

On being true to yourself in the work you do



Actor, writer, and DJ Sasha Grey discusses finding work/life balance, moving past failure, and not being afraid to make what you want to make.

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As told to Elle Nash, 3410 words.

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When did you decide that you wanted to write? Did you always write, or did you just sit down one day and think, "I'm going to start and finish a book, and then I'm going to do it two more times?"

Writing is probably my first love. If I could do nothing else and survive, it would be that or photography if I could actually make a choice. I've been writing since I was a kid, and it's the first thing that interested me that wasn't influenced by my older siblings, or by my friends, or even by my teachers. It was just something I naturally gravitated towards. It is something I've always loved to do.

How did you teach yourself about writing, did you take any classes?

Throughout all my collaborations, I've worked with my friend and mentor [Anthony D'Juan](#). He has been my rock, my pillar. Every screenplay I've worked on, we've worked on together. And actually as a result of publishing my book, I was hired to write a screenplay, which was really cool. So, it all came full circle.

How did you get started on your book series, *The Juliette Society*?

My goal, and what I was trying to do during that time period when I started the first book of *The Juliette Society*, I was trying to sell scripts. I don't always like to talk about what I'm doing as I'm doing it, because I don't like getting people's hopes up. The world doesn't see all your failure. Well, they see some people. Some people just like to share it all. I'm not that way, and I've learned that I'm not wanting to be that way through experience. I've had a lot of failures. I tried many different avenues. Like: "Okay, I'm going to pitch this script, and I want to be involved from day one, and I want to be heavily involved in the process." I've tried selling scripts just to sell them, and let them go, and live out on their own. I've done everything in between in the independent film world.

I had been speaking with an agent that I had. He'd been pursuing me for several years, and he just said, "I think if you write something now, and you pitch something now, that we can make this happen." So I started with the proposal first, and that's actually what allowed me to sell the rights to several different countries before the book was finished. That's very rare. I realize how lucky I was, but culturally, we were at this point where people were coming to me every day asking if I wrote *50 Shades of Grey*.

I feel like you're probably so tired of that pun.

Yes, absolutely. So it was, for me, also a way to say, "Okay, if I can't sell a screenplay, or if I can't do this

now, at least I can still write and do something that I love, and also tell a story that's for my generation—hopefully, to inspire people, especially younger women, with something that is different and not the expected.”

This wasn't, obviously, a romance novel. I was very fortunate in that I was able to get paid and go write this thing. That's something that's very rare, that doesn't happen every day. I loved it, because I was able to just focus on that and not have to chase a thousand different things at once, which I'm so used to doing. Now we're in a whole different space culturally, and things have shifted and changed so much that I don't have that same luxury or benefit to be able to just go sit and write something, and make a living that way. But I'm also very fortunate for what I am able to do.

I was reading *The Juliette Society* and I can definitely tell you are inspired a lot by film, because there's a lot of references and it's this recurring theme. But I want to know about, firstly, what books you love the most—what books you felt most inspired by?

de Sade was a huge influence, but when you are setting a character, especially in contemporary times, that changes a lot. There's a book, *Wetlands*, that I can't recommend enough to people. It's by a German author, Charlotte Roche. I think when I first read it, it was just so refreshing because it's a female author, and she has this way of being so grotesque, and you either appreciate that or you don't. For me, that was just something so new coming from a female writer. She has this great ability to take the weird thoughts we keep to ourselves and put it out there into the world through her characters.

Angela Carter's another one as well. I think she resonates with me because she was discussing eroticism, and what does eroticism mean? She said something along the lines like, “Eroticism is pornography for the elite,” or, “Erotica is pornography for the elite.” You could probably go all throughout America and throughout the world, and you're going to get a different definition from everybody. Those things become quite regional.

It doesn't matter how true you are to your craft or to your art, whether you're a writer or whether you're a visual artist, things will be interpreted differently by different people. Things will be sold and marketed, whether it's by your publisher or your gallerist, in a specific way. We don't, as creators, always have control of that. So as somebody who's existed the majority of my adult public life living in a defensive state, that resonated with me a lot.

Because just of how people interpret it, and where they put you in that?

Yeah, 100%, and just the general concept or disdain a lot of people have for porn when we label porn for what it is—but they can justify enjoying other things. Even if they consume porn, the moment you bring it to the forefront or try to have discussions about it, people change. It feels some days that we're making progress, and other days we're regressing even more than we were 15 years ago.

