On not filling in what’s missi

Writer Souvankham Thammavongsa discusses writing the ugly draft, working outside of expectations, and the power of restraint and absence in art.

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As told to Jancie Creaney, 2700 words.

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When creating something, I spend a lot of time not knowing how it’s going to come together, if at all. It always seems like a miracle when it does. Do you experience that when you’re writing and have you found ways of approaching that not-knowing period?

All the time. I don’t like to know. I just jump into it and then I discover. Right up to the end of the project, I still don’t know. It’s so important, I think, to teach yourself and the people who are reading you not to know and to sit in that not knowing. For example, in the novel, *Pick a Color*, [the narrator] has a missing finger and I never explain what happened, why she has a missing finger. I think not knowing makes the character far more interesting than if we knew.

I don’t plot out what I do. Plot is not important to me. It’s not about what happens in the things that I write. The event that I’m talking about has usually already happened or possibly will happen, but it’s never about what happened. I think as a reader and as a writer, I like that beautiful moment, that you describe as a miracle, that something is happening here that I am not creating, but also the reader is not making, and yet we arrive at this moment together and we’ve made something and we don’t know how it happened and it’s so magical. I love sitting in that magic and taking it in and not asking, “How does it all happen? How did we come to this?”

I read that it took you six weeks to write the first draft. It made me wonder how you work. Your writing is so precise and bare. Are you very careful in a first draft or are you writing with more abandon?

I just write whatever comes to mind, and I tell myself that nobody is going to see this. Just get it all down. That first draft that I did in six weeks, I wouldn’t even call that a first draft. I would call it the ugly draft, the draft that you arrive at before you call it a first draft. And everything is wrong with it. There’s no clear idea of voice or character. I’m just in there trying to find the feeling, like what do I want this work to feel like when I get it done? And to see the material that I’m interested in.

I know how to shape. I know how to find the interesting. I know how to move people through scenes. I know how to make entrances and exits. I know how to make a symbol important. I know all of that, but when I’m writing the ugly draft, I don’t care. I just go in there and really try to find the feeling of the work. And then through subsequent drafts, I shape it in a way that’s clearer to the feeling that I wrote in the ugly draft.

Do you tackle it chapter by chapter?

For *Pick a Color*, what I did very early on was I wrote the first sentence of every chapter first, and then I filled it in. It was very much like a poem, where each line became a chapter in the novel, and then I filled it in. When I went to work on that chapter, I knew where I wanted to start and how I might take myself to the next chapter.

So, you set the tone, and then try to reenter the feeling from that space.

I didn't know how to write a novel, and I felt I was totally in over my head. But then I said to myself, "Well, you know how to write a poem and you've been doing this for 25 years, so let's use what you know however little that is, and let's see how it might work here."

I wanted to ask about a conversation from 2022 between Sheila Heti and you. That video, I've watched it many times actually.

Oh, really?

Yeah.

I mean, I was so hard on myself because I'm such a big fan of Sheila Heti. I didn't feel like I did a great job. She was amazing. So, to hear that the interview is meaningful to you really changes how I think of myself, that maybe I was too hard.

I've returned to that conversation because, despite the two of you having written many books, and gone through the process many times, you talk a lot about the presence of fear and doubt. It reminds me those feelings never go away, and to not give them much weight.

Yeah, those feelings. Even when the book is published, it's on the shelves and people are talking about it, I think of a sentence or a chapter and wonder, "Did I make the right decision?" Even before I give a public reading, some people will notice, "Did you change that?" I do go in and I'm still editing, refining one line, because sometimes work looks great on the page, but when you read it out loud, it doesn't come across as clearly. For example, if someone says, "We want you to read for five minutes." And my selection doesn't work in five minutes, I have to rewrite it with the container of five minutes. So I go into the work and I write what I need to write. I take in mind the fact that they're only going to hear this. A work has to work when that's all that they have to take it in, just the sound.

You ask Sheila Heti how, after so many books, she continues to "care and to find the interesting." She doesn't think *you*, as the writer you are, need to ask that question. "I'm so afraid of losing it," you say. So I wanted to ask, now, are you still afraid of losing that, or has the fear shifted to something else?

I still really am. I'm so afraid that when I get up in a morning, I won't want to sit in front of the work and keep working at it. I'm afraid that I'm going to lose the love that I have for the thing I want to do my whole life.

Some of it has shifted now, and I hate this about myself, in that when I see writers coming out with their first book, and they're so excited to have their very first book, and they're posting about their covers. You'd think seven books in, why would I be jealous? It feels awful to feel this, but I know that I will never get to experience that again. I won't get to experience what it is like to have your first book and what it is like to share your very first cover.

I think I feel grief because when I was at that stage, I didn't take the time to enjoy it. When my first book came out, I was thinking of my seventh and my tenth, how to get there. So I didn't take the moment to say, "Wow, this is really amazing." I didn't sit in that feeling of joy because I was always thinking of the next thing.

When your first book came out, did it seem like something impossible that happened?

My first book was a poetry book, and I always knew that I was going to write a book. It wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when. I knew it would happen. And then when it did, I just thought of the tenth book, when really I should have just appreciated that for many people getting to that stage is actually a really big dream and for some others, it's actually impossible.

As a reader of your work, I can always tell that it's your voice and your eye and your sensibility. No matter if I'm reading a poem or a paragraph in your novel. You've said you're a writer of absence, which I see as the connecting thread. How did you come to understand your work this way?

