

On the power of uncertainty



Writer and editor Durga Chew-Bose discusses strategies for writing and not writing, the value of re-examining texts you thought you already knew by heart, and why sometimes you are your most authentic self when you don't totally know what you're doing.

December 8, 2020 - Durga Chew-Bose is a Montreal-born writer, whose work has appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *Hazlitt*, *Filmmaker*, *The New Inquiry*, and *The Guardian*, among other publications. Her debut collection of stories, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, came out from Farrar, Straus and Giroux in April, 2017. She works editorially for *ssense*, an online retailer of luxury fashion and independent designers. Reflecting on her process, she says: "I do get a bit anxious about losing my way or losing what makes my heart want to write. I return to films, or poems, or email exchanges between close friends, that remind me of why I see things the way I see them."

As told to Thora Siemsen, 2971 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Education](#), [Identity](#).

Your book, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, came out 86 years, to the day, after the Virginia Woolf diary entry that inspired its title. What did that gesture mean to you?

Wow, I haven't had anyone pose the title in that way before. I didn't realize it was actually 86 years. To me, it didn't feel as impactful in that way so much. Like most things creative for me, I just wait for whatever I want to express to fit, and this title fit the project that I was working on. It was a title that I had stumbled upon a few years prior when reading Virginia Woolf's diaries. It was a string of words that I simply really loved the rhythm of, and I didn't know what I was going to do with it. With names in general, you can't overthink it. It just has to happen at the right time. When I was working on the book's proposal, I didn't have a title for it, and I remembered that I had underlined that string of words in her diary. It just seemed right, and then I never thought of a different title. That was it.

Is there a place you've seen your book where you've least expected to?

I've had a couple of friends send me pictures of commuters on the subway reading it. It's not that I don't expect it there, it's just that it's always surprising to see it out in the world. There's something so public about the subway, but also equally intimate, especially when someone's reading a book. No one can bother them. I guess in the subway it's always actually just really lovely to see pictures of that, especially if friends see it, and then they send you the picture. To know the picture exists in a text message. I think it's lovely. I think I'm still surprised by even seeing it in bookstores.

A book you've written about is *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, where she writes, "She pays close attention to externals, to the light, to the noise of the city in which the room is immersed." When did you first read that book, and how did it impact you?

I read that book my sophomore year of college at [Sarah Lawrence](#). I was studying with this professor, Angela Moger. She was one of those professors that has been incredibly impactful in my life. I truly believe I learned how to read taking her class sophomore year. Something about reading very thin books over the stretch of a semester was completely novel to me. We spent a long time with that book, and I think that combined with what the book is about—feeling young and old simultaneously; friendship with women; women's bodies; how impossible it is to have an honest relationship with memory—has inspired the way I read. Angela inspired the way I read. That book inspired the way I write. That book inspired my own relationship to telling my own story, and honoring that. Also, it's a kind of a book that's, even in its brightest moments, sort of mournful. I feel like that's a quality that I share. I can't write about happiness without underscoring sadness, too. I don't know why, and it's probably something I would eventually like to move away from, but I haven't quite yet. I think that's why that book affected me so much. It's also just so beautiful. It's a book about writing as much as it's a book about memory. There was a sentence about writing being all things confounded, all contraries confounded, so it's about being a person with an incredible amount of contradictions, which I also relate to.

When did you have the clarity that *Duras* expresses in that book about knowing she was a writer?

Probably more recently than one would expect. I was definitely never a kid who thought she was going to be a writer. I was definitely never a teenager who thought she was going to be a writer. Even quite early into my 20s, too, I didn't think much of it other than I would write one piece of writing and then the next one, so it was more an accumulation of written pieces that made me a writer. Definitely not a moment of clarity. In fact, I wish I had more moments of clarity in my life, in general. I definitely am a writer now, and I identify as one, but it wasn't like I reached the last rung of the ladder and then climbed on top of some rooftop and was like, *Okay, I'm a writer*. It was very slow to realize for me.

You've said before that you will sometimes watch a series finale of a television show before settling in to write. What are some benefits of this practice?

I think it's because they're so melodramatic and they try to wrap things up without wrapping things up. I'm into trying to control my environment when I'm seeking inspiration. A lot of that is either sonic, i.e. with music I listen to on repeat, or controlling something like harvesting familiarity. A series finale of a show I really love, deep diving back into those characters, has less to do with inspiration than finding a quick remedy for blocking out the world, and reminding myself what it is I want to do with my work.

