

On the reality of publishing your first book



Writer and music journalist Danielle Chelosky discusses the truth in fiction, taking necessary breaks from writing, and wielding social media to her advantage.

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As told to Sheridan Wilbur, 2462 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Publishing](#), [Process](#), [Promotion](#), [Income](#), [Money](#).

So how are you feeling now that your debut novel, Pregaming Grief, is making its way into the world?

I'm happy I'm not in purgatory anymore. Once a day, I'll pick up my copy and look at it in awe and be like, *it's real*. But mostly it's a weird feeling. I like seeing people react to it on social media. Otherwise I forget it's in other people's hands. The best feeling was when my friend Haley read it. She sent me pictures of her annotations on the pages, which made it really feel real. I sold it to some booksellers and they've told me stories about people picking it up and asking if it's going to make them cry. I like those stories. But mostly it just feels right. I just want to write more books. It's reassuring of what I want to do.

It must be satisfying to connect with people through your words, even if it's not exactly the happiest way of relating.

I must be really sensitive because some people have sent me long messages about how they relate to it. Then I feel overwhelmed immediately. I've heard stories from musicians I've interviewed where people will come up to them after a show and start trauma dumping. I'm aware that's a thing. It's just the book is really personal, so if someone tells me they read it, my immediate response is fight or flight.

Maybe not everyone knows this is based on your life.

There's a thing in the beginning of the book that says it's all fictional, which is just a legal thing. But I wonder how many people know it's a memoir. I feel adamant people know it's real. I can't imagine just making all of it up.

Do you use a diary or a journal to remember everything, and use that as raw material?

I'm really bad at keeping diaries or journals. I just use a Google Doc. That's what I did for this. I would just update it every day. But it's been hard since I switched to Pages on my MacBook.

The medium matters.

It's hard to pick one document to put everything on. But a few months ago, when I was writing every day, I was doing blog posts, which motivated me because I would just write it, then immediately post it. Which is instant gratification. Though I want to eventually use it as raw material for something bigger. I want to write diaries

because there's something special about writing longhand. I used to when I was a teenager. I've gone through those entries and transcribed them onto my laptop. I'm not even writing every day anymore. That's depressing. But it comes in waves.

What does your day-to-day look like now?

Yesterday I went on a walk for an hour listening to Radiohead. Every day I go to the cafe in the morning. I have a friend at the cafe, we smoke a little cig. She tells me crazy stories about her life because she's had a crazy life. She gave me permission to use those stories for something. I'm like, "Girl, I can't take those away from you," but I'm definitely tempted.

She's giving you a gold mine.

But sometimes after the cafe, I'll get sucked into laying in bed and rotting, famously bed rotting. Since the weather has been better, I've been dragging myself out of bed. I take a walk around this cute beachy village 20 minutes away. I try to listen to an album that I've never listened through before. That's when I feel most at peace. I just want to walk forever. Then I work from 6:00 PM to 10:00 PM. After that I'll read a little bit. I'm currently reading B.R. Yeager's *Burn You The Fuck Alive*. I read it before bed last night and I was like, this is why I have stress dreams.

Did you feel burned out after writing so much in a concentrated period of time?

This might be a hot take, but I'm not a big fan of the idea of burnout. It's one of those terms that got so popular where people are just taking advantage of it. Mostly I felt sad it was over. I was having so much fun writing that manuscript and just living in that world. Then I was like, well, I'll probably do it again. Now just the idea of starting something over is so crazy.

How do you get yourself to begin writing again?

I didn't consider *Pregaming Grief* to be a novel until people were calling it that. It's like 35,000 words. Just the way it was pieced together didn't feel like I was novel writing, especially since it's non-fiction. But last year, I set out to write a 50,000 word fiction manuscript... Make an outline, make fully developed characters, make an arc. It was mostly to prove to myself I could do it. I was so worried I couldn't do it, that it was physically impossible. Once I finished *Disorder*, I was like, fuck it, I can do it. Fuck it, we ball. Then writing *My Girls* was easy because I was like, I can do this. The plot came from a novel I gave up on. I salvaged a lot of the characters. I was obsessed with them. So, I just went in.

***Pregaming Grief* is a memoir, but *Disorder* and *My Girls* are fiction. What's your motivation to switch from nonfiction to fiction?**

I was very anti-fiction for a while. It's hard to conjure everything from thin air. Why would I do that when I have a lot going on in my life that I like to write about? It's cathartic for me to write about my life. But then I was like, I want to make \$300,000. I'm going to write a novel that is marketable and I'm going to sell it for \$300,000. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened yet, but we're working on it.

Just need one of the big five publishers to pick it up.

I know. It can't be that hard. I've been querying agents though and I'm like, oh, okay, I see now.

But about writing fiction. Once I got into it, I was like, this is awesome. I don't have to interrogate myself and my past for a growing amount of hours. I don't have to hyper fixate on my life. But I realized fiction is not just conjuring ideas and characters from thin air. You realize how much of it comes from your life and your experience.

Yeah, those experiences and feelings can go into several characters versus one.

It's like you have to really go in on your life in a nonfiction work first, then realize you don't have to do that. You can channel that into fiction. There's a saying, I don't know who said it, but every novelist spends their life writing the same story over and over. In my case, I write about my experience in a detailed, explicit, personal nonfiction way. Then I realized, *oh, I can also explore it through situations I make up.*

Once you realize that nonfiction and fiction can both be true and real, it doesn't matter exactly how you categorize it.