Any time we're discussing marginalized groups, or let's even say art or culture that is not mainstream, I feel that way. It's so easy to talk about these things on the internet—within our circles, within our bubbles, whether it has to do with sex work, or being sexually empowered. Even leaving the sex work side out of it—being a sexually empowered individual, whether it has to do with gay rights or queer rights, because I also consider myself a part of this marginalized group, or whether it has to do with economic disparities, or whether it has to do with racial disparities, or things like femicide. There's so many issues that we're able to talk about as groups now because of the ability to communicate and join forces. Which is all beautiful. But there's this other part of me where sometimes I get down because I have traveled, and I do travel, and you see that the world is a big place. It doesn't just exist on the internet.

I always feel like I'm on a tightrope when it comes to these things, where there's good days where everything feels balanced, and it feels like we're making progress, and then there are days where I'm like *shit, this is the reality*. Where do we go from here, and how can we make positive changes in the real world, not just online?

How do you, as a person, who has this very public facing persona, make sure that you're still connected to you and that you don't get confused with being what people want versus being true to yourself?

A lot of it is through experience. When I sit back and reflect on my life and my career, who I was, who I've become, I wasn't a child actor, but I just turned 18. And so, I grew up and I've become a woman in the public eye. And that's something very intense to reflect on and intense to also live and exist within this bizarre world that we live in, where it feels everything is 24/7 happening and you have to share everything. I don't share anything that has to do with my personal life for the most part. I've lived through real traumas that I just don't feel safe sharing everything with people. Also, because I am so known, but I don't have the same luxuries of, let's say, somebody who is a mainstream celebrity, or a mainstream actor or musician. A lot of that has to do with economics of your personal safety. I don't have those same luxuries. I've had to figure out ways to protect myself.

These are very anecdotal, brief, examples of things that I think about and live with every day. There are people that really like fame. There are people that do what they do because they really truly enjoy fame. I'm not that person. I'm obviously very selective with what I share. I try to set boundaries and expectations with my community on Twitch. And that's a whole different experience because that's live, that's in real time and I have a para-social relationship with these people.

Setting those expectations with my direct community and knowing that they have been so supportive is really huge. That helps me a lot. I think, most importantly, just not oversharing. Having those two balances without exposing too much is good.

Years ago now, I had this idea for an art piece that I wanted to do. But I'm not a visual artist. I don't do installations, but I wanted to do this art piece that said, "Your life is an ad." There would be a mirror. It was something for spectators to take selfies or photos of themselves in, because I so often open up any social media app, and it feels that way to me when I consume media. Sometimes it just feels so heavy.

With everything that you do project wise, how do you dig deep when you're tired or burnt out?

You know, 2020 was actually okay to me. As difficult as it was, being able to focus on the work was fine with me. It didn't hit me until the end of 2020 where I realized, "Okay, this is really not getting better." I'm very comfortable being alone. I get by just fine. But human beings are social animals and we need that. And I think it's very dangerous when we just lock ourselves inside. And some people have done that before the pandemic.

2021 was really rough. I wasn't sleeping at all. I lost three people in my life. But somehow, I was taking all these really dark moments and somehow I was able to turn them into something positive. In January, I was streaming five days a week. And then at the end of January, I said, "You guys, I'm going to have to take this one day off and stream four days a week." Then on my other two days that were supposed to be off days, I wasn't taking them off. I'm still chasing all these other things I want to do, but in a very unorganized way. I've just found it very difficult to focus on things. I think that is the result of the burnout. Feeling very scattered, unsure of what to do, unable to delegate my time in the way that it needs to be delegated to have a healthy work life balance.

My little mantra lately has been "a little bit every day." I can read for 10 minutes on the bus in the morning. And maybe I can do something after work. But if I'm just too tired, then I'm just going to bed as soon as my kid's asleep.

Yeah, a hundred percent. When I am alone with my thoughts, there's just a vicious circle. I tend to focus on all the negative. I think about, "Man, I want to do all these things and I have all these different projects." Then I get overwhelmed with, "Where do I start?" "Where can I go from here?" "What do I focus on?" When I'm working I'm focused on the positive and that's a boost for my serotonin.

As an "A" type of person I always have to have a project or I'm mentally unwell. Do you ever get success envy? Say someone publishes a book, and you're just like, "I wish I had that book deal." It's not even like you have a book you're writing. But you're the success junkie. One thing I've really been trying to embody lately since I am not working on anything is, turn your jealousy or your bitterness into motivation. How do you deal with it?

I one hundred percent understand. When I published my first book, it was a success before it was even out, in a way. I was very aware at that time that wasn't normal. Sometimes I even have envy at that opportunity that I had, that is now, in my mind, pretty impossible. It's very difficult to find yourself in those situations. When I have friendships or relationships, I take them seriously, but they're not always reciprocated. I've been in a lot of situations where I've been burned by other people. I've seen people run with my ideas. But then I realize I'm wasting my time worrying about other people, and that's not healthy. The more I'm thinking about and worrying about other people, the less I'm working on me. If I find myself doing that, I delete an app from my phone for a week. It needs to be deleted. Don't log in.

