

Amber Tamblyn on being both an actress and a poet



October 17, 2016 - As a teenager, Amber Tamblyn played the role of Emily Quatermaine on the soap opera *General Hospital*. She went on to star as the title character on *Joan of Arcadia*, has been in a number of films including *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *The Ring*, and *127 Hours*, and has had extended roles on *House* and *Two and a Half Men*. During this entire time period, she was writing poetry. Her first published poem, "Kill Me So Much," appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle when she was 12. Her third collection of poems, *Dark Sparkler*, was published by Harper Collins in 2015.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3474 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Adversity](#), [Beginnings](#).

This discussion took place in front of a live audience at Basilica SoundScape in Hudson, NY, shortly after Amber did a reading from her book, Dark Sparkler, along with some newer poems.

I wanted to talk to you about being a poet, and also an actress, and being weighted with preconceptions where someone will say, "That person's an actress, why are they writing poetry?" Or, "Are they serious about poetry or is this a vanity thing?" When those kind of things come up, is it difficult to stay the course?

Acting requires a certain type of horrific stubbornness, where you push through rejection—I always tell people that I don't act for a living, I just get rejected for a living. That's every actor's experience and you have to be okay with that. To do that for years and years and get certain things here and there, it's a very particular skin-thickening, heart-thickening experience.

In that way, I think jumping into any other artistic medium, you have to have thick skin. At the same time, you have to be good at that craft. You have to look at it and not do the egotistical thing that a lot of actors do, where they go, "Fuck it, I just want to do this." By the way, that's also okay, to go, "Fuck it, I just wanna have a band," or do whatever—put out a pop Christmas album. I really should do that, by the way.

But you need to have a relationship with that art. If you have a relationship with the art, then literally no one's opinion matters, because you will do that thing through any opinion and through any critique. You won't be discouraged if you have a true relationship with that art.

I think that sometimes for actors, too, there's a sense of shaming them. There's a shame in what I do. There's a shame in that it doesn't matter, that it doesn't mean anything, that it doesn't mean as much as the cool band that's playing or the author that wrote a book. There's a sense that it's worth less.

Frankly, that's also because actors get paid a disgusting amount of money that they don't deserve. I would say that for everybody. It's not fair. There are a lot of authors, who I would say, deserve that type of money, like Charles Portis. In that way, there's a sort of shame about it.

At the same time, the overcompensation is to say, "Well, shit, I'm going to start a band," or, "I'm going to write a book," or do something like that. That's also wrong. You can't do that. That's part of the falseness of doing it. That's part of not having a relationship with the art itself.

Most people don't know that I started acting when I was 11. I'm 33 now. I also started writing when I was 11. My father's an artist and an actor as well. I grew up in Los Angeles and Venice around the old Semina Culture movement artists and Beat poets and Jack Hirschman and Michael McClure and Amiri Baraka and Diane di Prima and Wanda Coleman, who's an incredible poet from Los Angeles who passed away last year. That was an endemic experience for me. With or without people's critique, or with or without people's opinion, that was a part of my life.

I made chapbooks when I was a kid. My mom would take me to Kinko's. That was always so fun to me. Any of my girlfriends who have kids that are interested in writing, I always say, "Take them to Kinko's and make their fucking books!" Take them so that they can take it to school and sell it for 25 cents. There's a feeling about having what you've created in front of you. It matters.

That's also a thing I can say about acting that you don't get. A lot because often when you pour your heart into something that you never see, or that that turns out bad, then all you ever hear is how everyone hated it. It's painful.

Filming seems like a slow process. Is there something about poetry, the immediacy of a chapbook, that appeals to you versus this other part of your life where you're on the set forever?

I think that can be part of it. Again, I have said this, acting is only 50% yours. It's painful in that way. In the way that I would imagine some musicians signed to big record labels feel like they don't have control of everything that they do—that hurts and that can be difficult. Again, I can go and pour every ounce of what I think is great about my understanding a character and conveying that in whatever form and at the end of the day, that has to be edited correctly, the director has to have had a vision in order to do that. The writer ultimately had to have done the right thing in the first place by structuring something right. Then you have to pray to fucking God that someone cares enough to buy it. Then you have to pray to fucking God that there's an audience that actually wants to see it. There are so many different levels of how something actually ends up getting to a screen and that you guys even end up seeing anything in the first place. It's kind of this extraordinary mistake.

In that way, you never really feel in control of the art of acting, of doing that, but certainly with writing, that's all yours. You live and die by your failures and your successes. I much more prefer to control those things. Certainly a chapbook is fun, in part, because I think it's kind of a dying art. One of my girlfriend's daughters is 13 and asked me what a chapbook was and I wanted to stick scissors through my eyes. I like forms like that, that are physical, that are tangible. There's not a lot of them left.

Something I was thinking about when you were reading just now is that it helps as a poet to have the ability to act, to be a compelling reader.

