

# On balancing growth and guarding against burnout



Writer Madeleine Watts discusses taking creative work seriously, describing a world impacted by climate change, and the importance of replenishing the soul with art

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As told to Ariel Courage, 4114 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Mental health](#), [Day jobs](#), [Process](#), [Time management](#).

## **How did you first decide you were going to be a writer?**

To some extent, always. When I was asked when I was little, "writer" would always be on the list of "what I want to be when I grow up," along with "witch" and "marine biologist." I was always writing. But I'm from a family that's very sensible, so I didn't allow myself to think it would be a possibility. There are moments when I could have just become a public servant working in Australia.

When I finished university, I hadn't really taken writing that seriously. I hadn't really tried to get things published, anything like that. I took a year and I made a list or plan for myself. I said, if I can make some headway on this plan of being a writer in a year, then I'll see. If I didn't, I was going to apply for a PhD. By the end of that year, I'd made enough headway that I didn't feel I needed to go back to school, at least not yet. It was a sort of make-or-break 2013 for me.

## **When you say "taking it seriously," what do you mean? What sort of things did you do?**

Part of that, for me, was moving to America from Australia. I needed to get away from everything and everyone who had ever known me, or that I had ever known. For various reasons, when I was 22 or 23, I felt like I had to become a different version of myself, to allow myself to think of myself as a writer.

Part of the work of being a writer, early on, is convincing yourself. You tell people for years that you're a writer, but you don't have a book, and you don't have much published. People will look at you and they'll roll their eyes. So, you are the only person who you answer to. I had a job all through my twenties, but I would tell myself that writing was my most important job, and so that would take precedence. I made space and time for writing, even letting it take precedence over my social life. Like a night where I could have gone to the movies with a friend, I would sit in front of my laptop for two hours.

When I did an MFA program at Columbia after a couple of years, I encountered a lot of people who were like, "I'm here because this MFA will give me discipline," and I felt glad that I had already developed that discipline on my own. Once you're out of the MFA program, you don't have deadlines anymore, so you need to have an internal drive to sit down and write into the void. As much as you wish they were, nobody out there is waiting for your book.

## **It sounds like you went through this intense process that was possibly a bit lonely. Has there come a point where**

**you feel like you've been able to relax while still feeling like a writer? Or is the struggle constant?**

It's funny, my first book came out during COVID-19. There's how I felt about writing before the book and how I felt about writing after it, but some of that was the pandemic, so I'm not quite sure which is which. Right now, I feel like I have a good community of people around me, many of whom are writers, and many of whom inspire me. I like talking to them, I can feel my own thinking expanding and my own thoughts improving. I can feel it in the work that I'm making. I think that's helped me relax a little and actually understand that it's important to go for walks and have friends. If you work so hard all the time, you'll burn out eventually. I think my life is a bit more balanced now.

**Between the constant hustle of writing and the pace of the news cycle and maintaining day-to-day existence, the burnout risk seems very real. Could you talk a bit about how you avoid burnout, or cope with it when you experience it?**

In the last few months, I've definitely thought to myself, "Maybe I'm just burnt out?" I hadn't necessarily thought that before, even when I was going through rough periods. It's never about the creative side of things—I have ideas I want to be writing—but I do get burnt out with the other things I have to do to support the writing. I wish I could write full time, but I can't. Freelance jobs or teaching, all that kind of stuff can feel exhausting when it's not the work you really want to be expending your resources on. There's also ambient, circumstantial political stuff which I think a lot of people are finding draining right now.

What I've found helpful is reducing my phone and social media use. I have a distinct memory of getting my first iPhone for my 21st birthday. I remember after 48 hours of sitting engrossed in it, I popped my head up and thought, "I'm so glad I didn't have this in high school, I would've never gotten anything done." I also don't sleep very well, and that can turn into a vicious cycle. If my phone is in the room where I sleep, I'll start reading the news in the middle of the night, and that will worsen my wakefulness, because it's not conducive to being calm. I think it's smartphones specifically; the Nokia I had when I was younger was fine. I'm very much on the verge of getting a dumb phone.

I used to use Twitter a lot but find it incredibly toxic now. I've told myself I'm not allowed to delete it until this book promotion is over—my last event is on May 9th, and I made a calendar reminder to delete Twitter on May 10th.

