

On art as the start of a conversation



Writer Sarah LaBrie discusses the limits of trauma narrative, the internet as temporary, and letting love happen.

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As told to Lindsay Lerman, 3787 words.

Tags: Writing, Identity, Process, Money, Success, Inspiration.

I'm struck by the way your book is refusing certain standard ideas about what a memoir can be, or what a "trauma narrative" can be. It's really pushing against conventions. I'm wondering how consciously you did that and how you feel about that.

I read a lot of memoirs. I've read them habitually my whole life. And one thing I found myself reacting against often was narratives that started when the writer was a child, then dug into this deep, traumatic childhood and stayed there for too long. I don't always feel like very young children have narrative agency when it comes to trauma memoirs. It was very important to me to never have the reader be in a moment where there wasn't real conflict as opposed to [watching] a kid have all these terrible things happen to them while their parents control their lives. There's no story there. So it was important to me to not do that. I also never wanted to feel like I was in a position where I was boring myself just to get information across.

So anytime I started to feel bored, I just got out of that section of the story and moved into a different one. And I did have an amazing editor. She's also a poetry editor. Her name is Jenny Xu. She acquired the book. I was her first acquisition, and she was really open to unconventional structure. She helped me break it and make it new. She took a line from the book where I talk about understanding my mom in layers and not in terms of puzzle pieces fitting together, and she was like, what if that was how we put the book together? What if it's written in layers of understanding as opposed to that more common structure of, you know, childhood and then looking back at childhood?

I love that. And I loved the way you treated your mother. I wonder how readers are going to respond to the way you've written your mother and the way you treat her in the book. Obviously, it's not easy material to write about, and it's hard material to read, too, probably for lots of people. But as someone who has known and loved people who are very unstable and unwell, I've always been really frustrated by the way people will reduce someone to "just" their insanity. There's always so much more to a person. And I also know that sometimes it's the madman, the madwoman who's the only truth teller. But I really loved the way...

I think I lost you...

[At this point, Sarah's connection dropped. She signed back on a moment later.]

Hi! In *The Arcades Project*, there's this whole section where Benjamin would talk about how he was dogged by bad luck his whole life and how there was this little demon that was causing it. And I feel like that's happening to me now with all of my technology. Nothing will hold a charge. I took my laptop to the Apple Store and they couldn't fix it. Now I'm about to go to New York for two weeks and it looks like I'm going to have a non-

functional laptop.

Oh no. Maybe you can ask your little demon—or maybe you can have a little angel, not a little demon? Ask your little angel to work on the connection for you.

I do feel like the world is a projection of what's happening to you internally. And I'm sure I'm repressing so much stress about my book that it's just coming out in other ways.

I feel that. And the thing I was building toward when your laptop lost its charge is that I was really touched by your portrait of your mother as a very full human being. How are you feeling about that aspect of the book?

I thought about that a lot. There's this line in the book where I'm quoting Freud—I'll just paraphrase. He's sort of like "all of mankind is plagued by delusions that may or may not be real." And that really resonated with me because I'm vegan, and if you are a vegan talking to people who are otherwise completely ethical and even extremely progressive, and you bring up veganism, the kind of cognitive dissonance around talking about Big Ag and child labor in slaughterhouses and impoverished communities poisoned by toxic runoff from pig farms, is just crazy. Everybody just shuts down. So my question has always been, how is that any different? The delusions my most progressive friends have when it comes to the direct correlation between climate change and factory farming and my mom's delusion that she lives in Ethiopia and has a husband there? They're equally psychotic. But one delusion is accepted culturally, and one is not. I mean, I'm also not saying I'm fully sane. Nobody I know is fully sane. It's just that there's a collectively agreed upon conception of reality that more of us share than not and my mom's conception of reality was not a part of that. But for her, her imagined life was real, and I knew that it was real.

Have you tried to anticipate readers' reactions? Or to prepare or protect your mother in some way?