I think they really inform each other, for sure. Again, I've also been performing live for a really long time. I know a lot of actors that throw up before they go out on stage, that have severe stage fright. I wouldn't say that they're mutually exclusive indefinitely, but I would say that if you have a penchant for live performing it helps. I've been reading poetry at open mics in Los Angeles with Wanda Coleman at Beyond Baroque and all these places in L.A. since I was a teenager. I've cultivated a strong voice for how I like to speak and the things I like to read and how I like to read them.

You read some new poems today. Do you have another book coming out soon?

I do. I go to AWP every year, which is the Association of Writers & Writing Programs. It's like Coachella for writers. It's really fucking nerdy. Where you can go and find some obscure chapbook and you're like, "Oh my god, there are these poets that are in this obscure chapbook." It's really for dorks. Literary dorks. I do this annual show there with Roxane Gay who wrote *Bad Feminist* and is a really awesome writer and a friend. I missed doing chapbooks. I had really, really missed them—limited edition, small press things.

I had this idea because I'd gotten obsessed with a couple of different poets who'd written very volatile, unrequited love poems, which went beyond being sad, but into vengeance. I love that type of stuff. To me that's a great thing to read. It's been throughout our literary culture forever. I wanted to really fuck around with that idea of a unrequited love romance that takes place, but then the attention goes all towards to woman, and this sort of self-obsession which then becomes also obsession with yourself as a woman. It becomes sort of mirrored, which is a lot of the poems that are in that piece, *The Punishment Gift*.

There is this really great small press that does a lot of art and poetry and literary work called Smoking Bottle Press. They did that book. I think there's a couple left. I wanted to

make that. It will eventually become my next full-length book.

Are you at all drawn to writing prose or just poetry?

Yeah, I love prose. There're also a couple of pieces that will be in the new book that are prose. I'm actually working on a novel, which I've just turned in my first pages for. That's a whole other shit show. Very, very hard. I would say even harder going from poetry to fiction. It's a discipline that I don't enjoy at all. I think I'm good at it, but I hate it.

What's the novel about? Was it a poem that didn't work out as a poem?

No, it's just a really really good idea. Really good idea. Really good idea. [laughter]

Can you share the idea?

No, not yet. But it's a really good idea. [laughter] And I was like "Oh, shit, no one else is going to write this the way I think I could write it." Even in the writing of that, you know, and I've studied a lot of first person books, which this is...but I was like why can't I have written a Young Adult novel about dragons and princes? It's like, "What the fuck?," the subject matter I choose is, like: "What's the hardest thing I can do?" I didn't go to college, I didn't get my MFA. "What's the hardest thing I can do?" First person, present tense, fill in the blank of which you will know very soon...

Amber Tamblyn Recommends:

Hausfrau by Jill Alexander Essbaum (A book that is breaking me right now)

The Complete Plays of Anton Chekhov, translated by Lawrence Senelick

Anything classical involving the violin work of Joshua Bell

Bergamot black tea

Using a jade face roller when I first wake up (keep it in the fridge so it gets extra cold!)

My husband David Cross' new standup comedy album, America Great.

My mom's folks music album, Winter Wind (She plays a 12 string guitar and is a badass singer songwriter.)

The poetry of Bob Hicok, Wanda Coleman and Sharon Olds. And specifically, Love, An Index by Rebecca Lindberg.

The films of Ingmar Bergman. All of them. But especially Persona.

Newman O's cookies and a glass of milk. Where the hell have I BEEN!

Closing the flu on my fireplace for just a few seconds so the room fills a little with the smell of wood smoke. My clothes too.

The paintings of Samantha Nye.

But I enjoy the challenge of it and I feel like I'm at that time where it's important to start growing those parts of me. Especially because I left high school. Through high school, I was on a Soap Opera for seven years growing up and then went directly into a TV show that launched my career and never went to college. I never had that experience that a lot of people have and certainly most writers have.

I feel like this is a good moment to see if anyone else has any questions. Does anybody have any questions for Amber?

Audience: I want to ask you about periods of creative dormancy. I'm a grad student, and sometimes I put creative projects on the back burner while I pursue my degree. It's been kind of a push and pull. There are times I feel like I'm falling back into my work and I feel really confident. Then there are times where I feel like I want to completely escape inward and close myself off because of a lack of confidence. I wanted to know if you experience those periods of creative dormancy. If so, how do you pull yourself out?

I'll tell you first off the bat that absolutely nothing of what you're feeling is wrong. It's all right. It's all correct. You should absolutely be going through swells of that. I'll tell you a story. My writing mentor, Jack Hirschman, speaks 13 languages. He's the Poet Laureate of San Francisco. He is a self-described communist proletariat writer. Very, very, very political, very much a personality. I grew up listening to him reading in my living room all the time. He's got a very strong discipline about writing every single day. If you want to be a good writer, you write every day. There are many, many, many writers that do that and believe that to strengthen your craft you have to do that. I believe that's absolutely true for some writers.

