On the antidote to shame

Novelist and poet Aria Aber discusses not feeling in competition with your friends' success, allowing yourself creative liberty and challenging definitions of success

June 9, 2025 -

As told to Ruth Madievsky, 2522 words.

Tags: Writing, Poetry, Process, Success, Focus, Mentorship.

Novels written by poets are having a moment. What possibilities and challenges does fiction afford you?

I think the biggest challenge was to create a narrative that is sustained and makes sense within itself. Because as a poet—even a fictional poet, as I like to call myself because I lie in my poems all the time and make up settings and scenarios and dialogue—even though the emotional truth is at the core of everything that I write, the challenge is to build a world that is intact.

I always remember Rachel Cusk saying that writing a novel is incredibly embarrassing because it means that you have to build a house that will still stand even when you walk outside and aren't holding up the roof anymore. That's exactly what it felt like to me. But I'm also incredibly interested in the moment where a character or a lyric "I" in a poem—as opposed to fiction—experiences an irreversible change and understands that there is no turning back. In a novel, you can focus on a single character's consciousness and illuminate how that change has occurred, what external and internal factors led to, let's say, a political awakening, or a breakup, or a turning away from your past self.

I love that, kind of like the volta of a poem.

Exactly.

I don't know about you, but I've had a really hard time returning to poetry since publishing my debut novel. I'm curious if your relationship with poetry has changed at all since *Good Girl* came out.

As I said earlier, I feel like I have a narrativist bent even in my poems. I like to tell stories and was raised in a family of storytellers where the arc, as we understand a classic Aristotelian story with a beginning, a middle, a climax, and an end, is very common in the way we relate anything that has happened in our lives. I tend to look at periods in my own life or in other people's lives also as story arcs.

So it didn't feel that hard to move into fiction. But now, moving back into poetry, I have the same dilemma as you. It's kind of hard to turn that part of my brain on again that is more associative, more risk-taking, more melodic, and doesn't just adhere to narrative as the primary impetus when I write. I haven't written a poem since I finished the novel, and I don't know when I will. But I still think of myself as a poet first.

You translated *Good Girl* into German yourself. Do you feel like the English and German versions have different personalities? Are there parts that you feel hit differently depending on which version you're reading?

I’m still in the process of understanding the differences. I just returned from my German book tour last week, and the response has been, interestingly, very similar. People ask similar questions in America and in Germany about the book.

That’s wild.

Yeah, it is pretty wild. Translating the book was almost harder than writing the novel itself. Maybe I’m saying that because it’s more recent and I don’t really have access to what it felt like writing the book. I always suffer amnesia after completing something. I have that after writing poems too. But they do have different personalities, I think.

One thing that I enjoyed doing in the English version was to play with syntax and sound and really allow my poet self to come forward, especially in the childhood chapters, which are more associative and syncopatic. In the German, even though I tried to maintain the same melody, I really couldn’t because German grammar is very different from English grammar. German is a much more variegated and proliferating language, whereas English seems like a very flat language. The fast pace of the language and some of the paragraphs got lost in the German, but a certain type of elegance was gained.

I’m not sure I will ever attempt self-translation again. It was important because it facilitated a bridge back into my original language, which I had alienated myself from by building a career inside of the English language. It felt emotionally and spiritually important that I do this translation myself, because it is ultimately a German story about growing up in Germany and reckoning with German history. But it is also an American story, because my protagonist who’s telling the story in the first person is writing it in English. So that alienation is part of the DNA of the narrative.

There are a couple of instances in the German where I added some political tidbits or changed a sentence. I feel like content-wise, it’s the same book, but the sound to me is very different, and I notice it because I’m a poet.

You, like me, are an immigrant writer from a culture where shame about sex and how to be a good girl are very relevant. How did you navigate writing about sex, queerness, and coming of age through nightlife without being eaten alive by anxiety about how your community is going to perceive you?

Writing in English afforded me the liberty to pretend that no one is ever going to read it. Even though my parents do speak English and half my family lives in Canada, I kind of assumed no one would read it. With my poetry, people did actually buy the book, but I don’t know how many read it page by page. I try to not think about audience at all, regardless of whether it’s my immediate family or anyone else. I also struggle with a question of who my audience is or who I am writing for. I think I write for a past and a future version of myself. When I am in front of the page, there is only me and language, and I really try not to get deterred by that kind of anxiety.

At the same time, I understand that it’s a very common problem, and I probably now have a different relationship to subject matter that is as transgressive as sex and nightlife and drugs and queerness, which are topics that I don’t really talk about with my family openly. But it is understood that it’s creative. We can hide behind the mask of fiction, and it’s not an autobiographical novel, even though there are similarities between me and my protagonist. It’s important to allow yourself that kind of creative liberty. And if there is a lot of anxiety about the reception of family members—use that anxiety to create an interesting creative restraint for yourself. There are ways to write about these topics while maintaining a kind of disguise.

I have this theory that writers are either bleeders or pukers. Bleeders bleed over every word, cleaning up as they go. Pukers barf up a terrible draft and clean up the mess later. Which one are you?

With poetry, I’m a bleeder. I go line-by-line and see where it takes me. Obviously, it’s easier to do with a 200-word poem than with fiction. With fiction, my writing process resembles puking more than bleeding. I try to get everything down. I go through many, many drafts of chapters, of paragraphs. The most important thing is to find the right tone. I know that tone is kind of an esoteric and vague term in itself, but it has something to do with

melody, with mood, and also with the temperature of how the language is being transmitted.

