On making honest work about yourself

Memoirist Cindy House on navigating the ethics of writing about family members (including children), the unique benefits of uncovering the darker sides of ourselves in our work, and nurturing relationships with mentors.

April 28, 2023 -

As told to Hurley Winkler, 3029 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Mentorship, Identity.

You earned your MFA from Lesley University, where you concentrated in fiction writing, and you're working across both fiction and nonfiction today. I'm wondering what led you to initially write a memoir, rather than a novel or a short story collection, about your experiences as a recovering addict and mom.

I actually had never, ever planned to write nonfiction, and I am still shocked that my first book is a memoir in essays. At Lesley, they have you do an interdisciplinary course outside of your genre. At first, I did a graphic narrative course—I was an artist before I ever started writing, and there are graphic narrative pieces in the book—and then I wanted to write a nonfiction essay that I had in mind about my friendship with David Sedaris. I asked a mentor to do that course with me, and it was like the floodgates opened. I started writing essays constantly. And every time I felt excited to write, I was excited to explore an idea for an essay, not fiction.

You've come back to writing fiction since then, though. What made you decide to return?

It was outing myself as a heroin addict in my first book. With fiction, you can say, "Well, people can assume it's true or not." I wrote a novel last summer, and it just was coming along more slowly, so I've gone back to nonfiction for a little bit and shelved the novel for now. I think I'll always sort of go back and forth. I haven't exhausted the things I want to say in nonfiction yet, so that's where I am right now.

In your memoir, you write very frankly about drug use and family. I know so many writers who hold themselves back from writing about these topics, at least in a nonfictional sense. Did it take time for you to keep from holding yourself back from writing about these parts of your life?

Yes, and that was part of why I never thought I'd write nonfiction. I thought I could only write about those things while hiding behind the fiction label, never having to actually confront some of those things. I never wrote about either of those topics as nonfiction, and then once I did, it became less and less scary.

One of the first things my students want to talk about in memoir class—something that comes up over and over again in a 10-week course—is how to do this. They think I've worked this part out. But there are things I did not put in my book because I'm not ready to write them yet. When it comes to outing myself, I'm okay with that, but writing about other people is still a tricky thing for me. Whenever I see an interview with a writer who's talking about it, I immediately read it. I'm still looking for the answer. The formula.

The hardest part was writing about my son, because he's a minor, and he's the person I want to protect most in the world. The way I resolved it with my son was by hiring a child psychologist to read the book as his advocate. I also let my son read the book, and he read it many, many times. There were a couple of things he asked me to take out, and of course I said yes, so I feel like I worked out that one piece. But my family of origin is still very tricky for me to write about.

There's the Anne Lamott quote that goes something like, "If you wanted me to write warmly about you, you should have behaved better." That's one end of the spectrum. Then there's the Melissa Febos take on writing about real people that's more along the lines of, "I have a the platform as a writer, so there's an imbalance of power, and it's not fair for me to tell my side of the story when they don't have the platform to tell their side." I fall somewhere between those two places.

I know so many writers who half-jokingly say, "That person needs to be dead before I can write about them." How should writers go about writing about family in spite of that fear? Or do you even recommend that?

You can change names and disguise the people a little bit. That helps. It can also help to imagine the worst-case scenario. "If I did write about this, then…" A lot of times, it isn't going to be as bad as we imagine. We just think it's off limits, but there are times where people will actually feel okay about it, and we couldn't have anticipated that. But other times, it's harder than that, and I wish I had the answer. I wish I could say, "Here's your brochure. This is how you do it. Follow all the rules. You'll be fine," but it's just not easy.

It's helpful to know that there is no tidy answer to that question; that everybody's grappling with it, even when you have a book out. You mentioned your son, Atlas, who is 15 now. I'm wondering what kinds of conversations the two of you have about including him on the page and how he's responding to that now versus a few years ago, before your book was published.

