

On writing as a rite of passage



Novelist Ottessa Moshfegh discusses the pain of producing her latest novel, the ways in which you are (or aren't) in control of your creative output, and the alchemy of her writing process.

July 16, 2018 -

As told to Yasi Salek, 2891 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Time management](#), [Mental health](#).

You have famously said in interviews that you wrote your 2015 novel, *Eileen*, out of desperation, because you needed to make a living. Did that same thinking apply when you were writing *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, or did it have a different impetus?

No, it didn't happen in the same way. As much as *Eileen* was a helpful career move, it also was a very important artistic lesson. The biggest thing it taught me was that I *am* a novelist. But writing this new novel was different... I had to write it for my own life. I remember writing it at certain moments and being like, "Oh, people aren't gonna like reading that." But of course now, all those things are the things that people do like. In many ways, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* was a harder novel to write. I didn't know where I was going when I started it, and it was much more of a reflection of the deeper frustrations that I feel.

The social context feels almost random. I'll do a lot of interviews about how the book is set in New York City before 9/11, and I can talk about 9/11 or New York or whatever, but it's just a backdrop for the very deep concern of how it is to feel like you exist, and to know that you can only be one person. And if you don't enjoy existing, well, that's a problem. You know? I think I chose a character that would allow me to have a sense of humor about it, and I chose a tonality in the novel that could move into satire at times.

All of your work touches on dark topics, but you string it up with these threads of humor. It's an artistic choice, but is it also reflective of your worldview?

Yes.

So much of *Rest and Relaxation* is about not necessarily wanting to commit suicide, but rather existing in this in-between place where you are sort of nowhere—where you just need to relieve yourself of the burden of existing for a while. It's interesting because I feel like writing is the literal opposite of that. It involves fully engaging with yourself and with the world in a super uncomfortable and painful way. Is that something that you agree with? Was it weird writing about something that's the polar opposite of the thing that you're physically doing?

I don't know if I felt like it was the polar opposite, so not really. I was really isolated when I wrote this novel, and nothing is an accident, but I didn't realize that I was trying to escape my life. I didn't really have a life. I don't even know what that means, but I was single. I had left the apartment I'd been living in in California, drove across the country, and thought I would move home to Massachusetts. But that didn't work out. I just went to a bunch of residencies in New England and upstate New York, and then went to Montreal for a couple months in the dead of winter, where I knew nobody.

This was when I did the bulk of the writing on the book. During that time in Montreal, I don't even know if I was writing on the right track, but I might as well have been living in Antarctica. If Antarctica had a grocery store. I didn't talk to anybody, I didn't go outside. I'm engaged now, but this was before that happened. As soon as I finished this book, I met the love of my life. It felt like I had to get through this before that could happen. It was like a rite of passage with extreme isolation—something that I had to do. I knew that it was gonna suck. I had to get through this period of intense isolation, because it's the only way I was going to get through the book.

I think every novel is a rite of passage. This one was a really painful one, and when I came out of it, it was obvious that I had not solved anything. The only thing I realized is that we do have a choice. We can either be completely isolated and alone, and be like, "Oh, the world sucks, fuck that. I'd rather be inside here doing whatever." Or you can make yourself vulnerable and have a relationship with the world... and be willing to be totally disappointed. If the worst that's gonna happen is you're gonna get hurt, and you're gonna be disappointed, it is still more interesting than staying home alone.

Do you feel like there's an alchemy that happens between you and your work? If each novel or piece of writing is a rite of passage, do you feel like they've all changed you in some way?

Yeah. Definitely.

Is that a driving motivation for you to write?

Yeah. It's a driving motivation, but it's also like a duty. I don't really feel like I have that much agency about what I choose to do. Not that there's somebody else that has the authority, but there seems to be a karmic force in my imagination where even if I threw something away, it would just come back. Like maybe I wanna try to throw this away and *not* write this, but it would just resurrect itself in a new form. I can't really get away.

