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As told to Maria Santa Poggi, 2307 words.

Tags: Writing, Inspiration, Beginnings, Collaboration, Education.

# On discovering what your story is really about

Writer Melisse Gelula on starting a book club to create community, making something that feels organic, and facing the truth of yourself.

**How did establishing something as big as *Well+Good* help prepare you to cultivate the Memoiring book club?**

How my brain thinks is when there's a void or an opportunity, my brain rushes to fill it. If I sense I am lacking something or I feel there's an opportunity that people aren't addressing, I'm frustrated by it. That was what happened with *Well+Good*, and it was what happened with *Memoiring*, even though they're two different things.

With *Well+Good*, this was 2008, there was *Daily Candy*, a newsletter, and everyone was blogging. But there wasn't wellness journalism *per se*. There was this space in the market between the free health food store magazines that told you any essential oil was going to save your soul. And then there was *The New York Times* trying to make sense of what yoga was doing, and a lot of eye rolling. I was like, "Well, journalism can occupy this place between what is fluffy and what must have a peer reviewed study." Right?

I was in this MFA program for creative nonfiction, on the other side of having sold my company, and circling into doing something I really needed to do for myself. I'm in these amazing classes with amazing memoirists, and I'm here to write a full length memoir. Everything I'm being assigned to read is a personal essay. I have these two years to learn all about the genre I'm writing in, and I'm not reading it. And anyone will tell you that you need to read in the genre you're writing. So I was like, "Why are they not assigning us full length work? Why are we not looking at it?"

Then [there's] just the larger issue of the neglect of memoir as a genre, or the sidestepping of the memoir genre to other forms of narrative, [which] made me feel like I'm going to center it, and I'm going to hype it. I'm going to explore it, I'm going to study it, and I'm going to bring other people into it with me.

**Memoir is the most, and excuse my French, shit on genre in a way, or the least recognized. But then also the top performing books oftentimes on *The New York Times* bestseller lists are memoirs. It occupies this weird space in the landscape of literature. What are some of the false perceptions of memoir?**

There's lots of memoirists and thinkers and book critics who have really articulated the problem with memoir and why it gets the treatment it gets. Some of it comes out of the dismissal of personal stories as real literature. The dismissal of women's stories as well. Historically, ... We'd have to get stats on this, Maria, but the readership of memoir today is largely female. It's thought of as a "women's genre" without craft, pure confession. [While] the [fiction] novel was originally thought of as a "women's genre", in the 17th and 18th centuries.

I think [it's] the value that the industry places on fiction, and everyone wants to be the great American writer, [but] not everybody wants to be the great American memoirist, except the fans of Cheryl Strayed. And yeah, *Eat Pray Love's* author Elizabeth Gilbert. There's something about storytelling that gets valued more in fiction than in nonfiction, even though the story is so lauded.

**When you go about deciding guest authors, how do you go about it on a monthly basis? How do you get some of these authors to want to speak? You have some big names...**

It has less to do with me than it has to do with the industry. All authors, particularly memoirists, are told they have to really be engaged in promoting their own work. I published a cookbook a handful of years ago, and I was really engaged in the PR and the marketing of that cookbook.

A lot of memoirists don't have that platform. Or Melissa [Febos] does, for example, but not a lot do. Memoirists are really forced to do whatever they can to promote engagement with their books. So jumping into book clubs is one of the things they're used to doing.

There's a real problem with memoirists having to show up more than fiction authors to support their work. Whether it's through writing a book proposal, having to have a mega platform to even be considered for publication, and then having to activate that community when the book launches.

I consider myself a little bit of a memoirist hype woman. I'm not a PR person, but I get the importance of it. And so my Substack for memoiring and my Instagram is to help engage, not just the people who already care about memoir, but more people who might care about supporting authors, and care about reading.

**I don't want to say in the marketplace, because that's a little bit too capitalistic, but you know what I'm saying in general?**

[I'm] railing against the fact that memoirists don't have more PR support from their publishers. By saying, "Hey, I kind of want to help. I want to use my passion for the genre to activate it within other readers." And you asked me how I choose books, and I totally forgot to answer that, but I'm always looking. I read a ton about what's coming down the pike. I get ARCs when I can, but I often haven't had a chance to read something completely. Lydia Yuknavitch is a perfect example. We read her because I felt like I was so remiss in not reading *The Chronology of Water*, and I wanted to do that in community.

I try to really mix up the type of memoir. Like Camonghne Felix's *Dyscalculia* was a really important book, not just because she's a queer woman of color, but because the way she wrote her memoir is amazing. She's an incredible poet, and her memoir is so lyrical and fricking stabs you right in the heart.

What a lot of celeb book clubs are doing is awesome for authors, but there's maybe one memoir a year out of 12 that they're touching. And I'm like, "Not enough for me." The book club needed to be all memoir, all the time. And I think that there's enough expansiveness within the genre, despite what others might think.

**How does engaging with memoir in a community sort of differ through a club, with other people, how does it differ rather than just doing it on your own, to you?**

I'm filtering these books often through my own experience, my own literary analysis. And those are just formed by my own preferences and my own hangups. It's great to hear other people's questions and thoughts filtered through their own subject position, their own life experience. I'm not just interested in what I think, and people who think like me, I'm interested in different thinkers, and smarter thinkers, and people who see things that I might not see.