I don't think she'll ever read it. I don't think she can. I mean, even at her best, she never really understood how to use the Internet, and now she's living in a group home and she doesn't have or want a phone there. I told her about the book. And I told her when I was talking to her for the book. But I don't know that it matters, given everything. Even though she's medicated and in treatment, she's not 100% functional and I don't know that she will be.

As for other readers, I started this book in 2017 and I sold it in 2021. So that's what, like 7 years at this point? I've gotten feedback from everybody involved in the editing, publication, and production processes. And it happened more often than not that readers would tell me they also have a mentally ill loved one or they've experienced severe mental illness themselves. I definitely don't get the sense that anyone is judging my mother or looking down on her. It seems like people are happy to have the language to have this conversation, and that's something she's providing and that her story is providing, and I feel like that's important.

Absolutely. And that's beautiful, too. It's a real way you can give the world a gift through a book.

I have an MFA in fiction from NYU, right? And I was working there with Jonathan Safran Foer and Zadie Smith and all these huge names that, when I was growing up, I was like, "These people are gods," right? "That's what literature is."

I thought that that was gonna be my path. I was trying to write stories for *The New Yorker* and the *Paris Review*. And I was gonna live in Brooklyn and do that whole thing. But I don't know, that feels a little bit pointless to me right now in this moment. It feels like maybe right now, we need to be engaged with and in conversation with readers, and we need to do that because it just sort of feels like art is dying.

Maybe now we need a sense of collective understanding and community. It's a conversation for me. You know what I mean? I want people to read this book and reach out to me and talk to me about it. I think I used to think of artists as needing to exist at a kind of remove from the world, but I don't think I feel that way anymore. And I definitely don't want to live like that.

I think it's actually a great time to be an artist and there's so much exciting writing happening. It's just that there's not much attention being paid to it because our attention is very actively, intentionally diverted—sent elsewhere. But I do think it's an incredible time to be a writer and to be reachable. I'm moved every single time I see something in my inbox and someone is saying your book really did something for me, it broke something open for me, it frustrated me. Whatever they have to say, I can feel when it's real and urgent and they connected with it on a deep level. And every time, I realize this is so much more important than anything else, because everything else comes and goes so quickly. We keep seeing the content of an entire site wiped out in one day and so, ok, maybe that was really important for somebody's career to get something on there and maybe that really boosted them in the moment, but then it's completely gone.

Yeah, I think capital destroys everything. And that's what's happened to the Internet. It's just fracturing and shattering everything that made us who we are as writers. The only way I can figure out how to push back against that is to have real life connections and hopefully that's what this book can do. There are silent reading clubs in LA now—people go to bars and read together. I try to go to events. I'm a librettist and I work in opera and I make these ephemeral shows where people have to come and sit in person. And of course opera feels obsolete, but I don't know that it's going to be obsolete for much longer. Everyone's being inundated with information online constantly, and at a certain point it just becomes nonsense and you just want to go outside and talk to somebody.

Totally. I really think the book is such a durable technology. In some ways it's a much more durable and even elegant technology than any computer ever could be. Like, it's just it's beautiful little packet of information. I think in the long run, all of this is going to be fine. I think film will be fine too. I really really hope, because it's also one of my favorite art forms. This is a dark night to walk through and we have to keep holding these torches. We're doing our best.

The thing I always think is that in 10,000 years of human civilization as we know it, the Internet's only been around for a couple of nanoseconds, comparatively. I think sometimes we get so tied up in the sense that we're all just going to ascend to this digital nothing and everything's gonna disappear. But it's not true because we have physical bodies and we exist in the world. The cloud is what's temporary. We're still gonna be here.

This really speaks to your invocation of *The Arcades Project*. It's part of this deep appreciation for the ephemera, that's actually not ephemeral.

