

Maaza Mengiste on defeating the sophomore slump



June 9, 2017 - Maaza Mengiste is an Ethiopian-American novelist and essayist. Her debut novel, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, was published in 2010. Her work routinely examines the lives of those impacted by migration, war, and exile, all of which play a role in her almost-finished second novel, *The Shadow King*. Here she discusses the difficulty of writing a second novel: "What I've found with the writing of this new book was that I was trying to do everything that I thought I did well in the first book. I was trying to recreate that the second time around. It was a mistake."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1841 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Adversity](#), [Anxiety](#), [Focus](#).

Your first novel, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, was a big success. You're in the middle of completing your second novel. People often talk about the sophomore slump and the difficulty of second projects. How has the journey of writing this second book been for you?

I don't know how to describe it. The novel has been so much a part of my life for the past five or six years that I've been working on it. In a way it's been a constant companion. It's been every single part of my day, every day. In many ways, it feels like I've grown up with the characters. We've become more aware of this story together.

The thing nobody ever really tells you about, or maybe we just don't talk about it enough, is how challenging a second book is to write. I've had certain writers who are now on their third or fourth book tell me things like, "Oh, just get it done. Don't even worry about the second book. Just get it out there. Just do it. Just get it done. Your third book is going to be the book that you'll really like. The second one is always horrible." I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to accept that.

That's a harsh thing to hear when you're in the middle of writing that second book.

Especially if your first book did well, then you really do feel that pressure with the next one. If your first book did not do so well then you feel a different kind of pressure, of course. I think part of what I've realized with this book is that creativity is always about running against and into yourself. In every way. This book has been no exception. Often I'm sitting here trying to better what I've just done and there's nobody else in the room, nobody else to prevent me from failing or succeeding except myself and my fears and insecurities. What I've found with the writing of this new book was that I was trying to do everything that I thought I did well in the first book. I was trying to recreate that the second time around. It was a mistake. By the time I finished a draft of this second book, I looked it over and said, "This is crap. This is *really* bad." It was a moment of complete discouragement.

I sent panic messages to my editor, so she and I sat down and we started talking through it. She said, "Well, why don't you think about what you think really needs to happen and then come back to me in a few days?" I went home and was thinking back to a conversation that I had with a really spectacular writer from Croatia. Her name is Dasa Drndic. She wrote this incredible book called *Trieste*. It's a work of fiction and nonfiction set during World War II during the Nazi occupation of Italy. She did something that I have never seen done before in the way that she combined fiction and historical archives.

We were in Italy having wine. She was smoking. I was talking to her about the troubles I was having finding the

story in my new novel. I had done so much research for it, but the story was escaping me. She took a puff of her cigarette and said, "You know, that's the trouble with all you Americans. You care too much about stories. Fuck stories. Who cares about stories? What do you want to say and how do you want to say it?" I thought back to that moment when I was sitting at my desk and I'd just come back from meeting with my editor. *What do I want to say?*

I thought, "If I could do anything I wanted and I'm not worried about telling a story but I'm just letting the story come out, what would I do then?" Then I threw away the whole manuscript. Tossed the entire first draft of the book. I started again from page one. It took a few days before I felt like I hadn't been sucker punched in the gut. I just sat at the computer for a while. I kept saying, "You can do anything you want to do now. What do you want to do?" I started writing. I rejected every instinct I had to play it safe and pushed even further. Now the book is almost done and I'm really happy with the way it's been turning out.

So it was just a matter of adjusting your way of thinking about it? Refocusing your energy and not being so chained to the plotting?

Initially I was writing in service to all the research I had done. I had done mountains of research. It's a novel set during World War II and it's focusing on the stories behind Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. I was researching about fascism, reading and listening and watching Mussolini's speeches, and reading that propaganda... I knew so much about this moment in history and about World War II. I've read the military maps and the varying accounts. I could tell you the terrain of the land. I was trying to put all of that research into the novel... and I was literally kind of squeezing out the story as a result.