I'm currently working on another fiction project and just taking notes for it, and I haven't quite found the right tone. So puking is really important, and I think the bleeding comes later. I like to gather all the material at first and then whittle away at it. I think otherwise I would never write or my fiction would look very different because, aesthetically, I am a maximalist.

Do you outline your fiction?

No. Even though when I tried to teach myself how to write fiction, I really had to do it as an autodidact because I never went to a fiction class. I didn't do a fiction MFA. I didn't have the benefit of having workshop experience in that genre and knowing how to create and scaffold those craft elements that include a plot. So what I did while writing this novel was look at my favorite novels and outline their plots, even though my reference texts are not really plot-heavy at all. They're much more meandering and fragmentary and kind of stream-of-consciousness style, like Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* or James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* or all work by Jean Rhys basically. But it was still helpful to understand how a chapter is structured or where dialogue comes in and all of those more minute details that are part of fiction. Like, how do I get this character from one room to the other? To me, plot comes more subconsciously. I think if I did work with an outline, I would really struggle adhering to it because the granular level of writing is more interesting to me—like the sentence level, and the music, and the setting of scenes—so everything else comes second.

Are you an ass-in-chair kind of writer? Or do you wait until you have the urge to write?

Both. When I know that I want to write something, I have to put my ass in the metaphoric chair. I don't actually write at my desk, or very rarely do. I write in bed and on the couch, sometimes on the floor, everywhere. I am a private writer. I don't write in public, ever. I don't even like having another person in the same room as me. But once I am in the flow, I can write anywhere. I also like generating on my iPhone Notes app on an airplane or on a train. Being in transit helps most of the time. Generally, I prefer to write when the urge takes me to it. But if it were just the urge, then I would probably never finish anything, so I do have to force myself to write. That's usually in the evenings. I'm very nocturnal with everything. I like to write after people have gone to bed because I don't like witnesses.

When you're not writing, you're a creative writing professor at a university. How do you protect your creative energy when you're spending so much time on other people's work?

That is really difficult, and I don't have a formula or set technique yet. I usually try to write and read things that I don't have to teach, especially on the weekends or during semester break. It's really hard to maintain a balance though, because when I am teaching, I tend to prioritize my student work. I'm not like Louise Glück, one of my mentors, rest in peace. She said that teaching was really inspirational for her because her students' poems would fuel her own creative impetus. I don't have the same relationship to student work. I love reading it. I love being moved by it. I love scaffolding it. I love editing it. But it's difficult to carve out my own creative time.

Though usually when I am knee-deep in a project, I manage to find time, even when I'm working in academia. And that often means that I'm sacrificing my own social life, where I can't go out for dinner or on the weekends because those hours are my writing hours.

What does success mean for you at this point?

I think success is a very vague term that is tied to capitalism and sales, of course, and a certain kind of reception that we regard as prestigious. That often plays in the background of my mind when I think about success. But more than that, I think success means that I am able to do what I want to do, which is to write and to teach. I feel immensely grateful to have that.

You and your partner, the excellent poet, Noah Warren, are both creatives. How do you protect your relationship from the potential friction of being contemporaries in the same genre?

In some ways, it's not really a topic in my life because we're very different writers, aesthetically. And also in terms of subject matter, we're drawn to different things, so it doesn't feel like we're occupying the same niche. My closest friends are all writers and artists, and I don't feel in competition with them, either. We're happy for each other's successes and try to uplift each other. And I try to bring that into my romantic life too, just this gratitude that I can be with a person who understands me on my most molecular level. We can talk about writing all the time, and I can share my drafts with him, and he can share his with me. I learn from the way he sees the world, from the way he writes. I hope the same is true for him.

What did writing *Good Girl* teach you about yourself?

One thing that it really affected is my relationship to shame and desire and how I understand those two emotions as vehicles of self-discovery and self-destruction. When I started writing *Good Girl*, I thought of shame as something cultural that is being instrumentalized by the patriarchy in order to oppress women, especially in the Afghan community. But I'm now understanding shame is not just cultural; it functions globally and on a national level. Witnessing or working through German history, as I did in the novel, taught me so much about how certain groups of people, not just different genders, are shamed to assimilate within majority society.

My protagonist Nila has this moment where she's staring at a photograph of her father and his cousins sitting on a hill wearing Afghan dusmal shawls or keffiyehs, and she understands suddenly that they're seen as a threat in Germany and had to emasculate themselves to assimilate into society. Shame was being used as an instrument by the German white society to silence what these men stand for or how they represent themselves.

And so the universality of shame as a social and moral feeling that we feel when something inadequate has occurred or we have behaved inadequately or made a mistake was really interesting. To see it transpire in men as well as in women was something that I learned in the process of writing this book and crafting these characters. And that desire can be an antidote to shame, but that it's also intricately related to it because desire comes with a feeling of shame. To want something is inherently embarrassing and risky.

Aria Aber recommends:

Isabella Hammad's novel *Enter Ghost*

Getting a coffee and walking through your nearby park without a phone

Calling your best friend/mom/sister out of the blue

The Bright Eyes forever classic album *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning*

Buying yourself flowers

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