**Oh, I love that. How does running the book club differ from Well+Good? Which I know is probably a big question, but I'm so curious. Because you're still running something, you know what I'm saying?**

There are huge differences. For one, Memoiring just feels like this scrappy thing that I just wanted to do because I wanted to do it. It's not monetized in any way right now, although that could change. Now that I finished the MFA, I'm thinking about ways to do that. It's different in so many ways because I'm not setting out to build a media empire. My former business partner might be like, "Yes, you are. You just don't know it yet." My friends who think of me as a builder of media companies might be like, "Yes, you'll do this as soon as you have a hot second to think it through."

I don't want it to feel like I'm starting a business. I want it to feel like I'm starting something that's coming out of my own creative community needs. And I haven't figured out how to do both.

**I am not saying that starting a huge media company like Well+Good didn't come from an organic place, it did. It started out in a very organic place where it's like, "Well, I want this to consume, that has all of the spectrum of what wellness is." But it's not like you started it thinking, "Oh, I'm going to get an investor up here, first blog post."**

**It sounds like [the book club] is in an organic place. Where it's like, "I just sincerely want to have people who are the best of their craft coming in and talking about what they're doing, so other people who are also working on their memoirs, or love just engaging with memoir, feel like they have a safe space."**

The interesting thing is that 75% of the Memoiring community are [currently] writing memoir, or personal essays. The conversations that we have with authors are probably much more about craft than a traditional book club where people might be interested in just talking about content with a little behind the scenes. When Margo Steines came, she offered a combination of conversation and craft workshop and that was a really well attended and well-received one.

**I do notice when a fiction writer goes to promote their book, it's always through a personal essay. That's in relation to their fiction...**

I feel you and I could have a really long panel discussion about this in front of a large audience, because what you're saying, it's true for memoirists as well.

It's interesting to me that we're using the personal to enter fiction, but we can't use the personal, or we don't totally value the personal to get into memoir. Although there are exceptions, a lot of memoirs do very well. But still, not a ton. It is very hard to break in and sell a memoir.

**How does memoir fuel you creatively? Can you explain that sort of feeling and how to do that in tandem with the community?**

My training was as a journalist, and writing about other people's stories. For a long time I didn't want to write my own story. My own story was something I wanted to hide. And I did hide it, for a really long time. Because I thought, I was pretty much told that if you have mental illness in your family, it's not something other people want to see. I didn't want to see that in my mom. She was a child psychologist who started to hear voices, and that's the basis of my memoir. Leaning into the creative nonfiction process was a whole 180 in centering my own story.

**Well, you're a journalist.**

Memoir is a place that demands both from me. It demands that I tell my story, that I do it in a structured way, using all these narrative tools of turning myself into a character, my mother into a character, creating a narrative arc.

There's something very difficult, very deep, and multilayered for me in a way that psychoanalysis is, where there's the conscious and the unconscious. For memoir there's the story on the surface, as Jo Ann Beard, one of my mentors said, and the story under the surface. And for me, that's one of the most interesting places to explore when writing a memoir and talking about memoir and community. I'm not just interested in what happens on the page, I'm interested in the heartbeat beneath it and what the story is really about. Where is the memoirist really showing her shame, or the most difficult things to say that we all relate to? Because when we hear someone else's worst, it makes our own worst more acceptable to ourselves.

**That's such a beautiful answer because when you think of, I mean, and I'm not saying fiction is a mask, but fiction is much more of a mask, especially if it's... I mean, you're writing a memoir, but just changing the names and dates. But memoir, it sounds like writing a memoir and being in community with memoir, you're forced to look at these shameful things. And is it really shameful? Or is it, who conditioned me to feel this shame?**

If you listen to a lot of podcasts as I do, with authors, especially memoirists, you learn that while someone can write a novel in a couple of years, some very accomplished authors take eight years to write their memoir. It's a very different process of knowing yourself, and then really fucking knowing yourself. And really realizing the stories you've been telling yourself might be things you needed to survive, versus the real story of what happened, and your own implication in your own story. It's something like what Alexander Chee says, escaping into the truth versus escaping from it.

**Melisse Gelula recommends:**

Suzanne Scanlon's memoir, *Committed: On Meaning and Madwomen*

Hiking: My dad took me hiking on the Bruce Trail when I was kid, and I still like zoning out and looking at trees and letting your mind unspool. I've hiked in Bhutan, Japan, and Iceland. My next trip is to Banff.

Feminist lesbian psychoanalytic anything.

Anything Phoebe Waller-Bridge creates.

YOLO education: I recently completed an MFA in Creative Nonfiction at Sarah Lawrence College in midlife. Working with the authors and writers there was the best experience. I was a journalist and editor for 20 years and thought creative writing might be a relatively easy transition. But I struggled to realize it's a whole other medium. Or, as one of my mentors, the esteemed Jo Ann Beard said to me, "Melisse, it's art."

Name

Melisse Gelula

Vocation


founder (Memoiring), memoirist, journalist


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