Something about series finales, it's about ending, but ending with an opening. That's something I'm drawn to, but also it's just a form of procrastination, if I'm being really honest. Most writers, I assume, have a wealth of ways to procrastinate. That's one where I find maybe less guilt.

You write frequently about film, the private bliss of going to the movies, and even mention in your essay, "Upspeak", having worked on a feature-length screenplay in 2012. Is writing a film something you plan to do in your career?

For sure. It's definitely something I do now, but I don't think it's part of my career yet. Writing scripts is something that I love to do. I'm pretty terrible at plots and dialogue, those are two things I would like to get better at. When I'm in the script format, I feel like it gives me an opportunity to contend with those two things more honestly. I see the world very cinematically and I see writing very cinematically, so it just seems like a natural progression for me. I

would love to write movies, and write them not just privately for myself, which is what I do at the moment.

"Mindlessly self-deleting, it turns out, is addictive. And while these little accommodations have simplified some experiences, there is the gamble that my willingness to write myself out of my daily encounters will curb the potential for A Tremendous Me: big goals, big wants, and dreams I've left in the cold or crystallized," you write. What are some rituals you adhere to that bolster your sense of "A Tremendous Me"?

Honoring my capacity to not be around people a lot as a way to get my work done, and hear the voice in my head, while also managing how quickly that can become isolationist. Being aware of that. I go on long walks, like probably every writer. I connect with the people that I really love and that love me back, because sometimes that reminds you of who you are. It cuts out a lot of the extra stuff that we require to be in the world. One of the most integral parts of that is returning to whatever art has made me want to pursue writing. If it's a movie that reminds me of what's important to me, or a poem that restarts my day, those kinds of things really remind me of who I am, and how what I want to do requires quiet time with the art that has galvanized me.

In 2015, as part of your feature in Brooklyn Magazine's 30 Under 30, your advice to writers getting started was, "Pay no interest to media madness, don't feel shy about declaring your dream assignments, take edits, practice pushing back, cancel plans to stay in and read and go to bed early." What advice would you add now?

Take your time. Don't rush through your projects, and don't believe anyone who's telling you to rush through them either. Just really take your time with your work. Follow what is weird and strange that you do privately and consider that there's probably writing in there. The stuff that you don't ever talk about that you do when you come home after spending a day out with a lot of people. Whatever interests you have that you aren't sharing with anyone. I don't mean share that necessarily, but there's a story there. Listen better.

Since the book, it feels like so much has changed and nothing at all has changed, which is an unhelpful statement. I really believe that there is a sense to produce at a quick clip, and I just think that we could all benefit from slowing down a little bit. There's a way to be reactive while still slowing down. I think the two get confounded, because the world incites reaction, obviously, and it's important to react and it's important to be members of the world and react to the state that it's in. I think that there's a way to do it thoughtfully, as well.

Are there certain writers that you read that you think do that very well?

Yeah, definitely. Friends of mine do it really well. Doreen St. Félix is a perfect example of that. I'm always blown away by how quickly she can get her thoughts out, but they don't feel rushed. They feel like she's been building towards it, which is impressive considering she'll be commenting a lot on stuff that happened a day before, yet the writing always feels like it's been building up her whole life. Sarah Nicole Prickett, too. Anytime she writes anything it feels like she's been harvesting those sentences forever. It's impressive. It's really impressive to me. It's writers right now that are able to comment on the state of the world, while also commenting with a sense of personal history.

You taught a course at your alma mater, Sarah Lawrence College, called "On Not Writing." Per the course description, "'On Not Writing' is, in a manner of speaking, a variety of writing. It's the writer accumulating and accessing new points of entry. It's the writer drawing connections over time, without coercing meaning but, instead, allowing it to surface." What surprised you most about teaching that course?

It was my first time teaching, so my capacity for surprise was huge. I was teaching a lot of text that I'm really, really familiar with, so having it interpreted by students who are reading it for the first time and reopening the book or the text, for me, was really surprising. Reading something I thought I almost had committed to memory, but hearing it from a different point of view was really surprising.

What were some of them?

We read Jamaica Kincaid's Talk Stories. We read Rivka Galchen's Little Labors. We read some Fanny Howe. We read some Woolf. We read Marguerite Duras' writing. Also, her book Practicalities, which I absolutely love. We read Maggie Nelson's Bluets.