I had two writing mentors. There was Jack and then there was Wanda Coleman, who was in Los Angeles, and as mentioned, has passed away. Wanda said to me, "You have to think of writing like a muse." This is the thing that I live by. Like a literal muse that needs to fucking sleep. Okay? Let it sleep. You don't have to push that. As long as you are constantly in a creative space that's in your head, whether it's thinking about that subject, but allow yourself to build the energy and the time.

It's not like the movies where you sit down at the typewriter and you're like, "Yes! Pure genius is flying out!" It doesn't work like that, but there are times where you need to let your brain sleep—let the muse sleep. When she's awake and when she's ready and when she wants to have the subject, the idea come to fruition, she will let you know.

Now the art within the art is being able to hear that, is being able to be insanely selfish and know when it's striking. Musicians talk about feeling like it's this connection that it's like the ones that understand when they've really honed in on their voice feel like that they have a connection with their voice that they can't explain to you where the writing comes from. I've heard Bob Dylan talk about this many times. That's kind of what it's like. Really what that means is you're just listening ... You need to figure out and learn unequivocally where the voice comes from and you need to nourish that voice.

Sadly, it can hurt relationships that you have, whether those are marriages, boyfriends, girlfriends, friendships, you need to be selfish to that voice. You need to really let that thing be the thing that dictates when and how you write and nourish what that is. Sometimes that doesn't come for years.

I can speak personally and say for me, it's like an idea for instance, the poem that I read tonight, "The Final Scene." That started with just an idea of what a final scene would look like in a meta-movie about the girlfriend of the man that I am in love with. It's a great concept, right? A final scene. You can go so many ways with simile and metaphor with that idea. I just took that and I let myself think. For months, I just let myself think about it until I came up with a great first line. Then eventually I'll write a full poem and then I'll go through and I'll start really mastering and tightening the words and the language and the visual parts of it.

I say all that, to say, you can read about your favorite authors. You can read about people who you admire and how they do their art. But that doesn't mean shit for how you do your art. You have to really figure out what your voice is and how it comes to you. Cherish that and protect it at all costs. Don't be afraid of when you feel I don't believe in writer's block. Fundamentally I do not believe in it. The more you push against that, the harder it is to let that creative voice come out.

Audience: You mentioned small-press chapbooks. These are physical things. For instance, I have a copy of [the journal] *Forklift*, Ohio with me right now. Then there's also self-publishing online—all the blogs, online journals. Do you feel having all these highly available online resources affect poetry as a medium, or the craft of poetry? It's hard out there for chapbooks, when there's all this highly available, mass-produced material online.

I think absolutely anything that draws attention to good poetry is good for poetry. There's a great poet named Victoria Chang who, a couple of years ago at the Penn Center Awards said this thing on stage and I was like ... I don't believe in tattooing words to your body, but if I could I would, it's all right, that's just me. I have a shitty Tinkerbell on my ankle, so I am not one to talk. She said, "Poetry is the armpit of the literary world." She's right. That doesn't necessarily mean in the craft or the art. It means how it's viewed or treated.

I fully think that anything that creates more opportunities for poetry to exist and certainly for good poetry to exist is a good thing. I look now at people like Lena Dunham who does *Lenny Letter*, and I've had a poem published there. The fact that somebody like Lena Dunham gives a shit about poetry and really cares—she really, really cares about a lot of literary art forms, but predominantly poetry.

A lot of people do — Kathleen Hanna, there are cool people that love poetry and that is so important because poetry can be cool. It doesn't always have to be the stuff that you were forced to read in school. Or a slam that you were forced to go to, that your boyfriend, who is hopefully not your boyfriend anymore, was performing at. I think that anything that opens that up is great. Are you a writer?

Audience: Yeah.

You are. Then you would know. It also helps because there are, in academia certainly, it's hard to get a foot in the door there, because it's all about political relationships. Who knows who, who's published who? Then you publish me, I'll publish you. It's a very pat each other on the back situation. People like Matt Hart and *Forklift, Ohio*. If you guys don't know what this is, they're so cool. They're these handmade books. He to me is like the punk rock of the chapbook making world. He's just the best.

Things like that can afford for more writers like yourself to go, "Hey, I write and I'm good at it and I wanna get my shit in somewhere. I don't want there to be this sort of political bubble that surrounds that." I think any of it's good. It also opens things up to be more quantity over quality, but that's just the world. I do believe that most of the cream rises to the top. Still there is a lot of cream that's like, "I'm fucking delicious cream and I'm down here. Help!" Most of it. *[laughter]* I don't know why cream has such a high-pitched voice.

Name

Amber Tamblyn

Vocation

Actress, Poet, Author, Director

Fact

As a teenager, Amber Tamblyn played the role of Emily Quatermaine on the soap opera *General Hospital*. She went on to star as the title character on *Joan of Arcadia*, has been in a number of films including *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *The Ring*, and *127 Hours*, and has had extended roles on *House* and *Two and a Half Men*. During this entire time period, she was writing poetry. Her first published poem, "Kill Me So Much," appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle when she was 12. Her third collection of poems, *Dark Sparkler*, was published by Harper Collins in 2015.



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