**It sounds like you're sort of always "on," creatively speaking. What is your process like?**

Well, I'm not some wunderkind. I don't feel creative all the time. I don't sit down at a laptop and try and force myself to write when I feel panicked and burnt out anymore. I used to, because I felt I had to work all the time, but I've learned that's a counterproductive practice, because what I write will turn out like crap, and the quality of my thinking won't be any good.

But if I'm not actually writing, then I have to make sure I'm at least leaving time for it. Sometimes I facilitate that by going away for two days. I like getting on the train to the edge of the city and going for a six-hour walk. I also often go into art galleries. It's like giving my mind a shower or something—like I'll just feel cleaner and better and calmer afterward.

**I agree that walks are incredibly helpful.**

I was in England the other week with my in-laws and I went for a six-hour walk with like ice on the ground. It's the coldest hike I've ever gone on, and I was covered in mud because I'd slipped a bunch. But I felt so happy afterward.

**One of the things I think TCI readers are curious about is how artists make a living and how they balance their work and their creative lives. You touched on this a bit earlier, but could you speak a bit more about supporting yourself as a writer?**

It still feels kind of tenuous. A friend and I were talking a few months ago about the fact that we're in our early to mid-30s, and we're still getting asked to write for free, even though we've published books now, and we're still getting asked to do things that aren't necessarily lucrative but might be "good for our careers." We were told it would be good for our careers a decade ago when we were starting out, and we're still being told it will be good for our careers. We thought we would already have fully established careers by now. When do we get to actually have careers—in our 50s?

I think this dynamic—and this is probably a millennial thing—is common for people who were impacted by the global financial crisis. There's just been this slowdown or degradation—you know, the enshittification of everything—since we became adults. I don't necessarily feel like I'm successful, in so far as I once thought that success would have some relationship with stability. I sort of feel like I'm stable right now, but that could change. Before I sold this book, I was in the very early stages of applying to law school, because I just didn't see how my writing career, such as it was, was going to be sustainable. This book sold, and I'm okay right now, but I don't necessarily have any confidence that I won't be in that position again a few years from now.

From 2014 to 2020, when I was in grad school and writing, I worked four days a week at the original McNally Jackson bookstore. That was wonderful. I don't think I'll ever love a job as much as I loved that one. It was adjacent to writing, but didn't make me hate books in the way I think I would've had I started working in actual publishing. I didn't have a ton of money, but I had the time I needed to prioritize writing. I left that job in 2020 and since then have been balancing things with teaching, which I love, and freelancing.

It mostly works OK, except when it doesn't. You don't have the ability, which I miss, of truly being able to take two weeks off when no one is emailing you, and you're not responsible for anybody. I'm now at this stage where I set an out-of-office email on my general inbox if I go away for three days. The need to be constantly available can be difficult.

Another important thing for me was leaving New York. I moved to Berlin 11 months ago. I love New York, it feels like home, but it was increasingly clear to me that there were things I wanted and ways I wanted to be able to prioritize being a writer that weren't tenable for me in New York anymore. The cost of living in Berlin is a lot lower, and there's a huge English language writing community. Berlin isn't perfect, but in comparison it's so much easier to make art here.

**I feel a similar sense of instability—of trying to write while also working. For a while I thought that would be solved by selling a book, but I'm coming to terms with the fact that it's just going to be a lifetime problem, unless you get very lucky.**

Yeah. My husband is the reason I live in Berlin. When we met, I lived in New York. Initially the plan was that he would move to New York, but in the meantime, while we waited, I was going back and forth, spending big chunks of time in Berlin. Spending a significant amount of time outside of New York for the first time in a decade really changed things. I realized, basically, that there was another way to live. One where I wasn't stressed about buying groceries and could have a washing machine in my apartment. In the end Berlin won out.

**Earlier you mentioned going to galleries to replenish yourself. Elegy, Southwest is also full of references to art, and characters are constantly making themselves into art by photographing themselves. Could you talk a little bit about how other art forms relate to your writing?**

It's not necessarily deliberate, but it often frames how I'm thinking. In terms of this novel, a lot of the artwork is mediated through screens and Instagram in particular, because it's so woven into the way we experience the world and into the processes of discovery.

I'm particularly interested in photography, because it's losing its specialness—the punctum that Roland Barthes talks about in *Camera Lucida* is so often absent in photography now, because everything is being photographed. I've always been interested in film and photography, maybe more so than other representational art forms. In *Elegy, Southwest* in particular, there were a lot of films initially that stirred something in my imagination, and art. There are two films talked about at length—Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* and Buñuel's *Simon of the Desert*.

