On finding a way to do what you love

Author and ghostwriter Sarah Tomlinson discusses writing about what you love, learning from others, and allowing yourself to make mistakes.

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What did you learn about writing a novel or even about yourself when you were writing this?

I'll tell you one thing I learned about writing a novel and one thing I learned about myself. This is my fourth novel. It's the only one that has been successfully published, assuming the trucks don't crash on the way from the factory to the stores. They take so much work. I knew that, and I did work hard on the other ones, and I did all the things they tell you to do.

I took not just fiction writing classes, but novel writing classes where you learned about the art of the novel. I had friends who were readers. I was very diligent about not just sharing my work, but reading the work of others so I always had a good community to go back and forth with. I did a ton of revisions. I wasn't lazy about it, but the other books weren't well realized enough. In some ways, I don't think the ideas were quite good enough because that's one of the hardest things of being an artist.

Everyone talks so much about the craft. Of course, that's important and you have to work on your craft and master it. But if you don't have a good, undeniable idea, you're just sort of circling the drain forever. I do think that Kirby, my agent, as someone who sells books and spends a lot of time thinking about what makes a book successful, was really smart in the idea of a thriller about a ghostwriter. He told me that people love learning about worlds they don't know about.

I think it was wise of me to take that advice. It was the right subject at the right time in my life. When I was working on it, I did at least 11 revisions. I got notes from friends who specialized in thrillers. I got notes from friends who specialized in music. I got notes from friends who were German. I got notes from friends who were British. I got Kirby and his assistant to read it. I just really worked so hard on it and did everything I could to make it as good as I could. And then when I sold it, we still did a ton more work on it. It still wasn't even there.

A fair chunk of your book involves your protagonist, Mari, interviewing people. You know quite a bit about the interview process from your work as a ghostwriter and in music journalism. But ghostwriting has an extra step: When you're doing the writing, you have to inhabit the subject—and the result is subject to the interviewee's approval. Can you talk about that process?

There're two answers to this, and one is the deeper answer, which we actually even talk about on the jacket of the book. Mari's dad is a gambling addict and a narcissist, and I grew up with a gambling addict narcissist dad, and I've written about that in my memoir. It can be incredibly damaging to children to grow up with addict parents. It puts them in the position of trying to take care of that person and to intuit their emotions and

their needs and to get there before the person.

Weirdly, because I had that built into me, and I've been spending a lot of my adult life trying to undo that and just be a healthy adult human, it also became a superpower. I never set out to be a ghostwriter. I was very intentional about being a music journalist, and I loved it, and I just realized I was not going to have the career I wanted to make it worthwhile. I fell into ghostwriting, and coincidentally, I had just the superpower to do it.

I've had so many people—especially other writers—ask me, "How can you stand to not get the credit?" Or, "How can you stand to work with someone who cancels meetings all the time?" But I just laugh because I was kind of wired that way from childhood. I also am very curious about people. I have a lot of compassion for my clients. I understand that when they're behaving badly, a lot of times they're under stress about revealing what they're going to have to talk about in the memoir.

Obviously, there needs to be respect in a professional relationship, so you can't just let someone not show up to meetings. But I don't take it personally. I think a lot of that does come from my childhood.

That makes a lot of sense.

It's interesting. J.R. Moehringer, who wrote *The Tender Bar*, also wrote Prince Harry's memoir. He just wrote this personal essay for *The New Yorker* about being a ghostwriter. He said he had an absent dad who was a radio DJ outside of Boston, and he was sort of obsessed with this fabulous dad, this sort of fantasy of the dad. In his personal essay, he talks a little bit about his path to becoming a ghostwriter. He's much more masculine about it, and he tells Prince Harry what to do and stuff like that. I have a much more intuitive approach where I try not to have epiphanies for my clients. I really try to make sure that, especially if it's a self-help book, that they're only putting stuff in there that they can feel or realize themselves.

It seems like Mari's strategy is similar to yours in a way: Give them enough rope.

I recently got a review of the book that was mostly positive, but then they said they thought it was a little slow. It's interesting because I intentionally made the beginning slow. The first 100 pages is almost entirely Mari with her first client, Anka. I rewrote that so many times, more than anything else in the book. In the end, it still always needed to be that long because I wanted to get across that pace and the intimacy that develops. It's sort of like dating: You have a really great time together, and then you kind of mess it up the next time by either going a little too fast or a little too slow, and then you have to kind of make it up. I wanted to really capture that. You interview people, so I think you totally get it.