Another big challenge for me is I've always been independent. I don't come from family money. I've never depended on a partner. I've always been economically independent. Sometimes that's really stressful. So I have to delineate my time into these chunks where I pursue something that is going to put food on my table and consider how do I also pursue this other thing that's going to be the grind and the hustle, but that I'm very passionate about.

That for me is probably one of my biggest struggles. I'm actually going through it right now. How do I delegate my time in a healthy way and understand and accept that this other thing is going to take time, and it's not going to happen overnight? But it's like you said, just chip away at it. Something that helps me: I don't always have a to-do list, but at the end of the day, I'll write down what I was able to accomplish. And when I do that, I feel way better about my day and about my week. And I realized, "Okay, I was able to do all of this."

How do you know when to fight for something you believe in versus picking your battles?

I usually make that decision when it has to do with my personal safety. I'll typically let go when I feel like I'm in a physically vulnerable situation. When it comes to other situations where I don't feel that my safety is at risk, I'm pretty vocal. Probably sometimes to a fault. I could have had some other opportunities or had things change if I shut up a little bit. I just can't be that way. Also, because in the past, I dealt with ageism so much. I would take advice from people against my instincts because they would convince me they had the experience, they knew better. So I also know there have been times where, had I followed my instinct in what I believed to be right, I would've been in a different situation, in a different position. Through that experience, I probably fight more than I should. But I also sometimes feel like I have less to lose than other people.

Were you always unapologetically yourself or did you have to develop that over time?

I would say I've always been that way with my close circles. Outwardly in larger settings, way more reserved. Then as an adult, I feel like because of going into porn, that put me on an automatic defense. There's nobody. You're sort of fighting on your own. So absolutely, I was unapologetic and I still am. This writer, I did an interview with said that when he wrote this article about me in 2016, he was getting calls and emails complaining because they put me on the cover of LA Weekly. I was getting calls and emails from self-professed feminists asking me why they put a whore on the cover of our magazine.

This was me promoting a DJ tour that I was doing. I'd already been out of the industry for eight years at that point. Knowing that that's the perspective of a lot of people, and also not asking for sympathy, that's part of my pride. I don't need anybody's sympathy. Understanding, maybe, yes, I would like things to change, but definitely being unapologetic. It's a must for me. It's at the core of who I am.

Do you ever feel tired of talking about it? Because I imagine it's the one thing that people come to you that they want to talk to you about all the time.

Yes. Also because like, look, I was in it from 18 to 21.

Yeah. It's such a small part of your life and of everything that you do that I just imagine when people lightning rod to it, it just must be so exhausting.

It's exhausting, and everybody, any great musician where it's like-

That one song.

They hate having to play that one song. I feel that way sometimes because, well, because I was in it for such a short period, but also because, in many ways, I don't feel I have a fresh perspective to offer. I just don't exist in it anymore. I have a target on my back that other people don't have simply because of my choices. I understand that and I accept that. But I also know that I have to make a living and therefore, there are rules I have to conform to. I don't want to go on camera four days a week and talk about my past-what is there to talk about? I don't want to live in the past. I want to live in the present.

Every day, I'll have people say, "Oh, you DJ? You wrote a book? It's those algorithms that don't feed the other things that I'm doing to these people. They only push a specific version of me.

It can be really frustrating. It is such a big part of my identity and who I am. And I'm proud of that. But again, I'm not going to go back into porn. I'm not going to start an OnlyFans. How do I convey these things in a way where I won't be punished for it? It's really frustrating to navigate, especially as an independent creator. That's why I still love photography, because I always felt very uplifted and supported in the arts. Everywhere I've been able to speak or do an exhibition, I felt that support.

Sasha Grey Recommends:

Wash your face and brush your teeth every night, no matter how sleepy you are.

Oyin Whipped Pudding. My favorite lotion for a while now, smells perfect, you can use in your hair as well. It's perfectly moisturizing and doesn't just sit on top of your skin like some body butters.

Lindt dark chocolate 90%. Come to the dark side, I can't live without it.

Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*. You might have heard Kendrick Lamar sampling bits of this in his latest album and there's a reason why.

Clickup. It's helping me organize my life, and as someone who finds it difficult to manage my time, it's helping me get better. I love that it has different layouts available for each person viewing the material, so you're not locked into one format.

Name

Sasha Grey

Vocation

actor, writer, DJ

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Sashay Grey