Georgia O'Keefe, and land art are deeply embedded in the book. I was also watching a lot of Wim Wenders films—*Paris, Texas* and *Alice in the Cities* and *The American Friend*—so they're threaded through in ways that aren't necessarily discussed but were very important to how I thought about the book. Even the way perspective works in the novel comes from spending a lot of time in visual worlds and translating that into sentences. I was very captivated too by Judy Chicago's 'Atmospheres' series, which I got to see once I'd finished the novel when it showed at the New Museum. I think a lot about the ways in which bodies, particularly female bodies, inhabit those desert landscapes, and so even if a certain artwork isn't necessarily there in the content of *Elegy, Southwest*, it's there in the way I was responding to them. When I go to galleries, I like to go alone, and I will often write all the way through them. I went to see the Nan Goldin retrospective here in Berlin last week, and I was writing the whole time.

**What do you write during these sessions?**

Just a lot of sensory stuff: smell, taste, touch. It's also tracking where my mind goes. That particular form of notetaking actually ended up being the basis for this novel. I took two trips to the American southwest, one in the fall of 2018 and the other in the spring of 2019, and I didn't at that point know what I was writing, or even if I was writing anything at all about the southwest, but I took hundreds of thousands of words of notes. Every sign I could see, all the details about how the landscape smelled, all that sort of stuff. Note-taking is huge for my process.

**Is your process consistent across projects?**

It varies. Note-taking has become much more important the longer I've been writing and the more I read. I'm very reliant on it. In college and high school, I kept diaries, which I stopped doing because I realized I wound up narrativizing my life in a way that was running me into problems. I make a distinction between diaries and notebooks. I'm not going to spend a long time describing how I feel about something, but I will spend a long time detailing what I'm interested in: things I hear on the street, the way the clouds look, what people have said to me and how they've said them. It's a little more external than internal. It's a way of remembering.

I'm not interested in writing a traditional 19th-century style novel. What excites me are books which are structured differently, embrace the world differently. You need new and different forms to capture the world as we experience it now. I think the notes help me remember and define my experience of the world, and they're the building blocks for whatever I end up creating.

**Are you taking physical notes, like in notebooks?**

I hate using my phone, I hate being someone who does this, but I've found it's just easier to do it on the Notes app—this is the primary problem jeopardizing my dumb phone ambitions. It's easier to take notes on my phone partly because what I'm doing is sort of creepy—like if I'm on the train and somebody's having an interesting conversation, to take out a notebook and pen is very obvious and possibly unsettling, but if I'm on my phone I just look like I'm texting. I've recently started trying to systematize the notes such that I have a folder on my computer that collates my notes month by month and year by year.

**I'm interested in the theme of climate change in your writing. Can you talk a bit about how you came to focus on that?**

I talked about this a little bit when my first book came out, but I didn't necessarily set out thinking I was writing about climate change. I started writing that book when I was 25 and living in the US, and some things about place became obvious to me in a way I'd never thought much about or been very interested in before I left Australia.

But when I was living in New York, it became clear to me that I didn't really know any of the names of the plants. Or I would see daffodils blooming in January, and even though I'm from the Southern Hemisphere, I knew daffodils shouldn't be out in January. Becoming more attuned and thinking about place in turn made me think about climate change, which effects every place, every environment on earth.

It used to be, let's say fifteen or twenty years ago, that climate change was a topic confined to dystopian fiction—Margaret Atwood or Cormac McCarthy or Octavia Butler. That always annoyed me because it confined climate change to something that was going to happen in the future, which minimized the threat. But it's happening now, we're seeing the effects, and it's important to describe and to recognize its immediacy. It's an imperfect comparison, but the only thing that you can sort of compare it to is war, except that war is a completely circumscribed temporal event. Climate change is very slow, with processes that are geological and exceed our lifetimes, except when it's very fast, and will extend far beyond our individual lifespans. It's global but also manifests locally. These events cannot all be captured by the story of one family or one person. You can either view these as challenges to writing about climate change, or you can use them as structural possibilities and innovate your form to respond to them.

When my first book was out, I was asked a lot of questions about climate change. To some extent, because I hadn't started with the explicit intention of writing a "climate change novel," I didn't feel like I had great answers to those questions, or that the answers I had weren't satisfying enough. This book, *Elegy, Southwest*, is to some extent an attempt at answering those questions I was asked four years ago and actually representing what it's like to be alive right now.