In that sense, I'm sort of the bullseye in the target audience for this book. But as your agent said, I think non-writers could be fascinated by the ghostwriting world.

I'm going to say one other thing about ghostwriting. I only answered the deep, sad part about being a ghostwriter, as the child of an alcoholic and gambling addict. The other part that's interesting about Mari is that she was based on me in 2011, which was when I had been ghostwriting for about three years, and I was trying to get my first bestseller. It's hard, as she says in the book. You can't get your first bestseller until you have your first bestseller, so you need a person to take a risk on you. I did, and it was incredible, and it was a bestseller, thank god.

At that time, there weren't all the transcription services. Also, the person I was working for was writing about very sensitive stuff. They were very paranoid about it getting out, probably rightly so. There was a major lawsuit possibility around the book, so it was really a risk for them to hire me because I hadn't had a bestseller. Everyone on the team knew this would be a bestseller and I had to get it done. We had six weeks to do it, and they said, "You're going to have to do all your own transcription," not just because there wasn't a reliable service at the time—they didn't trust anyone else to do it.

I will say, I'm so glad I don't have to do that anymore. Mari talks about it in the book: When you have to listen to someone that closely for that many hours, it is an incredible lesson in their voice. It was really valuable. I

probably did my own transcription for the first, I don't know, maybe four or five books that I wrote.

Earlier you mentioned the fact that ghostwriters don't get credit. You've had a few *New York Times* bestsellers that your name isn't on. That's gotta be frustrating.

I've had four uncredited *New York Times* Bestsellers and one [on which] I was a co-writer. So, I have seen my name on the *New York Times* Bestseller list once out of five. Is it frustrating? Yes and no. The first client, the one I told you about who was the first one to hire me, actually went to the place that does the gold and platinum record framing, and had a framed acknowledgement made. It had a copy of the hardcover and the paperback of the book. It said, "In acknowledgement of your contribution to the bestselling memoir," and it had the name of the memoir. I didn't get public acknowledgement, but I was very much acknowledged by the team. It was super classy of them to do. Once I have the grand office I will have someday, I'll have it hung up. Right now, it's in storage.

Does the paycheck make up for the lack of public recognition?

Partly. To be honest, that book was wonderful. I was super proud to do it. There have been some other books that I maybe wouldn't have wanted to have my name on. No offense to anyone, but it just wasn't my world. They were done very quickly. It was sort of meant to be a torn-from-the-headlines memoir. The one thing that would sometimes bother me was… I know from my own experience and my friends' experiences who are writers, who are musicians, it's so hard to get attention for your work.

It's funny: almost all of my clients go on *Good Morning America*. They get to have their face on the jumbotron in Times Square when it comes out. They just get that highest level of attention and accolade you can, and I probably won't get that for my novel. It's not even that I want to be in the spotlight. Of course, it's gratifying when you've worked hard on something, but it's just that you want your work to have a chance. In our culture, that's what gives it a chance.

I think that's the only part I would get a little jealous of, but I understood it, too. They were already celebrities. They were incredibly charismatic. They could go on that show and do great and be charming and be totally natural. I've never been on *Good Morning America*. Hopefully I would be amazing and kill it, but it's a different kind of promotion.

You were a music journalist before you started ghostwriting. What did you get out of that experience?

When I lived in Boston in the early aughts, I was a freelance music journalist, but I was known as a music journalist for the *Boston Globe*. People in the music world knew me nationally, and I loved writing about music. I loved my friends in the music world. I loved getting them into the *Globe*, where it actually helped them to sell records. I got some weird bands into the *Globe*, some weird indie art bands. I loved hanging out with bands. I loved going to their shows. I loved writing features on them, doing reviews. And then that started to go away. The reason I got out of the music industry was that it didn't really exist anymore. Partly because I had never gone to magazines, but I think even if I had, it seemed like there was not the chance to be a byline anymore. But I know you went to magazines and had a different experience. I guess that's sort of a long way of saying I've seen a diminishment in the value placed on journalists.

Many people seem to respect journalism less and less with every passing day.