I love that you said that because I always think about how [in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin] is writing analytically about pieces of what are basically garbage. He's talking about fashion and clothing that's gone out of style and objects and images and the outdated associations they hold. He's showing us how they hold time. Because we look at them and we're simultaneously in the past and in the present and that's how we're able to conceive of the past. Because we are experiencing that object right now in the present while constantly moving forward, but those objects and their associations are pulling us back. It's like that Paul Klee painting, right, of the *Angel of History*? That famous metaphor Benjamin wrote about all this catastrophic stuff building up, and the Angel trying to go back and stop it, but being shoved forward by it instead. because that catastrophic stuff is history. It's human civilization. It's us. That's what it feels like. It feels like we're in that storm right now, and that will never not be true. That will never not be relevant.

I marked this page in your book, when you're taking aim at the way so much contemporary literature is written by—I think what you say is the delicate, fragile children of aristocrats? Do you want to get into that?

Yeah, I mean, I went to Brown and I went to St. John's [a private school in Houston]. I've gone to these fancy schools and been around that kind of money for my entire life, and I don't know what to say about it, you know, because obviously it doesn't necessarily matter who your parents are. People can come from anything and make incredible art. But I do think maybe it's something that's worth acknowledging.

The playing field is definitely not level and it's not fair and nothing's fair and you have to work from where you start. That's fine. But I think at that moment in the book I was feeling incredibly frustrated because my mom was so sick and I was doing a reading at an art gallery and I just started to feel like what is this for? Who is this for? What are we even doing here?

I was talking to a good friend, Steph Cha, who's an incredible novelist. We were talking about that *New York Times* list of the best hundred books in the past century, and we were both like, hmm, it's weird that both of us have heard of every single book on this list. Yeah, we're well-read, but, I mean, if someone on the selection committee for that list wanted to put a book on there that had only had six Goodreads reviews, or zero, other people [voting on the books] aren't going to have read it and so aren't going to vote for it, so there's no way it could ever appear. It's obvious these huge corporate marketing forces are collaborating to determine literary taste. You can't say anything more obvious than that, but we kind of pretend like it's not true.

That's the part that drives me a little bit crazy. The collective pretending. Because if you're in the writing world, you know it's not level, and you know everyone else knows, and everyone is polite and doesn't say anything about it for the most part, but everyone else outside of the writing world has no idea whatsoever. Like, they think that if something shows up on the *New York Times* bestsellers list, it's because of the numbers alone, that it's all transparent.

Yeah. I mean, I grew up reading the *New York Times Book Review* because my grandmother subscribed to it in Houston. She was my cultural arbiter because she traveled everywhere. And I remember I used to read it in the bathtub, and I would feel like, "One day. You know? My byline'll be in there." It wasn't until I left Texas and went to Brown that I realized, "Oh, all these people's parents work for NPR. And they all have enough money to leave college for a year and intern in New York." And it's not that I was poor. I had support, too. But you realize, "Wow, none of this is democratic." At all. Which, okay, fine. But maybe use your powers in a less self-indulgent way is something I would say. This is something I really am wrestling with because I love fiction. Literary fiction is my life. It's everything. But sometimes I just want to say, it's not the '90s anymore. It's not the mid 2000s. We are in a catastrophic situation. We've got to stop pretending like that's not the case.

And I don't know what role fiction plays in it, but it's something I would like to see talked about in a more honest way.

I also don't know what role fiction plays in addressing catastrophe, but I do have a strong sense that it plays a more important role than we're led to believe. I've worked in education, I've taught classrooms full of kids and I know that AI cannot help them understand the world like a story can. Like, we think it's solving a problem to put a Smartboard in a classroom full of children who are actually hungry for ideas. And when you have a lot of factors in their lives preventing them from being able to focus at school, the tech just doesn't do shit for them. It really doesn't. What they need is an adult who cares about them and who says you're safe here. You can read whatever you want to read and talk to me about whatever you want to talk to me about. There's nothing that technology can do to improve that. In fact, it just gets in the way over and over and over.