To some extent I'm happy to embrace being a climate change novelist. But I when I teach writing about climate change or nature writing I sometimes find it helpful to frame it this way: you can take a Victorian literature class in college, but that's a span of nearly 100 years, and at the time those writers and their movements didn't necessarily think that they belonged under the same subheading, or that they had anything to do with one another. In the same way, I think you can basically call anything produced since 1988 "Anthropocene literature." You can just choose to make it more obvious in your work, or choose not to address it at all, but even in omitting it you're making a choice. You can't live outside your era. I think if you're being mindful and honest about the time you're living in, and really want to accurately represent the world, then climate change needs to be there, because here it is.

**There's this part in *Elegy, Southwest* where the narrator gets accused of enjoying the catastrophe, like she's excited about the idea of everything falling apart. I've wondered that about myself—that I almost enjoy writing about climate change, like it's a little bit of *ruinenlust* (Obsession with ruins). Sites of environmental disasters and degradation produce human suffering but also these striking images. And I don't go through life like this all the time, but I feel this awareness when I'm passing by regular, seemingly unaffected places now, this sense of ruin, which was always possible but is now a little more accessible to the imagination. Do you feel anything like that in your writing?**

It can feel really complicated, and I suppose it can sometimes feel a bit like *ruinenlust*. I think 10 years ago or so there were ethical conversations being had about the complications inherent in the fetishization of ruin. I think in general, though, it's very human to make art about crisis and to make art out of a crisis.

That particular line in *Elegy, Southwest* about catastrophe I think is me chastising myself a little bit. I do have a morbid streak. I'm the kind of person who likes sad music and depressing books. I like engaging with work that scares me, or that makes me sad, because getting closer to those feelings makes me feel like I can control them, or that once you've merged with them, they can't control you. I think too that some of the most interesting feelings, and creative responses to these feelings, come out of engaging with a catastrophe.

This book has its roots in the early days of the pandemic. In March of 2020, I wound up inadvertently stuck in Australia and ended up being there for four months. I was quarantining, because I'd just been in New York, so I would go on these long runs into landscapes where I knew I wasn't likely to see anyone else and risk infecting them. During 2019 and into 2020, southeast Australia experienced nearly six months of catastrophic fires, and close to where I was in those months, in the Blue Mountains, had burned quite badly. I would run down a road and underneath a line that said "do not cross," behind which the fire had burned up over the ridge and almost reached the town. I'd been down that road so many times before, it's incredibly familiar to me. And everything I would run past was black, the trees were charcoal. There was no sound. Everything was dead. The first time I ran it, I stood in the middle of the road and burst into tears.

Over the next few weeks and months, I saw greenery start to come back, flowers. It still looked catastrophic and remained incredibly silent, but I kept going back there because continuing to engage with the grief—the grief of knowing a particular landscape and seeing it decimated in that way—is very human.

**Last question: Is there anything right now that gives you hope?**

If I'd written a book about difficult female friendship, I don't think I would get asked about hope so much  
[laughs]

I don't know that I'm the right person to offer hope. On the other hand, yes, there are works that give me hope. One writer I'd mention is Daisy Hildyard and her novels *Emergency* and her non-fiction book *The Second Body*, which I think about all the time. Another is *When I Sing, Mountains Dance* by Irene Sola. I thought both of those books were incredible creative responses to living in the particular world we live in, even if not necessarily fitting neatly into the box of 'climate change novel.' I'm much more interested in work that doesn't fit into that box.

I also get an enormous dose of hope from teaching, which I feel like is such a cliché. I'm often 10 to 15 years older than the people I'm teaching, which doesn't feel like that much time in the world, but there's a real difference. I think I'm used to a certain amount of cynicism and bewilderment from people my age, and I see that less in younger people. I think there is more of a steely resolve that they may not even recognize in themselves. But I love it, I feel energized every time I come out of a seminar.

**Madeleine Watts recommends:**

*The Nan Goldin retrospective at Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie*

*The Second Body* by Daisy Hildyard

The 'American' films of *Wim Wenders* (*Alice in the Cities*, *The American Friend*, and *Paris, Texas*)

*Kairos* by Jenny Erpenbeck, translated by Michael Hofmann

If you are in New York in winter, getting the A train to the end of the line and walking along the beach to Fort Tilden, ideally in conditions of fog or snow.

Name

Madeleine Watts

Vocation

writer

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