On building trust in your creative process

Memoirist Sarah Perry discusses remaining embodied while revisiting trauma in our creative work, the magic and surprise of a 100-day challenge, and making "weird little things."

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As told to Hurley Winkler, 2140 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Adversity, Mental health, Time management, Focus.

I appreciate when memoirists talk about self care. Your first book, *After the Eclipse*, is a memoir about your mother's murder, which happened when you were 12. Your new book, *Sweet Nothings*, is a collection of essays about candy: and in it, you write more about your mom, about the aftermath of your first book, and about your mental health. What did you do to take care of yourself when you were working on *After the Eclipse*, and what are some things you wish you had done differently while writing that first book?

I think even the story itself predisposed me to have this kind of masochistic relationship to putting the story together. I had been interviewed and interrogated by police a lot as a young person, and I had been a really willing participant in that. Because I felt like, well, if I submit to this process—if I just fully submit to all of these questions and all of these things they're asking me to do—maybe they will figure out who committed this crime. And this person will be put away, and I will at least not be worrying anymore that they're still on the street and could be harming other people.

It's tricky because, it's like, that was great training in being extremely thorough and trying to nail down what had happened, and how I felt about it and what exactly I remembered. And so I think I went into it with that mindset, submitting myself to that process of just endless self-interrogation and endless… like, just being extremely rigorous and thorough with myself. And not having a great sense, at least at first, of what boundaries I needed.

And then, of course, the way that I moved toward prioritizing those boundaries was actually very productivity-motivated. If I was reading police documents or the autopsy report in the middle of the night, and I had been working for hours and hours and hours, and I went beyond my capacity, I wouldn't be able to write anything for a week or two weeks. And I felt like, if I'm going to actually get this done, if I'm going to keep going forward, I need to be more mindful of what my capacity is at various times.

There are a few things I implemented eventually, and even more things that I advise students to do, that maybe I thought about doing but never actually did. I think embodied practices can be really useful. Like, people often talk about yoga, etc. But back in the days of writing *After the Eclipse*, I was still a pretty active roller derby player. I would have this immediate sense of belonging and also get to do this physically aggressive thing that was empowering. It was something that would help me get out my anger and my frustration, but among friends.

And a lot it is also just staying mindful of the fact that writing memoir can be such a process of time travel. I found myself really traveling back to times in my life that were a lot more difficult and mental states that were really challenging.

A great example of that is that one month in 2012, I wrote a check and I wrote the date—but 1994.

Oh my god.

Sometimes you don't realize how transported you are. So I would resolve to write two hours, and then, even if I had more writing time afterward, I would stop and entrust the part of myself that was less under the trance of memory and of investigating these things to have a good sense of what my capacity for that day was, and I'd put it aside.

How do you hold yourself to it, though? Do you set timers for yourself?

Yeah, definitely setting a timer. I'm a big fan of tracking and logging things. I have a lot of my own spreadsheets and systems. If I am actively working, I'm usually working more than I feel like I am. So watching hours add up over a week really helps me assure myself that I am showing up for my work.

I've heard a lot of writers who write memoir about their trauma say that they're not sure they'll ever write about anything else. Do you identify with that at all?

I do. And I have to say, my current orientation to that is frustration.

Then I was working on this memoir that's a lot about sexuality and love in the wake of trauma. And a lot about thinking through all of that via my mother's example and experiences, and trying to interrogate some of the sex-negativity that surrounded the trial. So you can imagine, that one was a good time, too, to write. [*laughs*]

I was working on that, and it was 2020, and I was just like, "I can't do this work right now." I have the world's biggest sweet tooth, I like to say, and my partner had long been suggesting to me, "Why don't you write about candy?" And I had said, "I'm sorry, I'm a serious writer. I'm not going to do that. What are you talking about? That's not a book."

But I finally broke down and gave it a shot. I said, "I'm going to get up every morning for 100 mornings and write about a different candy every day, just as writing exercises." I just wanted to enjoy making sentences again and get into that sort of pleasure of language. And then I would go on and do my "serious" writing for the rest of the day.

Now, *Sweet Nothings* has become this book that I hope gives people some lightness and joy in a continually really difficult time. Of course, it still does have this frame of—I like how you put it earlier—not only Mom and the murder, but this telling of that story in *Eclipse*. So it's very much still folding back in onto the same subjects. The funny version is, "Why won't my mom leave me alone already?"

