

On writing for the muses



Astrologer and author Chani Nicholas on the connection between astrology and storytelling, having the time and space to fully be a mess before you finally hit your stride, and understanding the audience you're writing for.

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As told to Mitchell Kuga, 2679 words.

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Your voice as an astrologer is so distinct. What was your journey as a writer?

I certainly don't know anything about grammar and sentence structure—I was a really bad student. [laughs] I was in my daydreams all the time and I didn't pay attention and I wasn't good at homework. I also didn't write consistently for much of my life, but I always remember when I would write things people would say, "Oh, that's really beautiful, you're a really good writer." I had this natural need to express myself, but I never thought of it as any kind of way forward.

When I went back to get my bachelor's in San Francisco I thought, "Would I really want to be as an essayist? Well, that's stupid—you know you can't make money doing that." And that's when I started to write astrology. I realized this is a way that I can actually write. So I put my passion for all the things I was learning about into the form of astrology. It helped me build a habit of writing consistently and it was that habit that eventually turned into everything else. It really just started with the habit of showing up at the same time every month or every week or, in the beginning, every full moon, that really hooked me into the relationship with writing.

Would you say the essence of your voice was there from the beginning?

Yeah, my weird sentence structure and all that? [laughs] That person never changed.

Your book opens with a love letter to your wife Sonia Passi, who is the CEO of [FreeFrom](#), [a nonprofit dedicated to financially empowering victims of domestic violence]. How does your relationship inform your work?

It's very necessary for me to be part of some sort of social change in order for me to feel, somewhat, like I can sleep at night. My ability to support her and her work in the ways that I can helps me to feel engaged. That is a really healing part of our relationship. She also works on [chaninicholas.com](#) with me. Within FreeFrom, Sonia is an incredible leader—she's gifted in a lot of ways, but that's one of the ways in which she's extraordinarily gifted—so she teaches me how to be a leader in my own life and business, and about how to create the best kinds of habits for work culture. We don't just want the work that we do to go out in the world and only help the people that receive it—we want ourselves included in that equation, we want the actual workspace to be as healing as the work that is being produced. It has to happen at home first. She's taught me about that.

And then there's just the basic... well, it's not basic, but I've never had somebody believe in me the way that she believes in me. Someone who has that kind of watchful faith, who's that mindful. It has helped me to take risks I

don't know if I would have been able to take otherwise. It has helped me to develop in ways that I didn't know were possible.

A lot has been said about the particular resonance astrology has with queer folks. I'm curious about the other side of that equation: if being queer informs your approach as an astrologer?

What I learned from some of the elders in the queer community—whether they're Black feminists, indigenous feminists, POC feminists—informed everything that I am. It informed how I see the world and everything that I write. If it's any good, it has someone's teaching in it that I've gratefully received. So my queerness, I mean it should be clear: I think we have to push back against the currents that are trying to sweep us up and say, "Fuck this. This is actually the way I need to take up space in the world." Even if we can't take up that space externally, for safety reasons, I think it's really important if we allow ourselves to take up that space internally. Astrology supports that, because it only ever speaks to your essence in a nonjudgmental way. So as queer folks living in this place in history we need these systems of knowledge that support our understanding of ourselves to say, "You are you. This is exactly what was meant for you. This is exactly who you're supposed to be."

How do you interpret the link between astrology and storytelling?

The story that we have about ourselves—and about each other, but it's essentially about ourselves—is so incredibly important. Astrology is a map of your life. It tells a story of your life and if we can work with it in a way that feels affirming and also in a way that challenges us—not to stay complacent, not to stay in places that are comfortable or quelling our creativity—then it can be used to help us tell our story in a really wonderful way.

Like, everybody knows what Saturn Return is now—the story of our Saturn Return is always so magnificently perfect for that person's chart. Even if it was extraordinarily painful and challenging, it's something that helps us to shape, contextualize, tell the story of our life and the choices that we had within that story. It's still a choose-your-own-adventure. Astrology would say, "Okay, this is the story that we're in. What are you going to choose within this setup?"

You mention being a late bloomer in the introduction to your book. What did you gain from leaning into your calling later than is culturally expected?

I was such a mess in my twenties and thirties. Like I really, really wasn't ready. The moment I was ready for it, I felt like it came. I needed all those years to heal. I needed all those years to figure myself out. I'm not someone who naturally has a really thick skin, so learning in public for me, like it is for a lot of people, was really challenging. I'm really glad I lived out a lot of mistakes offline. I'm really glad that I wrote a lot of awful things that didn't ever see the internet. I'm glad that I got to, you know, like *really* fuck up and find my way through it. And I don't know if that's a cop out or not, but I just needed that time to not be inside the fun house of success. Because success does not make you happy, it just magnifies what's already there.

Personally, I needed to be really humbled by doing work that I didn't want to do for a long time. It was a way of me developing my spiritual practice. In jobs that I hated, I would pray or do affirmation and breathing exercises all day long, because I was so miserable that if I didn't I was sure to get fired. [laughs] Working through the despair was a big part of my journey. Working through the despair of not having "made it" and having to learn how to love and value myself anyway, even though I hadn't fully established myself in any kind of way that felt really meaningful or connected to me. And then it took me a long time.

My whole story really is about disconnection and abandonment. You know, the childhood story. And so the astrology came along and I kept refusing it and rejecting it, but it was the one thing that, when I started to get into it and write about it, was the one place I felt connected, and it never abandoned me. I had to learn how to not abandon myself and not abandon it. And the more I turned to it the more I felt this internal relationship with it. That was like a lifeline for me internally. It was like, there's something here, there is energy here. I can keep putting energy into this, and it keeps feeding me.