I came to see it this way when I had really difficult conversations with editors. Every time I'd get edited, I would be asked a lot of questions like, "Why isn't this there?" Or they'd ask me to write in a way that would fill in that absence. Of course I can do it, and then when I do, the work looks so awful. And we just go back to how I had it on the page, and I realized I am a writer of absence, and it doesn't even have to be intentional. It could just be a gesture towards that absence.

In my first book, *Small Arguments*, I'm talking about the small. Because I lean so heavily on the idea of the small, grasshoppers, worms, little fruits and insects, what you actually feel is the idea of big. You can only understand so closely what I'm doing with small things if in your mind, you automatically think of big things.

My second book is a book about something that was found. But the whole time, even though I'm leaning heavily on what I found, which is my father's scrapbook from when we were living in a refugee camp, you think about what I lost. It's the same with my book, *Light*. Every poem in that book is about the word light. Not just it's visual meaning, but light in weight and tone. You think about its opposite, which is the dark in tone. Every time I'm doing something, there's something underneath it that is absent. And that absence, even though I'm not writing of that absence, because I lean so heavily on what I'm doing, it is absence. You feel that it exists.

Those examples were my poetry books. But now that I'm thinking of *Pick a Color*, the absence of the English language in that novel is its trick. It is written in the English language, but it asks you to pretend that the English language in front of you is not there. The way that I choose to show direct speech and indirect speech is really important in that novel. We hear English only twice. And when we do, it's only the words "yoo-hoo" and "whoa-whoa." That absence is how power works.

It's the same with the humor in that novel. To a lot of people, that book isn't funny. It's not funny when you realize that the power you think you have is not there. We have this idea of a nail salon worker, that she is powerless, that she hates her job, and that she is sad about having to go to work and work on people's feet and toes. The first sentence, which is, "Everybody is ugly," shifts the power dynamic. The narrator is suddenly telling us that she has the power to decide what beauty is. For people who are often in a position where they decide who has currency and who has power, when you enter the book, you suddenly are made to feel like you're not the one in power anymore. To see it come from someone that you assume has no power, has no joy, really shifts your idea of where you think power is located.

In *Pick a Color*, the narrator is someone who is considered invisible in general society, someone whose voice we don't often hear or are able to see think. Anytime we've seen a person think on the page, it's someone really educated, like a professor, an artist, a philosopher. And in that novel, it's somebody who does physical labor and is thinking too. She's considering those same questions. "Why are we here? What do we love? Why do we love it? And how do I get to the next hour, to the next minute, to the next day? How do I live in that moment?"

I feel writers like me are asked to write in a very specific way. We are often asked to serve or to answer the question, "Where are you from?" When you do that, your artistic field becomes very, very narrow. I wanted to write a book that exists differently artistically. I don't answer the question, "Where are you from?" I don't give a historical lesson about where I'm from as an author, or as the character that I created, because I think historians can do that. I don't have to write an epic that spans generations, continents, time. It could take place in a very tiny moment, and it could exist in that tiny space I've given it.

So in terms of the form of the novel and the artistic choices I made, not that it's entirely absent, but it's a very small field that you see someone like me writing in that form. Yes, my characters have accents, but I don't perform that accent on the page. I make people who often are not seen as other feel like other. That is really absent in literature.

It makes me think too how it can be threatening when someone else can see more, see deeper into the ordinary—like

grasshoppers, or a single day in a nail salon. It disrupts how you relate to the quality of your own awareness.

For sure. We're expected to read a certain way. When we encounter something that feels different, that we can't predict, it can be uncomfortable. When you work outside of expectations and it's good, it throws off the idea of what good is, and to have to rethink what good is is hard work. When we create work that is different aesthetically or that we don't encounter often, the quick and easiest thing to do is to dismiss it.

I first encountered your writing on the Guggenheim's website, in a video recording of a poetry reading dedicated to Agnes Martin. There's a clear resonance between your writing and the paintings of Martin, in their subtlety and delicacy and their attention to what is almost invisible. I have a friend who's a painter who tells me her work is often described as restrained, which I thought was a nice word to use. Is restraint something you consider?

I think restraint is the right word to describe it, but to go into it more, I would say Agnes Martin's material is very tiny. It's really just the color white. That is all she was working in. But she can do so much with it, an entire lifetime of work. I think that's beautiful, the way that she's able to work with such a small set of material. Yet when you're looking at her work, you're not bound by that material. You don't feel like she's missing anything or that she's left anything out by not using red or blue or brown or yellow.

When I was younger, I had gone to a lecture on music, specifically the sonata. The person who was talking said that in the sonata, you're given just a few notes, and what you do with those few notes becomes the work. The material is tiny, but its power is what you do if you compare and contrast, how you variate that, those small sets of sounds, how you orchestrate it, how you arrange it.

In my writing all the work is done with material we don't give much attention or beauty to. The decisions that I make to use: "it," "that," "this," "here," "there—those kinds of words are not considered stars in a sentence, but they hold the sentence together. When I choose those words, that's the word that makes the sentence beautiful. Those are the words that make the sentence precise. Those are the words that lift everything around it.

Souvankham Thammavongsa recommends:

"Floating" in *The New Yorker*

Wear a wristwatch

Horses Atelier

My mom's cooking

Peanut M&Ms

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