But it's making the richest people in the world richer, and that is something where I do feel like what is happening in terms of education and literacy is happening on purpose, because you can't put an ad inside a novel. And so there's no use for it.

So much money is being funneled to the top where people have no use for books. That what's terrifying to me. We're just letting it go. We're just letting it disappear. Not to victim blame, but like, I don't know.

Well, we're still writing books, right? And we're still writing the books we want to write. Like you said, you wrote the book you wanted to write. I'm writing the books I want to write, and I'm going to keep doing that. I had this realization a couple of years ago. I was like, "Oh fuck, if I abandon the playing field to the people who are, like, natural born killers or very wealthy, then what's going to happen? It's time for me to get in there." And that's not a natural or easy thing for me. But I feel like it's just essential. That means I'm going to write in a way that speaks to the collective or that taps into the collective unconscious. And if I'm going to take myself seriously as a storyteller in the Benjaminian sense, then I'm going to really pay attention to the fact that we are just these fragile human beings in a force field of torrents and bombs.

We have to tell stories, and we have to tell them in the best possible way we can, in our moment in history. And so I was like, OK, fine. I'll serve the gods of literature in whatever way I need to, even if that means that I produce something that I couldn't imagine myself producing 10 years ago. But that's good. I have to change. We

have to change.

I love that. Yeah. Then maybe that's what our social responsibility is, because I definitely don't think it's our responsibility as writers to show people what's right. I don't know that what I'm talking about is even a political responsibility. It's not. It's to keep writing and to write well and to be true to whatever that invisible dream force is that drives you to do it is, as opposed to the one that says, make as much money as you can and then die.

What hasn't been asked yet, about this book, about you as a writer?

One thing that hasn't really come up is, well, I feel like it's very clear in this book that I'm not better. You know? I'm still broken. What happened to me as a kid and the things that happened to my mom and the things that happened to my grandmother and the things that happened to my great grandmother...writing this book about all that for me was not an act of catharsis. And I'm not saying there would be anything wrong with that if that was the case. But I went to therapy to get therapy. I wrote the book to write a book because I am a writer. It's a story I wanted to tell. It's for other people.

But I do think one thing I learned from writing it that maybe would be helpful to share is just that all the therapy in the world and all the medication in the world is nothing compared to allowing yourself to be loved by other people and loving other people. The reason I'm alive and functional and able to write at all—even through my mom's abuse and her schizophrenia diagnosis and my anxiety that I was going to inherit her disorder—is because I have incredible friends. I have an amazing husband. And I allowed that to happen. I think sometimes there's such a focus on the self when it comes to mental health and self-care. But, in the book, I quote this book by Dan Siegel called *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human*, about how the mind is not your brain. It's everything your being interacts with. There's a German word for it, right?

Maybe *umwelt*.

Yeah, so, it's your immediate environment and how you perceive it and that's influenced by the people you love. The people in your house. Your neighborhood. Your community. It's the world. I sometimes think it's very easy to be introspective about these topics, but maybe it's really a question of looking outwards and seeing what you can do for other people and what you can allow them to do for you.

I really love that about the book. It beautifully resists an easy redemptive narrative arc, which I respect. But at the same time, by the end, it's really clear—I can't think of a less cheesy way to put it—that you begin to let love heal you. Which is all we can do ultimately.

Yeah, just tapping into that. I do ketamine therapy in the book, and one thing I came out of that fully understanding is that the universe loves us and is happy we are here. It wants us to observe it and to experience it joyfully. I try to remind myself of that every day, and I find that to be a kind of salvation, always, in the face of everything.

Sarah LaBrie Recommends:

Fostering a Husky or any kind of dog

The book *The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield

The film *Cadejo Blanco* dir. by Justin Lerner now streaming everywhere

Lydi Conklin's short story collection *Rainbow, Rainbow* and their upcoming book, *Songs of No Provenance*

Detroiters on Netflix

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