Writing projects feel a lot like if you had a guru and the guru was manipulating you so that you would have to live through certain experiences in order to learn a lesson, but the guru could have also just told you outright, "Here's the thing you need to learn." But you wouldn't learn it unless you spent three years suffering, you know? In a way, I know that I'm the one writing it, but I don't know if really I'm the one. I believe that there's a higher power in charge of the imagination.

Right. It's like we're set out to constantly be pushed against things that we need to learn, and we'll just keep being pushed against them until we learn them. Whether it's through writing or just the general strife of life.

Maybe... but I think it might be more magical than that. Like being pushed against lessons until you learn them, that's not always true. Some people are never pushed up against what they need to learn. They live completely in the dark. Why does it have to be so hard?

Do you think about how your book might change your reader? Is that an important thing for you?

I think about the passageway of the reader's mind—what's happening in the reader's mind as they're reading it, but only in the ways that I can control through language. Those are the kinds of things that you think about when you're writing sentences and moving from one paragraph to the next. "Okay, now I wanna direct the reader's attention *this* way." I feel inspired by the idea that a novel could wake someone up and resonate in a way where they would put the novel down and be like, "Well, shit. How do I go back to lying to myself about X? Because I've just seen myself really differently." That's what I love about art.

I experience that the most powerfully through narratives, through novels and film. I think it's because I'm relating to a character, and there's there's some alchemy, to use your word, of experience and observation where I've sort of forgotten that I'm a real person. If I'm gonna enjoy a book or if a book is gonna be good enough for me to let go of my primary superficial concerns about my identity, then I'm also letting go of my ego while I'm reading it.

Then what's happening to the character is easier to relate to. I can feel like I'm living vicariously through that character. I mean, this is all pretty obvious. This is why people love narratives, you know? But as the author, I'm not really thinking, "Oh, I want people to be sad here." I'm thinking, "I want this character to tap into something here." It's not like I think of the reader as a puppet, like part of my puppet show, but rather that I'm the reader too.

I read an old quote from you where you said that you vibrate at a high and neurotic but spiritual frequency, with a lot of anxiety, with a lot of passion. Do you still consider yourself an anxious person?

Yeah.

Do you think that anxiety and passion are correlated?

For me, I think that they're correlated in that there's an overlap, but I don't think that they're the same thing. I think that anxiety is mostly agitation. I think people confuse anxiety and fear. Fear feels more narrative, like I'm having a fear of something.

You're telling yourself a story.

I just feel very often that I'm in a state of intense agitation. I think it's energetic. I think it's about my physical self. I don't think there's anything wrong with my psychology per se, although maybe people reading my work would disagree. I just feel like I just have a very deeply agitated body, and that can sometimes provide the impetus for passion. Like, "Oh god, I hate this feeling. Maybe if I can have a spiritual experience through being creative, I'll feel different."

Your parents were both violin teachers and musicians, and you studied piano for a lot of your childhood. I'm sure it would have been very easy to just be like, "I'll be a musician. My parents are musicians, I'll study music." When did you make the conscious choice to be a writer instead of a musician?

I was 16 and looking towards applying for college, which I really wanted to do because I really wanted to get away from where I grew up. Also, it wasn't gonna be easy if I chose music. It was gonna be awful, and I knew that. I luckily had perspective because I have a sister. She's five years older than me and she was much more talented as a cellist than I was as a pianist, or at least that's the way that it seemed, and she did pursue music. I just knew that I didn't have that kind of constitution. I was going to fail. Also I was too old. I didn't wanna just be a piano teacher, and I was too old to have the career of a prodigy. I also just knew that I wanted to be a writer.

You write really well about women's fucked up relationships with their bodies. Is that coming from a lived experience?

Yeah. I think that's an almost universal experience right now, that hyper awareness of how you look. I don't think it's something I can ignore very easily. The characters that I'm writing, they're being very up front. I can't really conceive of a character who wouldn't experience obsession in that area. I don't know if I need to write about it all that much—I mean, all that much more than I already have. I'm 37, and it seems to be pretty important, so I've been writing about it.

How do you approach timing when you're starting a writing project? Do you give yourself a deadline?

