

# On success, failure, and working within constraints



Writer Helen Phillips on considering different ways to write about motherhood, the long gathering period that enables something new to be born, and being realistic about the constraints presented by your life—and then working around them.

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As told to Maddie Crum, 3196 words.

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**I'm curious about the genesis of this book. What got you thinking about these characters?**

Any book just comes from so many different places, but if I were to identify two, one was this night about seven years ago when my daughter was a newborn, and my husband was out for the night. I was naked, and I was nursing her in her little room, and I thought I heard something in the other room. Even though I knew it wasn't someone, I was like, "What would I do if someone were here right now? I am in the most vulnerable moment. I'm naked, I'm nursing." It was an animal terror that I felt. It was just a tiny moment. My love for her made me vulnerable, and the fact that I was caring for her made me vulnerable. But also, if anything happened, I would be so strong. I would have to be so strong in that moment, and I would be strong. I would do anything to protect her.

And then, when my daughter was eight weeks old, my older sister died. So, I had this summer of birth and death so close together, and right as I was falling in love with my daughter, my parents were losing their daughter, and I was losing my sister. So, in my book, I have two mothers who are in two really different places in terms of the abundance of having these little children, and then, the loss of these children, and comparing those two experiences.

**You didn't romanticize the mothers in the book, but you also weren't treating the mothers as villains the way so many stories do. Did you set out to write about motherhood?**

I would say that I did set out to write about motherhood. When I had little children, and when I started lactating, I was really like, "Why have I not read about this?" This is a common human experience, and this is one of the most surreal things that I've ever been through. My breasts are producing milk all the time. Using a breast pump is really strange, and I was just like, "Why is there not The Great American Breast Pump novel?"

And I'm sure it does appear in certain books, but I haven't found any yet that really are about the female body in that way. And there's probably some tie in that, something like lactation has historically not been considered a very interesting or worthy topic for fiction, but I think it is a really interesting thing. She even says at one point—her milk comes down, and she's like, "Reminder, mother. Reminder, animal."

Bearing a child and nursing a child made me feel like an animal more than I ever had before in my life. That is quite beautiful, and also quite strange and disturbing. There's just so much duality in motherhood. It's the most enormous burden you can possibly take on, and it is the most straightforward path to ecstasy I've ever

experienced. It's just both of those things completely at once.

**I feel like fictional portrayals of motherhood are usually [about] the mother as the object as opposed to the subject.**

Like a child is criticizing their mother, or something?

**Exactly. Or a husband is criticizing his wife, or something like that. Or the mother is a symbol. So, you said that you feel like you haven't read about things like lactating, which is such a strange absence from fiction. But, are there portrayals of motherhood that you've read or seen that you have admired?**

*The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson, and *On Immunity* by Eula Biss. They're such incredible books, and they're about motherhood, but they're also using it as a way to explore a lot of different themes.

And then, Sarah Manguso wrote a book called *Ongoingness*, which has breast milk in it, and nursing, and actually, I read it while I was nursing my son and most of what I remember about it is just reading a book about nursing while I was nursing, and just feeling this sort of divine harmony in that.

And Rachel Cusk has written very, very searingly about motherhood, too. It's a really honest and really dark evocation of it. It is. And I think that we need those. I think, like you say, portraying the mother as this kind of sacred, perfect Mother Mary figure isn't really serving anyone well.

**I wanted to ask about the mood of the book. Is mood something that you think about consciously?**

I kind of feel like mood is everything for me in a book. I think it's the most important thing, and it's probably the aspect that comes the most naturally to me. That is what the book is. When the book comes to me, it comes as images that have a certain mood. I don't know how to describe the mood of the story. It's kind of an ephemeral part of it in a way, or hard to pin down.

**This book would be hard to classify genre-wise. It's suspenseful, and there are some surreal elements, like you mentioned. Is genre something that you ever think of consciously?**

I don't think about what genre it is, and this book is really hard to classify. Like yesterday, I was on a panel about thrillers, including the writer, Karen Slaughter, who has sold like 40,000,000 copies of her thrillers. So, she's a thriller writer. And they made the point on the panel that it's a bit of a stretch to call my book a thriller, but it has elements of that. So, I don't think of the genre, certainly not when I'm writing it. But, what I do think about is the fact that there are certain kinds of books, like thrillers, that pull the reader in with a lot of momentum. I feel like among literary writers, those kinds of techniques are often not as highly valued as I think they should be.

