I really love the process of engaging every morning, just spending time feeling engaged.

## **How did you figure out that that schedule worked for you?**

I've always been a morning person. In graduate school [at Columbia University], I had a full-time job. The morning was the only time that I could work, so I protected that time. I remember kicking some boyfriend out of bed at like five in the morning because I was like, "These are the only hours I have to work." He was like, "You are a maniac." I was like, "Well, I'll be worse if I don't work," so I had to do it. If I don't do it, I'm depressed. If I do do it, sometimes I'm depressed, too, but it's much worse if I'm not diligent. It's really installing the correct mechanism to keep me from, like, killing myself.

## **How do you know when something you're working on is done?**

I'm the worst about this. I often don't know. I'll have 14 small victories while I'm working on something. I'm like, "It's done," and I show it to somebody and they're like, "Is it?" They ask me a couple questions, or I'll realize myself like, "I think it's done," and then a few days later I'll realize that, "Oh no, I'm still having ideas about it."

I often give up on things. I often reach the end of my patience. I think, "Oh well, that's all I have to say. It's not worth sharing with somebody else right now, at least not in that form." If I'm working on a novel, I feel like it's following me around. I just can't stop. I'll wake up every morning and there are 10 things, or I'm taking notes in the middle of the day. Eventually, those ideas just kind of peter out.

**Do you consider that writer's block, or is it different?**

The impulse to make something is generally related to something that you need to say. When it feels like a rock in your shoe or something, and you have to get it out. It's very clear. Sometimes you get it out, and it's not very useful. Often, I'll finish working on something and it's not in a state that I need to give it to somebody. The getting it out was necessary for me.

**Does it start with an idea for the plot or a character or a setting?**

No, it's more like a feeling. I don't know if you can remember what summer smelled like when you were in third grade, but somehow you can conjure that feeling. Maybe there's a specific light that comes with it, or some object, and it's this matrix of sensation that can't always be exactly put into words.

When I have the impulse to work on something, it's like a memory, and I'm trying to figure out "What the fuck is this memory?" It always seems very simple at the beginning. You're like, "Oh, I just need to write down this sentence"—and then there's another one, and then there's another one. You eventually realize the story of the person that's speaking. It really does feel like it's a memory, and I'm trying to figure out where it came from.

**You have two novels under your belt. What's your relationship to the work you've already published?**

It's been almost five years since I finished writing *Nobody Is Ever Missing*. I've started to be able to see it. I've read over parts of it at different times, for different reasons, and I'm proud of it. I don't feel like I'm the same person that wrote that book. If people have something nice to say about it I'm like, "Oh, that's nice, I'll pass the word along." It doesn't necessarily feel like me.

I think there are lots of problems in it, but I think that any good book has to have problems. Every strength that a book can have, it's going to create weaknesses. I wasn't trying to make any friends with that book. I wrote it in a state of total solitude, and I didn't ever think that anybody would read it at all. I had this idea that I could publish it with a tiny press, and somebody would print like 10 beautiful hand-bound copies. That would be enough, and I would move on to the next thing. The idea that it actually became an object that is available on a large scale and has been translated, that was not even part of the plan. I feel very lucky.

**After you publish a book there's the whole promotional process that you have to go through as a writer. You're suddenly opening yourself and the work up to other people's interpretations. What's your approach to dealing with that process, which I'm assuming is pretty weird?**

It is very weird. Nobody can tell you how weird it's going to be, because it'll be weird in a particular way for you. They are two very different processes. You can't confuse the two. So far, the approach has been different both times, because the books demanded different things of me.

I always wish to focus on the ideas of the book, rather than explain why I made the choices that I did, because I don't remember why I did anything. I barely remember writing [the book], to be honest. It's this monotonous thing you do every day. I think I'm happiest and I'm most comfortable when I can talk with somebody about the ideas that came up in the book, and less about me personally.

**That makes sense. With *The Answers*, for instance, what were the ideas that were swimming around when you were writing that?**

Various states of perfection. At the time I was going through a perfectionist phase in all things, trying to

optimize different parts of my life, looking for the best way to live. Every day it's the question, "What's the best way to live this day?" which sounds very self-help-y and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. But even if you're coming up with a to-do list, you're basically trying to come up with, "What's the best way to have this day?"

