On the value of taking your time



Writer Sanam Mahloudji discusses the time it takes to make art, balancing humor and pain, and finding creative freedom

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As told to Janet Frishberg, 2476 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, Process, Success, Focus, Mental health, Identity.

This book started as a short story, right? I'm curious how a short story writer ends up writing her first novel.

Yes, I wrote a short story called "Auntie Shirin," which was published in McSweeney's in 2018. The story is about an Iranian family, and it was the first time that I'd seriously tried to write about people from my culture, about Iranians. I'd been hesitant about doing that for years.

Before then, if I was writing a short story, there'd be a character in my head or a line of dialogue or a situation and I'd just follow that little piece of inspiration as far as I could. That didn't really involve my cultural history or background, and that wasn't why I'd initially gotten interested in writing fiction.

I was actually working as a lawyer and I took a fiction writing class, a one-day class, and I remember that in that class, I was shaking in my seat because I was being given this permission. I thought to myself, "I can write anything I want. Anything. Anything!" It just felt so freeing and like nothing I'd ever felt before in my life. So to me, having that kind of limitless possibility in the subject matter was really important. Focusing on what was closest to me, in terms of family background or culture, at that time it might have felt more constraining. It just wasn't appealing to me.

So I was writing short stories for a number of years. Then, with this story, I think what was different about it for me, and why it ended up later becoming my novel, *The Persians*, is that these characters were formed to me in a way that characters hadn't been before. I think it was because I let them be from my background and so I had all these ideas. I was just getting to know them, but I felt very strongly that I wanted to know everything about them. I wanted to know why they were the way they were, what happened to them, what their problems were. I had this level of care for them or curiosity that just kind of burst open a bubble, where I felt like, "There's so much there. There's so many directions I can go with this." It felt extremely exciting.

Writing for me was such a lifeline from the career track that I'd always been on, between work and school, work, school, work, school, and always having a very concrete goal. I think what attracted me to short stories was that it felt like it wasn't a career choice. I was following my artistic passion. That's why I didn't go into writing thinking, "Well, I'd like to be a novelist." Because that would've felt like I was just going from one career choice to another, and that would've cut off my feeling of infiniteness at what was available to me at the time.

I'm curious how that's affecting you now that you *are* a novelist. I don't know if you've started working on your next project yet, but do you still feel that sense of limitlessness, or how are you holding it?

That's a really good question. I'm finding that a bit challenging at the moment, I have to say. The book just came out in the UK, it's coming out in the US, and it's been a really exciting time, but it's also had its stresses. It's extremely activating. For me, it hasn't been very conducive to writing fiction and being creative.

That’s where I really want to be. That’s what I want to be doing, I want to be back in that place. I’m yearning for that feeling again.

I know there are some writers who seem able to do both at the same time, the promotion and the writing. I think I need to work on walls of protection for myself. Maybe as a first time novelist I haven’t quite figured out how to do that. I’ve been falling into kind of the opposite of having those walls of protection for myself, as I Google the book’s Amazon reviews, for instance. Which is not helpful for having that kind of calm mind or infinite expansiveness that I think you need to feel when you’re writing.

Yeah, you’ve been feeling very porous during the publishing process.

Exactly. I haven’t been someone who’s not read her official reviews. So far, I’ve had a few reviews over in the UK, and I felt very grateful about them. I felt like, “Okay, someone out there is seeing what I’m doing and they get what I’m trying to do.” That has helped me. I kind of hate that I have to rely on another person’s opinion to create that, but that’s just how it is right now.

I really wonder about this. Because…isn’t the whole point of publishing books, to feel received by people in the work? Like, as an artist, I’m sure you got a lot just from writing it, but then you decided you wanted to share it by publishing it. And the reason you wanted to share it was you wanted it to be received by people who understood what you were trying to do, so of course that feels good when it actually happens.

No, you’re absolutely right. I would just be writing and putting things in my desk drawer if I wasn’t interested in communicating to other people. But I do think there is a healthy kind of distance that one can create between, “This is my work and this is me and I’m not my work.”

That makes sense. One thing I’ve noticed in both your stories and your novel is this distinctive emotional tone. You strike this balance where your work has genuine feeling and poignancy, but it’s never overwrought or purely melancholic. Instead, there’s often this interplay between humor, intelligence, and emotional depth—it’s not just ironic or detached. Is that emotional balance something you consciously cultivate during your writing process, or does it emerge naturally? Do you find yourself editing toward a particular emotional tone?

In a way, I use humor in my writing as my way of painting pain, my way of expressing pain. I think some people have a need to make jokes about the world we’re in and our lives and our feelings. I’m in that category, because I think that life is really funny. People are funny and life is funny. It’s also really sad and things are really hard. So I think I have these two feelings about life that you might think would be very separate, but I think that they’re really tied together.

When I started seriously writing fiction was right around the time that my dad died very suddenly, and I very clearly saw that there were these two ways of living at the same time. I had my actual life that felt very sad and I was in grief and confused and almost paralyzed by what was happening around me, and then I had this other life that I could go into and write fiction. It felt like somewhat of a relief to be able to go into another world where I could find funny things, even about really sad things, because I do think that crying and feeling your feelings is really important. I think humor goes along with pain, and I feel like they’re twins together, in a way, for me and in my writing.