**Right.**

When someone says, "Oh, it's just a page-turner," I'm like, "Excuse me, let's examine this statement." Someone is getting someone else to turn the pages. That is sacred. I know the feeling of it leaving you empty at the end, but, someone got you to turn the pages. I think that that's something that maybe literary writers should think about more sometimes.

You want something that transports you and pulls you, so I feel like I borrow techniques from thrillers, like ending a chapter on a cliffhanger. I remember the first books I read as a kid, a cliff-hanger ending of a chapter was so fun. I mean, in my book, it's not exactly fun, but it's certainly pulling you forward with momentum.

These techniques that I borrow from other genres, I think they make the book much better and more interesting. And for me, with the speculative elements, they enable a metaphor to become literal. You could have lived a different life. Everyone has multiple lives they could live, but actually, literally, you could have lived a different life,

and here is what you would be if you had lived that life, and now you have to reckon with that.

Someone at the thriller panel was like, "I think it's a lactation thriller." Which, now I really like.

**Not to dwell too much on genre questions, but you also recently wrote a climate fiction story. How would you define the genre? And why do you find that you're drawn to it?**

Climate fiction. I feel like that is a recently-coined term that is helpful right now as we are making the transition, I guess, and reflecting more in art about the massive changes happening to the planet. I do think that it's probably going to become an obsolete term. If you're writing about the real world around us, it will involve climate change, because everything will involve climate change.

I'm drawn to it because I just think about it all the time. I was in Manhattan yesterday and just passing all the fast food places, and all the Starbucks, and I was like, "How many cups are we throwing away each day?" And the plastic bags the size of Texas in the ocean. These are surreal images that are actually real.

For me, my writing always arises out of anxiety. Maybe someday I'll write a book, or a story from a place that isn't anxiety, but I never have yet. It's always just what am I worried about. The climate is chief among those, so it shows up all the time.

**In addition to writing, you teach. I was curious if you found that teaching complements your writing well?**

Well, I would say that, for me, teaching and writing, and actually also being a mother, draw on a lot of the same parts of myself, which is a good thing. I never am at a loss for meaning in my life, because these three endeavors—writing, teaching, and being a parent—bring a lot of meaning, but they also take a lot of heart and a lot of intellect, and a lot of energy. I certainly write less when I'm teaching, obviously. There is just a time crunch. But at the same time, my relationships with my students and the questions that they ask keep me so honest. Like if I'm suggesting to my students that they should set a timer and write every day, I feel like I have to be keeping that promise to myself. And when they raise challenging questions about identity politics in fiction, or about non-linear narratives, and what's the point of writing a narrative that way? I think, if I were on a mountain writing by myself, I wouldn't have as deep a relationship with fiction. It really does help to be reading and writing things alongside my students, and I learn so much from it. I feel very expanded by it.

It's a rainbow unicorn. This job is a rainbow unicorn, and in the middle of a semester, I am completely fried along every vector, but at the same time, I love everything that I'm doing. It's such a hard balance, but it's all very worthwhile, and I do, during those busy times, set a timer. I set a realistic goal for how much time I can devote to writing that day. That time devoted could either be writing itself, or it could be stuff related to writing. I'm very flexible with how I use that time. It could include reading. It could include sending my work out. Taking the time to do a little research and submit to magazines.

**It seems like it would pay to be honest with yourself about how you're using your time.**

Yeah. You have to be totally realistic. And I do really think that people work in different ways, and maybe writing once a month for 13 hours is better for some people, but I think for most people, checking in with it on a daily basis is probably going to enable you to make the most progress. And the thing is, if it's an hour—which I don't think is that much time, really—it adds up tremendously. For *The Need*—and I think this shows from some of the short chapters—I would write for an hour and then go and teach a class. And that compression, I think it appears in the book, and I think that it's a benefit to the book.

I'm interested in the idea of the way constraints can breed creativity. In my first book, *And Yet They Were Happy*, I gave myself the constraint that each story had to be 340 words. It can be anything else that it wants to be, but it needs to be 340 words. And I found that very liberating, even though it's a ridiculous constraint, because I gave myself total liberty within it. And the same thing with the circumstances of my life—they are a constraint. The circumstances of everyone's life are a constraint. How much time you have, how much money you

have, how much energy you have. And you have to work with that. The fact that you have constraints doesn't mean you can't be a writer, or that you aren't a writer.