And I feel like—a lot of people, especially those who have one big traumatic event—they get to feeling like, "Am I a good enough writer to make meaning without using this thing? Is this the only thing I can make the gravitational center of something?" Because so often, I'll be writing a piece, and I'll be trying to do another thing. I wrote this piece about a fried cherry pie in Oklahoma, and that turned into a mom-mourning piece. And I thought, is this just the same shortcut that I keep taking here? And then the New England part of me, who is embarrassed about having feelings, comes in with, "Am I so wounded that I can't stop talking about this? Can I put it aside for a second and make something else already?"

How do you respond when you notice other writers writing about their trauma from different angles, taking a prismatic approach to that one event in their life? Do you have a similar reaction to their work as the frustration you're describing you feel with your own?

I totally don't. It's definitely one of those things where it's like, I would never say that to my best friend. My friends and colleagues can write about the same thing forever. But it was like, didn't I write *Sweet Nothings* to get away from this?

I want to backpedal a bit and ask about that 100-day writing challenge you mentioned, which kicked off *Sweet Nothings*. What did you learn about yourself from doing that, and do you ever think you'll try that kind of challenge again?

I actually openly welcome any idea from anyone about something I could do 100 times again. It was really fun, and very fun to accidentally have a draft of a book after 100 days.

What I learned was that I surprised myself a lot. It's a lot weirder and funnier than I realized I could be on the page. I think that's not only because *After the Eclipse* is obviously so serious, but also because I had this conception of myself as this very sedate writer of lovely, conventional sentences. This almost old-fashioned, little New Englander thing. I read too much Thoreau as a kid or something.

Whereas the work I love? I've always been such a big Maggie Nelson fan. I love Heather Christle's poetry. I love weird little things. But I just never thought I could make that myself. I am long-winded, but to make all these short little things that are sometimes quite snappy and unplanned was really thrilling to me. I don't think I could've done them well without the process. They are what they are because of how I wrote them: first thing in the morning, usually before my "editor brain" was on, as I say. I would just instinctively go to these weird places, and there was absolutely no pressure. If I were to do this again, the trick would be pretending I wasn't taking it seriously. I don't know if you can do that twice.

You were nominated for a James Beard Award for an essay you wrote about gas station pie.

Crazy.

Now you have this new book about candy. It's so clear that food is a creative doorway for you. How did you discover that about your writing process?

Honestly, totally by accident. I started writing about candy just because I love it, and other people had to point out to me that I had an unusual level of focus. And then honestly, I ate that fucking pie, man! And I was like, "The world has to know about this pie. Oh my god."

I also felt like it was an opportunity to do some class work around food. Class consciousness. Class critique. Thinking about who gets to eat what and how we judge those choices.

It's funny, too, because one of the gigs that got me through writing *After the Eclipse* was working as a fact-checker for *WSJ Magazine*. They cover a lot of high-class food. That job gave me major poor-kid class anxiety. There was a lot of French I couldn't pronounce. I remember thinking, "God, I've lived in New York for six years, and I still feel like a bumpkin in this job." So to be at the James Beard Awards was surreal.

I want to ask about the art of writing micro-essays, since there are 100 of them in your newest book. How does your approach to writing a micro-essay differ from your approach to writing a longer essay?

I really believe that every time you sit down to write, it's like you've never written anything before. You have to totally relearn it. But now that I have experience in writing a pretty long memoir and in writing micro-essays, I just don't feel like I know how to write a conventional-length essay yet. It's the length I teach, but I haven't really nailed it yet.

We always talk about how the essay is flexible, capacious: insert whatever quote about the essay here. And I think those especially apply to that 3,000 to 5,000 word range. Each one really feels like its own form. I just haven't aligned form with content at that length yet. I haven't found the thing I want to say that wants that length.

With micro-essays, sometimes, maybe half the time, I'd start with something like, "Today is about Reese's Pieces." I'd start typing, maybe pull in a quick bit of history from Google, and then I'd write this paragraph. I'd hit the last sentence and I'd almost hear it click in my head. I'd know: that's the end. And I'd put it down. And I'd

walk away.

Wow. Did that happen 100 times?

Not 100 times, but maybe 30 or so. Sometimes, I'd get this feeling, like, "Okay, this paragraph sounds like the first one. There's a shape here." That's the challenge with micro-pieces, you're trying to signal to the reader that you've come to the end much earlier than in a length we're more used to reading. You don't want to give it unearned gravity. You can't ring the bell of completion too loudly. And since I knew there would be 100 of them, I was always asking the reader to reset their attention again and again. So each one had to feel complete but also open enough that you could step forward into the next one.

But as for how I did it? I don't know. I just felt around.

Sarah Perry recommends:

"Selfish Soul" by Sudan Archives

Flow

Green Belly hot sauce

Ripton jeans

A Silent Treatment by Jeannie Vanasco

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