So much of your business depends heavily on digital platforms. What is your relationship to social media and how do you avoid burnout?

Oof—I get so burnt out. I really do. So like, 90 percent of the time I’m posting something that I’ve created out of the need to create it, and probably 10 percent of the time I’m forcing something and posting it because I feel bad that I haven’t posted something. I’m not as consistent as, you know, I *should* be for business purposes. I don’t post every day, I don’t do all that *stuff*. But I do feel like it’s a creative outlet for me that’s kind of compulsive. I know that when I feel pain or when I feel my own kind of sorrow, the way that I feel back in control is to be creating something. That is where I find my agency and maybe it’s where I distract myself—which I don’t think is such a bad thing—but it is from a place of wanting to be able to do something about either how I feel or something that I’ve come to in therapy. [laughs] Like, oh, *that* thing! Yeah, how can I bring that in? How can I communicate it to people? Is it useful? Is it relevant? Do I make another fucking meme about something or should I just shut up?

Do you have any tendencies as an astrologer or writer that you find yourself actively fighting against?

As an astrologer, I’m always trying to understand what I’m *not* witnessing or how I’m *not* seeing the picture. As a writer I’m always trying to think: If this is a square and I turned it on a corner, it would be a different shape—how could I look at it from that additional angle? I really feel like I’m trying to learn how to be a better storyteller, how to point to things that are in support of what I’m trying to illuminate, like rabbis do. I’ve heard a lot of rabbis tell incredibly woven tales: they start with, “It happened on a Saturday,” and then they transition to something that happened in the world, and then they go into a cloud and it’s like, “Oh my god, how do they do that?”

How do you balance the day-to-day tasks of running a business while still giving yourself the necessary space for creativity? Do those two things feel separate or are they pretty intertwined at this point?

My god, that’s a lot of what I’m doing right now. We’re trying to create, again, habits. I’m trying to help Sonia help me help the people we’re working with. I’m not good at it and it’s been total chaos mode and just flying by the seat of our pants, trying to figure it out and fit it all in.

I’m at the space now where I have to block off creative time—it has to be just itself. And then I have to have time for meetings, for email, for all of the other business things that have to be separate from the creative time. Otherwise it’s too easy to let yourself be distracted by all the busyness of the day. I really have to quarantine my creative time. I’m really trying to carve that out in my everyday schedule, Monday to Friday.

Why did you decide to write a book?

I’ve thought about that many days. Why? [laughs] You know, publishers started reaching out to me in ways that made me feel like, “Okay, it sounds like a time to write a book.” I know that writing a book in terms of being a business legitimizes you in some way. And then I felt like there wasn’t a book for beginners to learn the core principles, to understand the meaning of your chart in a very fundamental way. There wasn’t a book I could point to that I didn’t feel was kind of problematic in some way—which is also fine, people can read around things, but I wanted to write my version of it, my kind of updated version. It’s the book I wanted people to read when I was teaching courses.

How do you define success in your work?

Success is feeling like I didn’t let panic or fear ruin my day. That I was able to be present and thoughtful, and that I was able to show up. That I was able to be *in* the day and creatively, thoughtfully responding and not reacting to what was happening. Because every day something chaotic happens and I need to be able to roll with it in a way that doesn’t tax the fuck out of my system.

How have you been doing that lately?

Well, I fail a lot and I talk about it with my wife and friends. If I fuck up with somebody then I make sure that I apologize right away, or change the behavior right away, or a combination of both. And then I'm trying to remember to breathe. Just take a couple of deep breaths and feel my seat in the manic-ness of everything. That's the thing I think that helps me the most.

You've said in a previous interview: "I actually just write to please the muse I'm writing for or with." Who is that muse, and do you ever write with a specific audience in mind?

I'm always writing for my people. You know, like I'm always thinking about those people who I don't know yet or maybe never will, and those that I love and those that I respect and those whose work I know but might not know personally. I'm always having conversations in my head with the things that I've read during the day, or have read during my lifetime that have shaped me in some way. Those are all my muses.

And then there's just an energetic presence when I'm writing that we've all experienced some version of. I'm trying to get in line with it. And when the sentence lands in the way it wants to, there's an energy or lightning or something. My friend Barry Perlman describes it as a little ding-ding-ding. [laughs] Like, yes, you got that. You got the golf ball in the hole or whatever. It doesn't happen all the time, but when it does, it feels so epic.

Chani Nicholas Recommends:

1. Naps: I don't get them much, but when I do they are like heaven, especially with Sonya Passi. Also, when Sonya Passi reads to me before bed. This is incredible for many reasons, two of which are: It means we aren't so exhausted we are falling into bed and immediately going unconscious, and we are either reading books that teach us how to be better at what we are doing or that are beautiful tales that inspire me to write.
2. Maldon Salt: It is the best salt in the world. I know it doesn't have all the special things that Himalayan salt does, but the taste, the crunch, the whole experience is unbeatable. I carry a little travel case of it with me.
3. Marco Polo: I only have a couple of friends who have mastered the art of this wondrous app, but those that have helped me feel far less lonely in the world. Conversations on it can span a whole day or week without feeling taxing or pressured to respond. Actors, directors, and storytellers of all kinds are usually really good on it.
4. Bone broth: It's very basic bitch of me, but bone broth saves me on a regular basis. At around 3PM I need a cup. It keeps my brain working without getting sluggish. Plus it has collagen—another thing I am obsessed with.
5. Really good skin care. Right now it's Chantecaille, which will literally cost you your life, but whatever I can afford I buy.

Name

Chani Nicholas

Vocation

Astrologer, Author

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Luke Fontana