I'm a little more careful now about what I write about him. There's been a shift, in part because he is closer to being an adult, but the other funny thing is that he's writing, too, and he's in an art school in the creative writing department. I tell him, "You can write anything you want about me. Anything." And I also tell him, "You don't have to say that same thing to me, though." At one point, he said, "I don't care what you write about me when you're reading on stage; it's if it's in print, though, someone can find it on the Internet." So, if I read an essay on stage and I don't publish it, he doesn't really care. And he understands that, for the essays that I read on stage when I open for David Sedaris, I'm trying to get laughs, and he's so funny, so I use him a lot in those, and he's good with that.

He's in my next book a little bit less, but part of that is just because he's older and our lives don't intersect in the same way. When a child is young, they depend on you for so much and are with you constantly, but he has a whole other life separate from me now. But, in the pieces that he'll be in, he'll read them. We do the same process, where he really gets to veto whatever he wants. And I'm not saying that because I think that's the answer. I don't think that you can hand your book to anyone and say, "Take out what you want." I think we have to write what we have to write, but for Atlas, that's the one rule I have for him—that he can veto anything.

What are some of the unique benefits—or maybe even challenges—of parenting a child who's learning to work in the same medium as you?

Atlas showed writing chops at age five. He was writing poems. His teacher at the time was shocked and kept saying how great these poems were, so I always had this feeling that maybe he'd be a writer. And there really isn't a downside to that. During the pandemic, he was writing a lot, and I felt like he needed other adults who were not his mother to push him. I can't be in that role. He ended up getting into the school, which has been so good for him. He recently wrote his take on an image that I also included in my book, and I was just welling up in the audience listening to him read it. All I could think about was the absolute gift of knowing my own child as a writer. The hair on the back of my neck stands up when I read something he's written. It's like a whole other way of knowing him, and I can't even believe how lucky I am.

What advice do you have for parents who are also writers who are curious about the ethics of including their

children in their writing, who are maybe a little wary of doing that?

Definitely hire an outside professional, like a child psychologist. There are things that a parent can miss. There are things that might be problematic later that we might not think of, but a psychologist will think of it. When I did that, it gave my son the message that I'm taking this really seriously, and I care about how this might affect him. I'll do it again for my next book.

You mentioned an essay from your book that's titled "I'm Here to See David Sedaris." In that essay, you write about being Sedaris's writing student long before he was ever really known as a writer, and you remained in very close touch with him as he gained popularity. He encouraged you through some difficult moments of your life. I'm curious what you might say to other writers and artists about being mentored and encouraged in that way. What's the best thing that creative people can do when presented with an opportunity to be mentored like that?

Just grab it, and do everything the person says. If you respect them, just live to please them. I grew so much because I listened to David, who was full of practical advice. When I started doing readings in my twenties, he said, "Don't let the audience see how many pages you have. Don't set them up to be like, 'There are so many pages!'" That is a really practical, good thing to know; to have your work in a folder so the audience can't dread how long you're going to be reading.Having a mentor is a way of learning that's even more intimate and lasting than, say, getting an MFA. If you have someone who's willing to give you that, treat it as the gift that it is. Be respectful. Honor your word. If you say you'll send them something at such-and-such time, do it. Treat it like a really sacred thing.

Sedaris is also very well known for his essays about his family's complicated dynamics. What has he taught you about writing about family and other real people in your life?

He gets approval from his siblings if he's writing about them. Very rarely will they ask for changes, but he'll do it, which is kind of how I approach writing about Atlas. David did hold off on writing about his dad until his dad died. It just goes to show that every writer has to make their choices about what they're comfortable doing on the page. But now, David's new essays about his father are some of his deepest, most profound work. When his sister died, too, he wrote an incredibly moving essay, so it's just something everybody has to decide for themselves. I'm grappling with that myself, though, because I feel like I just can't wait for people to die. I might need to write something before that happens.

How have you applied what you've learned from Sedaris to your own process of writing about family?

When I was in the middle of editing my book, after I had sold it and was working with my editor at Simon & Schuster, I decided that I'd send essays that were about certain people to those people. Not so they could veto them, but sort of like a heads up. It wasn't that anything I had written about them was bad or anything; they were just mentioned, and I was shocked by how open and gracious and even happy they were to be included.