I totally agree. If there’s a short story writer who’s reading this, and they’re like, “I want to write a novel, but I really don’t feel like I can or know how,” what would you tell them?

I was going into it not knowing what would happen, and I think maybe that’s the exciting and frightening thing about writing a novel. Compared to a short story, where you have maybe 15 pages to figure something out, with this, it could be as many pages as you want really.

I do remember at times thinking, “Wow, am I writing a novel?” Not fully understanding what it was. And maybe that was helpful. There was this feeling of, “I’m here just playing. I’m here just figuring it out. I don’t know what

will become of it.” I honestly didn’t write this thinking that anybody would read it. That gave me energy. I was just following what I thought was interesting.

All of your short stories that I remember reading are either set in California or feature characters that connect to California in some way. It strikes me that you moved away from California to London, and then you started working on this book that’s about more than just the California part of your identity. Do you think that being in another country, a new country to you, had anything to do with writing the book?

That’s interesting, about California. I’ve spent the majority of my life in LA. I think distance and absence are important to the way creativity works for me. Being at a distance from LA, from California, from the United States, I felt like it leveled things for me, where now I’m in a neutral place, London. I’m not in Iran, I’m not in the United States, I’m kind of far from my biological family. It felt like I was safe to explore these topics.

I love California and I love LA, but there are expectations around it for me, having grown up there. Living here feels more aligned to being a writer. I’m sitting here observing and I’m on the outside. People don’t completely understand what I’m about, why I’m here, and I can just do my thing.

People read a lot here, and there are mostly independent bookstores in every neighborhood, so it’s very much a reading culture, which is really nice, but it feels apart from any kind of celebrity culture or Hollywood. It’s not like, “Oh, you wrote a book. Is it going to be a movie? Has it been optioned?”

I think it’s really nice to have artist friends, but when it starts to feel like it’s a business, that aspect of it really turns me off. Nobody really cares what I’m up to here. And honestly, the people that do are mostly readers, they’re people that really care about books.

That’s so nice. I’m curious if you’ve had to work through any internal thoughts of: “This is taking me too long,” or, “I should have already had a book out by this point.” Because we met in 2012, at the Community of Writers in Tahoe, and I think you’d already been writing consistently for a couple years at that point. Now it’s 2025 and your novel is coming out.

Actually when you were saying that, I was thinking, “Oh, 15 years, that’s not that bad.” From the first moment that I took writing seriously, and thought, “Oh, maybe I’d like to do this,” to then having a book come out, I think that’s actually pretty good! 15 years is not that long. And I feel like it just has to take what it takes, in a way.

Sure, sometimes I feel I would’ve loved it if I had been writing fiction straight out of college. That would’ve been great because maybe I’d be on my second or third book now. But you never know. And I don’t want to tempt fate with those thoughts.

I think it needs to take whatever time it takes. We’re all here for a limited amount of time, so that’s maybe where some of that feeling anxious about time comes from. What I see with writers is that there are some writers who will write a book every year. There are other writers who take 10 years to write a book. And I don’t know if writing a book every year is the way to go for me personally. Art takes time. That makes it different from a lot of the world and the culture around us.

I don’t think being younger actually is an advantage to writing. I think having some maturity and wisdom is really helpful for writing fiction or writing anything, really. I don’t think a 19 or 25-year-old brain is one that necessarily has an advantage over someone who’s lived more years.

I feel proud that I’m not 20 or 25. I’m not a young ingenue. You don’t need to be that. And feeling like you do is a view that puts one kind of a life experience at an advantage—the person that early on, say, had that encouragement to be a writer, and had a family and culture that encouraged that. It takes a lot to break out from what is a more conventional life path, of not having a lot of support and backing for that dream.

If you'd asked me even a year or so before I started writing fiction, "Do you think you might be a writer in the future?" I would've never guessed that. It was something that I liked to do as a kid, but it never occurred to me that it was something I could actually do with my life. I'm being mean to myself when I start to think in terms of, "Am I taking too long? Is it too late?"

I don't want to be mean to myself. I much prefer thinking, "Actually, 15 years is nothing and now I have a book." And that's a dream come true, really. And if I can write another one and that can come out too, that's just another dream come true.

Sanam Mahloudji recommends:

Good luck charms to take along while traveling: I have a few random stones I like to put in my bag and they protect me because I think they protect me.

Stuff for relaxing: Magnesium and zinc supplements before bed. Pulse point calming essential oils. Ear plugs. Guzzling very cold kombucha when it's hot. Rewatching old TV shows like "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (it's weirdly, not surprisingly comforting on the recent-past-Hellmouth). Saunas (pronounced s-ow-na). Writing tasks down in a physical planner and crossing them off (I like the Hobonichi Techo 2025 Cousin).

Live music: See the band Habibi if they are playing near you. I was the silly idiot shining my flashlight when meaning to take a video and responding loudly to their audience questions and dancing energetically, but I loved every minute of it.

Books that are funny, smart, and so sad all at once: *Eurotrash* by Christian Kracht is a good example and I am reading it right now.

Letting a loved one change your Instagram password: it's always warranted.

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Vocation
Writer