It's funny, people say that there's no such thing as nonfiction because there's more than one side to every story. But also there's no such thing as true fiction because all of those ideas are coming from somewhere. They're true somewhere.

Whether the author wants to admit it or not.

So, nothing is real essentially.

Or everything's real.

Oh, shit.

How much of your writing feels compromised for a paycheck?

When I'm doing music journalism, that's when it feels like my job... but I enjoy it. I love doing interviews. But I wasn't making money writing *Pregaming Grief*. I didn't want to make money for it because it's so personal. But when I decided I wanted to write a book for \$300,000, I realized you can make money from writing books. I was like, let me try. Since then, I've realized I might be wrong. What I've heard from authors, it seems like a complicated industry. But when I was writing that book, it didn't feel like I was doing it for a paycheck. That was nice. As a writer, I don't anticipate making any money. I don't know what my plan is here, really.

It seems like having an internet presence has felt more significant for writers' long-term careers. You have such a funny, savvy presence on Twitter and Instagram. How do you approach digital spaces?

I definitely use social media to my advantage. I grew up alongside the boom of Instagram. When I was 12, I had a Taylor Swift fan page on Instagram that had 13,000 followers.

I was doomed to this life. But I definitely resented it. Not only would my work be better, but I would be less infected by brain worms if I didn't have social media. Lately everything is making me angry. I'm like, of course. That's the point of the algorithm. But my career wouldn't have gone the way it did without Twitter. It connected me to so many editors when I was 19. That's how I got my first pitches accepted. So, it has been a good resource. But it's different now. It's getting darker every day. But I can't help but have fun with it.

I love it. The shirts you've made are so funny. It's encouraging to see more independent authors promoting their books in a way that connects with people and makes them laugh.

I am not on Penguin Random House. I'm not going to end up on every list of the best books of 2024. So, if I can't get people's attention that way, I'm going to make memes. I'm going to post thirst traps because it's fun.

It can be empowering to do it on your own terms.

Yeah, as opposed to having publicists who are getting paid to promote you, sending emails and talking about you as if you're some mythical creature they're trying to sell.

"Mythical" just reminded me, how would you describe your writing style? I kind of hate the question 'how did you find your voice' because how do you ever "find" this mythical "voice" like it's in hiding... but where do you get the power to write so directly?

That's funny, because someone once told me or complimented me on my voice in my writing. I was like, what's my voice in my writing? But reading authors like [Annie Ernaux](#), [Anaïs Nin](#). Who else am I thinking of? [Clarice Lispector](#). There's one author I'm missing.

Chris Kraus?

Yes. Thank you. If you read [I Love Dick](#), she writes so fearlessly. Everybody found out who Dick was afterwards. So, it's crazy to describe all that in such detail. But reading those authors made me realize not only I could do it, but people would enjoy it. I read them and I'm like, holy shit, this is amazing. I'm having a great time. My main concern was I would publish *Pregaming Grief*, and people would be like, "Why am I reading about this? I didn't need to know this." Which is a fair reaction. It does feel like we are in a culture now where we're so into over sharing.

How important is a creative community for you?

I'm so jealous of Chris Kraus and the community she has built at [Semiotext\(e\)](#). I have a quote on my wall from her *New Yorker* interview. She talks about how most of her books are technically self-published because they're on Semiotext(e), which was founded by Sylvère Lotringer (who she was married to for a bit and is mentioned in *I Love Dick*). It's become such an influential book. The fact it's self-published is so cool. She publishes so many cool authors on Semiotext(e). I'm envious of that.

That's part of why I started my little press/cult, [The Waiting Room](#), where I self-published two chapbooks. That helped me build a following and communicate with people reading my stuff. So many people read my stuff and I don't know it. That frustrates me. I'm curious who it is. But I want a more firm community.

What do you like to do when you're not writing?

Oh, god. Preferably I'll be taking a walk. However, I have been binging *Arrested Development* lately. I'm trying to watch more movies.

Being so young and already having a published book, another one on the way, and major bylines, what advice would you give to someone who's contemplating writing as their full-time focus?

I still don't know what I'm doing. I'm grateful I can live at home with my mom because I don't think I could afford rent. But I'm doing it because I love it. However, I wish I developed literally any useful skills. So, I would recommend developing useful skills in other industries. It's underrated to work another job and then write on your own time. But I don't feel like I'm in a place to give advice. It's a lot of pressure.

At one point, I was looking at jobs on farms because I was working a job where I thought I would be writing about music, but I was writing clickbait articles about celebrities posting thirst traps. It made me question what I was doing with my life. It's really hard to make money off writing and actually enjoy it.

Most of the time writing for money is commercial and more clickbait-y and soul sucking.

Yeah, you have to be selling something to make money from it.

It sounds like you're a purist. You want to be able to write things close to your heart, whether it's fiction or nonfiction.

I can't imagine doing it any other way. But I also did try to become a copywriter because that's how to make

money off of writing. And it's transparent that this is writing you do to sell something, as opposed to news writing that's masquerading as not trying to sell something. Oh, wait, aren't you a copywriter?

Yeah... The marketing you've done for your book proves you can definitely write copy.

At this point, I should have been offered a marketing job at a book publisher for all the memes I made about my book.

Danielle Chelosky recommends:

Yellow American Spirits

Lime La Croix

Lexapro (5mg)

Red Rocket (2021)

Playboy by Constance Debré

Name

Danielle Chelosky

Vocation

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