I wrote about my father's side of the family, which had three deaths in a row—two suicides and a drug overdose. I had asked the family if I could write about those deaths, and then I sent them the final essay, and they were unbelievably lovely about it. I just love them so much for being open to sharing their stories. My cousin who killed himself, his wife and children ended up being so happy that their dad's name was in my book. You know, you want the name of the person you love to not just disappear. It was incredibly positive and generous.

Do you think if you hadn't sent those essays to those subjects who were mentioned in the book ahead of time, just to give them the heads-up, that the reception of those essays would have been different?

It might've been, because that is really touchy territory. That is sacred ground. They experienced huge losses. My cousin Karen lost both of her sons, and when we were talking about it once, I said, "If I wrote about this, would you be okay with that?" I think if I had just asked her all these questions and then came home and published a book and it was a surprise—if someone did that to me, I would feel very funny, even if I wasn't opposed to anything in their writing.

It also sounds like you and Sedaris have been terrific at keeping in close touch with one another through the years. He lives in a whole other country now, and you're still very close. A lot of creative folks get intimidated by the idea of connecting with someone who's better known than they are, who think, "I don't want to bother them, and besides, what's in it for them if they help me?" Have you ever had those sorts of thoughts?

As a teacher, when I see a student come back with an edit that is so good, I die. I'm heavily, heavily invested. Being on the other side of it now, I know that mentors get so much out of helping, or else they wouldn't offer. I think the rule is that, when you're on the other side, you can mentor somebody else. You get it, and then you give it back, and everybody sort of is okay with that, I think.

Eventually, David started asking me for feedback, and I was shocked. I would go to his shows and watch in the audience, and he would email me and ask me what I thought about the ending of an essay or something. I remember being like, "Oh my god, he wants my opinion!" At first, I didn't feel okay about critiquing him. But now, I go to every show with a notebook and take notes, and I email him that night with feedback. I don't know if my feedback is that great. He doesn't really need that much help, but it does make me feel like I'm giving a little bit back to him now. So don't be too worried about the give-and-take, because it will balance out in some way, even if it means just paying it forward. That's part of what we're here for—that connection. There's no writer who can do it all by themselves. That's part of the beauty of this life of being a writer. Embrace any mentor offers, value the relationship, and bake a loaf of banana bread once in a while and bring it to your mentor. That's helpful, too.

Cindy House Recommends:

Disturbance: Surviving Charlie Hebdo by Philippe Lançon. Fantastic. So dense. Lançon was gravely injured in the Charlie Hebdo shooting—he lost part of his jaw. I loved the way he wrote the actual shooting as well as his recovery.

Poverty, by America by Matthew Desmond. Everybody in this country should read this book. It's just so good, not only in the places where Desmond spells out what went wrong in our country and why we have so many people living in poverty in America, but he actually proposes solutions. I have never seen such a clearly drawn argument.

In by Lisa Kereszi and Ben Donaldson. This book is coming out soon. They're photographers who documented their life together during the pandemic, and their eight-year-old daughter has photos in the book, too, so it's the three of them and their particular bubble. The photos are sort of creepy, and looking at the photographs, I really had a visceral reaction where I remembered strange details of my own pandemic bubble, but it is a beautiful book.

Shuggie Bain by Douglas Stuart. This novel is about a mother/son relationship. The mother's a severe alcoholic, and the son's resilience and survival is so engaging, so bright, and so resilient and sad. The novel covers the course of many years, and I thought it was a really good depiction of addiction and single motherhood. The author is Scottish, and so I love the way he wrote the dialogue. It wasn't overdone, but I could hear the accent in my head. It took me completely out of my life into another world.

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts by Gabor Maté. Maté, who's a doctor, writes about addiction in a way that I haven't really seen in other books. He works with a lot of addicts, but he also talks about his own ways of self-soothing that can be compared to addictions, what kinds of holes he's filling and how that affects his dopamine. The book made me think about how, even though I'm over 20 years clean now, I definitely have things I do to self-soothe. Some of us have things we turn to in order to either hit our reward centers with a little bump if we're feeling low, or ways that we try to forget pain that we're feeling. The book broke down addiction in a new way for me and enlightened me in a new way, and I already felt like I knew a lot about addiction.

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