What was exciting to me about promoting that book was talking to people about the kind of strangeness about love—romantic love, friendship love—of the maximum point of vulnerability that can exist between two people. That's not a small thing. That's something that will be interesting to me, I'm sure, for the rest of my life. Being able to have a conversation with somebody about that, that's pretty exciting.

**With *The Art of the Affair* a book you co-wrote about the love lives of famous artists, there's a line about how "relationships in an artist's life create the scaffolding of their life's work." That ties into *The Answers*, too, and how a relationship can either prop you up in your work or not. I'm curious, with the perfection angle, was there something in your life that spurred that quest?**

Yeah, it was a relationship I was in. Generally, I was living in New York and teaching trying to figure out, "Is there a better way that creative writing can be taught?" I was also running the bed and breakfast that I used to co-run. Building that business with my partners was a huge lesson in the creation of systems, the best ways of doing things, and communication and working with other people—all these things I didn't have much experience with before that.

Right at the end of revising *The Answers*, I met my current partner. I fell in love and sort of broke as a human being. I threw out the whole middle of the book and rewrote it, and then added a lot more in just a few months. The whole of 2015 I was technically working on *The Answers*, but I'm not sure a single sentence that I wrote that year is actually in the book as it is today. I wrote like two people in that book.

**Funny how you could be working on something for so long, and then look back on it and be like, "No, this is not working..."**

When you're working on a project that's that big, you can't be precious. Eventually, you're going to write the end of it, and that thing that you thought was the most important part in the middle, it doesn't belong there anymore.

It's hard to admit those moments, but it's like leaving a relationship. You're like, "You know what? I got into it as one person, now I'm a totally different person." It's sometimes easier to stay in something out of inertia than it is to be brave and say, "I'm not the person that can be served by this relationship anymore." It's very much the same with writing a book.

**You're currently a writer in residence at the University of Mississippi, the state where you grew up. What do you like about teaching?**

The nice thing about teaching is that you have to account for yourself. I go into the classroom, and I have to be able to account for myself: Why have I done things the way that I've done them? Am I really meeting my own standards? When you start judging somebody else's work, you can see the fault lines in your own. We all have these tics or habits that we can't always see, but sometimes we can see it in other people's work and realize, "Oh, that's what I've been doing that needs to stop."

The other way around, feeling inspired, like, "This person is pouring themselves into this story." It's refreshing to be around young people. It's easy to feel like we're surrounded by a bunch of people who don't care about writing, because that's mostly true. Then, you get into an MFA program for a little while, and you're surrounded by people that care about this. It's a relief.

**When your students ask about getting published, what advice do you share?**

It would depend on which student is asking and at what point. Sometimes, they're ready—they need to let go of

something, give it to an agent, take the next step. Sometimes you've got to work more; it's not even like you're a good writer or you're a bad writer.

The end goal is not publication. There's actually very little joy to be had in publishing something. Publishing, it's a mixed state. It can help you financially sometimes, but it's not even something you can depend on as a career. It can be a nice process, and there are a lot of good things about it, but for me it's not the goal. I think for most serious writers, publishing is not really the goal.

Most writers, if you ask them the right question, they can see whether or not they've succeeded on their own terms yet, and whether or not they're ready to put [their work] out for the world to the point where they have to answer for it. Any dumb sentence that you put in your novel could be the sentence that's the first line quoted in your biggest review. Are you going to feel that proud when that happens?

**From the outside, people might think that if you're a writer, success is being published; success is having critical acclaim. What is success as a writer for you?**

If I can sit down and do some work and surprise myself just a little bit, then I'm good. If I do that a little bit, hopefully every day, most days a week, then I'm okay.

The world can feel so hopeless, and there are so many things to be thought about, or to feel overcome by, or to long for in your past, or to long for in your present. There's so much to be troubled by, if you have your eyes open. I want to be in a state where I have my eyes open, but I'm not letting myself be too troubled. I'm still curious and animated. I do feel like there is a way that you can be engaged with the world without being demolished by it. That's such a fine line, and that's the place I want to live, you know? It's a quiet, ongoing personal pursuit.

**Catherine Lacey recommends:**

Listen to the same song on repeat for several consecutive hours.

Wake up at four or five in the morning; don't speak to anyone; take an hour-long walk without a companion, phone, music or destination.

Sarah Ruhl's [Melancholy Play](#)

Have one friend who is roughly twice your age and one friend who is roughly half your age. (I only have the former, but hope to someday find the latter.)

Jesse Ball

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Vocation

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