**What general advice would you give to any creative person about balancing work and the more creative work that they're pursuing?**

Setting a goal that's realistic. If that is 15 minutes a day, that's fine. When my daughter was a month old, I didn't write for the first month of her life. But, when she was a month old, I needed it again, so I did 15 minutes a day. That was realistic for that time. And at other times last summer when I was revising *The Need*, I was working six hours a day. So, making goals that fit your life at that moment, and then keeping them sacred. Make it as small as it needs to be. Make it one sentence a day. Because then, I feel like if you're working on your creative path a little bit each day, you never feel like a phony with it.

Even if it's not going well, you're still doing it. Even if you have a bad writing day, it doesn't matter, because you'll be writing again tomorrow. Whereas, if you're only writing once a week, or once a month, if you have a bad writing day, then you hold that badness with you until the next time you write. So, holding the badness for 24 hours, versus seven days, or 30 days, is better.

It really does help. And when I was working on *The Need*, or any of my books, I would have some terrible days. I'd just be banging my head against it, and then, the next day, I'd come to it anew, and it would go a little better. So, I think that consistency is really helpful.

I think it's Isak Dinesen, maybe? I should check who the quote is. "I write every day without hope and without despair." I think that that is the perfect way to approach it. Without hope, and without despair.

And at this point in my life, and it took years to get to this point, the motivation piece of it has been replaced by habit. So, at first you have to be super motivated, but if it becomes a habit, it's like brushing your teeth. Do you have to get really motivated to brush your teeth? Not really. You just do it, because you've been doing it for a long time.

**As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success, and how do you define failure?**

Success is setting aside the time and the promise to myself, and showing up for that. There are so many ways to measure success, and I certainly have to acknowledge that the recognition that my work has gotten in the broader world by being nominated for prizes, by winning prizes, by having books published. Certainly that is affirming in a really profound way, and that success is a great engine for me. But if I am able, for the rest of my life, to have the time and space to examine my life through writing, that is success, to me.

And then, how do I define failure? What would failure be? So many of the quotes I love about writing have to do with failure as a helpful tool, or a really positive thing. I love Toni Morrison's, "A failure is just information," or Samuel Beckett's, "Fail again, fail better."

Any failure that occurs within the context of the process, I consider a kind of success. But true failure would be leaving the process, or not keeping that promise to yourself to work, or getting distracted by the more superficial elements of being a writer.

**How do you start a project, and how do you know when a project is finished?**

When I'm writing a book, I start gathering material for years before I start writing it. I will find newspaper clippings, overheard dialogue, images that come to my head, sort of vague scenes from a plot, and I just make a huge, messy list of those things. I'm doing that for the next book, and I've been doing it for a long time, and I'm still not even close to being ready to start. Maybe in the fall I'll start it, but I'm not on the cusp of starting it really. I'm just gathering that raw material. And what deserves to go in that document? It's hard to say, but I know that things come together. I know that this article about Chinese surveillance definitely belongs

in the same place with my son telling me about this dream he had. These are somehow connected. I have no idea how, but it's just a feeling that I have, like an instinct. *The Need* and *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* very much began that way.

And how to tell when it's done? That's so hard. I feel like, with each of my books, I have gotten to the point where I've worked on it so much, and so intensely, that the letters almost swim before my eyes. In the last sentence of *The Beautiful Bureaucrat*, it could have a comma, or it couldn't, and actually, in one version, it has a comma. In the hardcover, it has a comma, and in the paperback, it doesn't, or vice versa, because I just thought about that comma and thought about that comma, and I don't know, when I get to that point, that is a part of the process that I find really hard. Like the truly final, final draft. When I read every sentence aloud, I've read it aloud several times, I feel like I don't even know the English language anymore.

**Sometimes I feel like I'm just making animal noises after a certain point.**

Exactly. It is helpful, but at the same time, when your brain gets fried by that process, which mine really can, I'll be like, "I just spent 45 minutes on this paragraph, and I didn't change anything." So, it would be hard for me to reread *The Need* at this point.

But I truly do obsess over every sentence, and when that obsession kind of veers from being positive and productive to being neurotic and painful, that's sort of when I draw the line. But it may be kind of arbitrary when I switch from being productive to neurotic.

**Helen Phillips Recommends:**

*Fever Dream* by Samanta Schweblin

*At the Bottom of the River* by Jamaica Kincaid

*Amatka* by Karin Tidbeck

*Pieces for the Left Hand* by J. Robert Lennon

The room of Agnes Martin paintings at the Harwood Museum in Taos, NM

Brian Eno's *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*

Name

Helen Phillips

Vocation

Writer

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