

# On getting inspiration from unlikely places



Author and translator Sophie Strohmeier on working with independent publishers, how to develop atmosphere and mood, and the importance of stepping away from your work.

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As told to Madeline Howard, 1462 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Success](#), [Inspiration](#), [Time management](#).

**Your book is in the tradition of English Gothic literature, as there's a story that's told within the larger story. What made you want to structure your contemporary novel this way?**

When you have a character tell a story about another character, a potent doubling happens. It's almost like a ghost story in itself. It's a very compelling device to use for fantastical literature, because you immediately have reason to doubt something.

Another element that was really important to me was queerness. When we construct our own queerness, a lot of it comes out of storytelling, gossiping, and this detective work that we do when we're younger and we're trying to figure out what this means for us. Dialogue and conversation are a huge formation of queerness, because we're constantly looking for language to express who we are.

**What other works informed this novella?**

I'm one of those people who wants to read everything that's gay. I also really crave horror fiction and romantic fiction. A huge influence on my book was this Austrian author, [Gustav Meyrink](#), who wrote *The Golem of Prague*, and this witchy, demonic novel about Prague called *Walpurgisnacht*. He's not well known in the English speaking world, but he's kind of the Austrian-German H.P. Lovecraft.

Of course, Russian literature influenced me, like [Nikolai Levskoy's](#) *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. I really love this writer, [Sarah Waters](#), too. She is a contemporary British author, and her work is extremely post-modern. Every book she writes takes on the format of the type of book that would have been written in that era. Her most famous book is *Fingersmith*, which was later adapted into a movie by Park Chan-wook.

**Your book has so many wonderful sex scenes that also render the character's gender philosophy. In your opinion, what are the elements of a good sex scene?**

My first novel, which hasn't been translated to English, was actually very sex scene-heavy. It was basically erotica. So *All Girls Be Mine Alone* felt much more demure, actually.

The sex scenes between the women in this book happen out of sight. There's one that describes their sexual arrangement, but it still happens very out of sight, and it's very much in a haze, like behind a foggy curtain. There's one sex scene between a girl and a boy, and it's very explicit. Everything that happens in that scene is

described. I wanted to show that for the character, there's this extreme presence when being with the guy. She's so hyper-aware of what she's doing, because she's not really that into it.

Whereas when you have really good sex, you usually don't really know what happened. You have an overall memory, of course. But the effect is a creation of intimacy which, for some people, is like the one unmediated experience of pleasure we get. Sex to me, is the one way we can connect to the divine. It's transcendence. But what makes a great sex scene? I don't know. I've been thinking a lot about great sex scenes in literature, and honestly, the best sex scenes I've ever read have been in fan fiction.

**What kind of fan fiction do you like?**

I can't tell you! But what I can say is: There's some really great fan fiction writers out there. It truly blows [my] mind that they're not more widely read. I read some of these authors even if I'm not in their fandom. There's one in particular, and the way they write sex, I've never read anything so good or so sexy.

Of course (and I'm not the first person to say this) it might just be the fact that fan fiction is essentially people taking two Barbie dolls of very attractive women actors, and contorting them into whichever position you want them to be in. It's wish fulfillment, right? The whole point of it is the sex scene.

**This book is inextricably linked to music. Composers and symphony descriptions are woven into the text. What mood did you want the music to elicit for readers?**

I wanted people to feel invited into the milieu. For example, I have a friend who does not care at all about Mozart. He often tells me he hates him. So you want to write in a way that might make him interested in Mozart, and see the sides of Mozart that you find interesting.

When you mention music, you want that music to do the atmosphere work for you. But it's really tricky. You're not writing a movie. You're not making an opera. You can't rely on the fact that somebody will know this piece. So for me, it was more like creating a material palette with the evocation of what each instrument might convey. For instance, whenever the main character, Stasi, sees the girl she's obsessed with, Tanya, she associates her with the woodwinds. It was a way of creating a feel for that character.

**You're also a wonderful illustrator. How do you balance practicing both art forms?**

I feel like I'm good at only one thing, and that's writing. I'm really an amateur at illustration. I'm self taught. I've been doing figure drawing at [The Art Students League](#) for a couple of years, which everybody can do. I highly recommend it, because there's schools all over New York City where you can just do figure drawing. It's like mental Yoga. You feel really good afterward.

For me, drawing is way more pleasurable than writing. Oftentimes, when I was a kid, I used to draw to make up my stories. As I drew, I would develop the idea. It's kind of like when you wash the dishes and you're thinking of your story, just by something to do with your hands. I love drawing because there's colors, there's shapes, and everything is immediate. When you're done, you can show it to somebody and get a reaction.

With writing, you don't have any of that. But I have more expertise and knowledge in writing and literature. I do love doing it more, but I guess it's harder for me. Writing is hard. I don't know why we do it, but we love doing it.

**How long did it take you to write this book? I feel like people might have the impression that a shorter book takes less time. I'm curious about your experience.**

I was unemployed because of the pandemic, so I participated in National Novel Writing Month. I was writing a novel that had a novel within it. That novel is gone now, but the novella within it was the second part of this book.

You can't really measure the time it takes to write something versus the time it takes to develop something. It's not the same thing. There were so many revisions that I worked through with my editor. Word count and time are arbitrary. What's most important is stepping away, and then letting your brain do the work for you. That's when drawing comes in for me, or going to art class.

It's good to write every day. But the 500 words a day thing never really helped me. It does help me, for example, to write in the mornings, when you have time where you're not infected by anything else. Then I go for a run or a swim. Then all of a sudden, ideas come.

**What made you want to work with an independent press like Joyland Editions? What was it like working with your editor, Michelle Lyn King?**

Michelle approached me about this project. She read my short story, and asked if I had anything longer. It was a fortuitous moment where we came together.

Going with a small press like Joyland has been extremely lucky and helpful. Michelle was invested in my book, and she gave me a lot of attention. She was available and ready to talk through ideas, and she informed the process. I credit her with having the vision behind the novella, and she was really invested in making sure my book gets sold.

Michelle has this generous vision and understanding of literature. It blows my mind. She has this very thoughtful, collaborative, and bespoke process. She really was my editor and my advisor. That's the process that I wish everybody had for every book.

**Sophie Strohmeier recommends:**

*Mulholland Drive*. There's no greater film.

The work of Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian-French philosopher, who wrote a taxonomy of the fantastical in literature. He actually coined the term "fantastical."

Writing first thing in the morning.

Classes at The Art Students League in New York.

Reading fan fiction.

Name

Sophie Strohmeier

Vocation

writer, translator, illustrator

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