I'm definitely the kind of person that needs and loves a deadline. I'm sure this carries back from my training as a classical musician, but I am extremely self-disciplined, to the point that I'm sure from the outside it seems just totally neurotic. There were times in writing the novel where I would plan out every moment of my day according to what work I was gonna do on the book. I was like, "Here's a month's sketch of how I'm going to do this book." It was always aspirational, but I like making goals. Sometimes I worry that I'm missing that, now that I have a partner and I'm enjoying my life more. I'm like, god, am I just gonna become lazy? That's an anxiety,

that's a worry that I have. I don't know if people would get it from my work, but I have a very type A personality. I am pretty uptight about a lot of stuff.

Are you a drafter? Are you like a first, second, third, 10th drafter?

Definitely. If you wanna know more precisely, I believe in the first printed draft. I don't print anything until the book is done. Then I count that as draft one. I've been editing it as I go. Most of the writing process feels like editing to me, and all of the actual generating of new words just feels accidental.

Here is a trick that I've discovered regarding how I work: I allow myself to just write, like write *badly*, and then part of the next process is putting similar things together. Like, "Okay, I'm saying this *here*, but then also saying that *here*, so let me put those together." And then, "Are those sentences exactly alike, or are they a development of one another?" Editing is a lot like looking at patterns and organizing things, which is a very different craft element than actually making creative decisions in big-picture ways, which is the stuff that I do when I'm not actually writing. Like when I'm at the grocery store or thinking deeply while I'm driving. That's when I do that kind of writing.

I relate to that. I always wonder why every single one of my writing ideas comes to me when I'm driving my car, and I can't write it down.

I started to do voice memos on my phone. Just so I don't forget. I used to write myself an email, but when you're driving you can't really do that.

Do you get creative blocks? Or are you one of those people that doesn't get them?

I don't believe in it being a block. I just think that there are times where I'm not supposed to be working.

You take it as a sign.

Yeah. It can be frustrating. I finished *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* a year and a half ago, and I haven't been working on a novel since then. I knew that I needed to take a break, but this next novel has been knocking on my door for like six months, and I know that the process for it can't be as maniacal as the last one. I've been trying to be like, "No. I can just let this incubate in my subconscious." But at this point, I'm saying things like, "If I don't write something, I'm gonna get really depressed." So I don't really believe in blocks, but I do believe in timing. Also, if you're not being called to write something, don't do it. It's like, don't have a baby unless you really want one, you know?

Can you read other books while you're writing a book?

Sometimes, yeah. I probably watch more movies and documentaries. I also read for research a lot. I don't like to read that much when I'm working on a book. When I was writing *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, I was having a lot of problems with my eyesight. I would get maxed out working on my own stuff and my eyes would get really tired, so I really couldn't read, and I didn't want to when I was done for the day.

Would you still write if you didn't make any living from it? Like, if there was no money.

Yeah. I have this conversation with my partner all the time. I definitely would. I can't really extricate the path from the reality. I don't know if I would be writing exactly what I'm writing now, but I always wrote things, even way before it was how I made my living. For most of my life I never thought I would publish a book. Then when I was like, "Oh, I should write *Eileen*."

It was like I was pretending I was someone else. It didn't feel like this was really part of my plan, although when I look at the decisions that I made in my life, of course it was. But I wasn't aspirational. I wasn't like, "I'm gonna be a famous novelist," or anything. I don't know. If I write a book and the politics of this country

become really fascistic and I'm suddenly excised or excommunicated from the literary world, would I keep writing? I might be so angry that I wouldn't, but it might take time. I would be really sad if I didn't write. I think I would feel really purposeless and silent and depressed if I couldn't write. I don't know if I would be that depressed if I couldn't publish. I don't know. It's really impossible to say.

Five documentaries I loved:

Reindeerspotting: Escape from Santaland

My Life in China

Paris is Burning

Kidnapped for Christ

The Wolfpack

Name

Ottessa Moshfegh

Vocation

Writer



Photo credit: Luke Goebel