When you were on the Rookie podcast talking to Tavi Gevinson [founder and Editor-in-Chief of Rookie Magazine], you said that when your students apologized while turning in an essay it often indicated they had gone to this unconscious place in their writing. I love this idea, and it's so different from telling writers to not apologize for their work, without also telling them to.

I could always count on experiencing their best work when they were apologetic about it, because I felt like it meant they let go and didn't really follow the prompt, which is the ultimate goal. It also meant to me that there is something about apologizing about one's work that means it somehow impacted you. You created an attachment to it, even if the attachment is feeling bad about it. I think there is something there that I've always really loved. Every time a student apologized I was blown away by where they went, because it meant that they let go a little bit somewhere in the process. What they're apologizing for is that instinct we have to then, once we write, rejoin the world; rejoin the assignment; rejoin what the purpose was. Then you feel bad that you didn't deliver on the purpose, but the real joy is that you *didn't* deliver on the purpose. I was always excited when a student would apologize, like, *Oh, this is going to be great*.

In your book's fourth story, "Gone!", you write, "Even very young, I was aware of how inclusion, no matter how warm, alerts me to further ways I might need to catch up." How does this awareness manifest in what you read and write?

I think it makes me hesitant when I feel a sense of belonging, actually, which I think is good, but I think it also makes it very clear to me that so much of my writing is rooted in watching and not understanding; or not fitting in; or feeling like it takes me a few extra beats to understand what the punchline was. It means that my interpretive powers maybe are a little [more] delayed than most people. It makes me aware of how important it is to trust my instincts. Even if I can't interpret the instinct, it happened in that moment, and even if it'll take me a long time to figure out what that instinct was directing me towards or directing me away from, it's important that it happened and not deny those.

I wouldn't say I'm this obvious outsider or anything like that, but I do feel that it has made my writing about contending with a sense of separation. How do I bridge that separation? How do I also take advantage of that separation? How do I use it to sharpen my point of view, as opposed to just passively experience it?

You edit and write for a fashion website called ssense, where you've created a new feature called Fiction Dispatch, where "An author selects an item from [the] site valued at under \$500, photographs it, and writes a piece of short fiction under 500 words." What are some ways that you see an economy of words as a luxury?

It seems incredibly daunting and impossible to me, so I think the real luxury is putting yourself in a position where those parameters are going to make clear what story can happen in such a small space. I think what's also cool about it, too, is that the luxury is that you are forced to find story in the slightest moments as opposed to requiring a story in three acts. I also love the idea of brevity, meaning that the world that you are creating is inconclusive. I think

that's really luxurious. I think inconclusive narratives toll longer with the reader. It's funny, we talk a lot about brevity and how did someone compact so much in such little space, but really what they're doing is creating something with such a long life because it's so brief. As in, the reader carries it with themselves for longer.

What are some ways that feeling temporized can become a state to work from?

It almost buys you time. I think maybe this is related to what I was saying about slowing down a little bit. It is a form of avoidance, but this whole conversation has been about highlighting all the things I avoid, like procrastination and making decisions. I think it's great. I think it's such a huge part of how I operate in the world, and it's something I should probably more interpersonally work on. I avoid, avoid, avoid, but I think I might confuse avoiding with accumulation, and so in avoiding I'm gaining something else. That might be a way that I write, as well. I don't want to commit to anything permanent. I feel like I can express better what I'm experiencing when I'm being indecisive almost, because I am full of contradictions.

I know that I can seem like I'm just not forcing myself to be articulate and that I'm kind of being a bit lazy, but I do really feel like a certain caliber of inarticulateness [is] the closest I'm going to get to knowing myself, honestly. I actually feel like I'm the worst version of myself when I'm completely certain. I'm not kind to people I love and my work is less true to me, but when I spend time wading through my indecisiveness, or whatever has temporized me, I get as close as I'll probably ever get to knowing my true self.

Durga Chew-Bose recommends:

The opening scene in [Jonathan Glazer's *Birth*](#)

[Pina Bausch's](#) hands

[Nelson Riddle's "Out of the Night"](#)

[Monica Vitti inhaling a cigarette in 7 seconds flat](#)

["My Heart" by Frank O'Hara](#)

Paintings by and photographs of [Amrita Sher-Gil](#)

My parents' cooking

Name

Durga Chew-Bose

Vocation

Writer, Editor

Fact

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