At a certain point I had to ask myself—what am I in service of? I needed to be in the service of my imagination, as opposed to just facts. I started thinking about all the books that I have really loved. I always went back to Homer's *Iliad* and the Greek tragedies—the different voices, the momentum of the language and the rhythm of the storytelling. I was thinking back to the poets that I have always loved, the books that gripped me have been the ones that, in some way, just say fuck story. They are books that aren't afraid of fragmenting voices and really letting imagination step in, things that try to push against what you might think is a nice and orderly book.

When you've done this research and absorbed all of that material, doesn't the knowledge creep into the book naturally?

Yeah. It's about trusting the process. It's about trusting your instincts and the fact that whatever is in your head is already there. You have to move into the empty space with a kind of freedom, then all of that stuff will start coming out, as opposed to having too many predisposed ideas of how something should go.

It's a scary thing for a lot of creative people to do that, especially when there are certain expectations of you and your work. One of the most important things I kept telling myself once I started writing the book again was that I couldn't be afraid of failing. I can't. If I'm going to fail I want that failure to be spectacular. I want it to be big. I don't to inch my way into it. I just want to push as far as I can and see what happens. If I fail I want to fail ambitiously, and not in some tepid way where I second-guessed myself to death.

Having nearly completed this research-heavy project, do you imagine yourself doing a totally different kind of book after this?

You know, I recently told a friend of mine that. I said, "The next book is just gonna be small, and it's gonna be set in present-day America." They just laughed at me. I think every writer thinks something like that while they're in the middle of a gigantic project. I keep saying it's gonna be short. I'm just gonna do something light. I don't know. I'm getting an inkling of what I might want to do next, and already I'm understanding that it involves some research. (*laughs*) It just so happens that doing research is a part of the process that I really like. Next time I just hope it can be shorter. I just want to make a novella or something.

You mention getting feedback from other your editor and other writers. Did you find that having the support of those people has been essential for writing this new book?

Absolutely. Even thinking back to my first book, back when I truly didn't know what to expect from the process, I didn't know what the role of an agent was, and exactly how my interactions with an editor would or should go. I remember my agent making me re-write parts of that novel again and again and again and again. It was hard, but also incredibly helpful. She was so good. I remember my editor coming in and showing me things that I hadn't even realized about the way that the book could go. I've found all of that really beneficial. The writing process is very solitary; I tend to be very independent in the way that I work. I don't want to show my work to anyone until I'm ready. I don't want to show anything to my editor. It's good sometimes to have that space, but what's also good—and deeply terrifying—is when I get an email saying, *Hey, when are you gonna be done?* Oh god. That's an email that I dread, but it's good to have it too, because it keeps up the momentum and you also need that. You don't write alone. It really is about a community.

Friends of mine, when we have dinner, we don't always talk about our books, but there are moments where you really need that. It helps to know someone else understands the anxieties that come up with this kind of work. It doesn't necessarily have to be just writing, though. It's also helpful to talk to people in other creative fields. I find those conversations really fruitful and inspiring. Those conversations often take me back, or at least remind me, of the pleasure that I get from writing. The feeling it gives me.

What I've realized lately, especially with this book I'm working on now, is that I have to work *towards* inspiration. I have to sit there and I need to write something down, as horrible as it may seem in the moment, and then it becomes the process of rewriting, rewriting, rewriting, rewriting, until suddenly I'm inspired and something clicks and I move into it. And it's as if I've written it the first time. It's work to get to that moment where it doesn't feel like work, or it doesn't read like work. It's a delicate balance of hard work and inspiration, but it's so worth it. You just need diligence to get yourself there.

Recommended by Maaza Mengiste:

- [Chet Baker](#)
- [Teddy Afro](#)
- [The Black Maria](#) by Aracelis Girmay
- [Trieste](#) by Dasa Drndić
- [The Fire Next Time](#) by James Baldwin

Name

Maaza Mengiste

Vocation

Writer

Fact

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