I was lucky enough to be one of the last generation of journalists that actually went to journalism school. I was mentored at the *Globe*. I learned so much about writing, about deadlines. I actually had copy editors. The fact that my work was copy-edited is incredible. It was a privilege to write at that level. I didn't really understand it at the time because I just thought that was what the world was. As I saw that going away, I moved out to Los Angeles in 2006. I was freelancing for the *LA Times*, again, because they knew me. They were like, "Oh, you're Sarah Tomlinson from the *Boston Globe*. Sure." I got to start doing concert reviews right away, which was kind of a big paper to do concert reviews for.

That was when they declared bankruptcy and they cut what they were paying their freelancers, which hadn't been very much to begin with. I was not getting as much work as I had at the *Globe* and I saw the writing on the wall. I've often joked that my career as a writer has been jumping from melting iceberg to melting iceberg, because I used to write for Monster.com when they started. I was writing for websites and doing content development, and then I went into music journalism, and then I went into ghostwriting.

Thank god the ghostwriting has remained kind of stable, but a lot of the books that I ghost-wrote—I did some *Real Housewives* books, some sort-of *Bachelor* books, *Dancing with the Stars*. Those books don't sell like they used to. I've seen the industry change as well in terms of what readers' interests are. I feel incredibly lucky to have had a career. I think my expectations of recognition are pretty low at this point, because I realize how hard it is.

You've told me you always wanted to be a novelist. Did you have a sudden epiphany?

I decided when I was 16 that I was going to be a novelist. I sold my first book when I was 46, so I've been chasing this dream for a while. My mom was a librarian, and so we had a very book-friendly culture. My mom and I still do this when I go home to visit: One of us will put down a book and the other one will pick it up and start reading it. We're just constantly reading books and talking about them—and giving each other books. I grew up in rural Maine, which at that point was very closed-minded. I got completely ostracized. If I had been a guy, I would've been beat up all throughout high school.

My parents and I found this school called Simon's Rock, which was an early college in the Berkshires. So, I got to drop out of high school when I was 15, and instead of going to my junior year of high school, I got to go to Simon's Rock. They gave us college-level courses. When I was 16, I took my first fiction workshop, where we sat around a table and workshopped just like they do at regular mainstream universities. I loved it. And then I transferred to Bard. Simon's Rock is under the umbrella of Bard, and Bard has a good creative writing program. I was able to get my undergraduate degree in fiction writing, which is very rare. I just knew that was what I was going to be.

You have a journalism degree as well. Why did you get a second one?

What happened was I moved out to Portland, Oregon, because I was only 19 when I got done with college, so I just wanted to live someplace cheap and try to write. I had gotten an offer for a job at the *Hudson Valley Magazine* in Poughkeepsie, New York, but that wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to go to get an MFA. So, I called my favorite writing teacher from Bard and asked him if he'd write me a recommendation. And he goes, "Let me ask you a question: Do you write every day?" I said, "Oh, well, I mean, mostly…kind of." He goes, "You need to *not* get an MFA right now. You need to get a job. You need to fall in love, and you need to write every day. When you do, call me and I'll give you a recommendation for an MFA."

He knew I had just come out of a serious fiction program, and he knew you can only get taught so much. Eventually, you have to put it in your own hands. I had started waiting tables, and I knew I didn't want to be a professional waitress. I wanted to have a job that supports my writing, and I realized that what I needed was a trade. So, instead of getting my MFA, which was very expensive unless you got a free ride—which was hard to do—I applied to journalism school, and that was great.

I didn't realize it at the time, but what journalism gave me, especially once I got into music writing, was I was so passionate about writing well about music. I cared that when I wrote about my friends' bands or bands that I admired that it was good and that they saw something true in what I wrote. So, I really applied myself to it. But because it wasn't my world—I was never a musician—I wasn't too precious about it. I think it was that, too: You have to both really care *and* you have to give yourself permission to not be perfect and to mess up sometimes in order to really learn something. For a period when I was writing for the *Globe*, I had stuff due every day, sometimes multiple things due a day, and I just churned it out as best as I could.

What do you see as the pros and cons of journalism school?

The thing that's really sad about it is I would never tell anyone to go to journalism school today. I managed to do it for $7,000. That was what I took out as a loan. And thank god, I managed to pay back that loan with journalism.

As a person who's interested in culture, I got to take a class on ethics where we read Supreme Court decisions that impact freedom of speech, and we read about ethics. Is it more ethical to drop the bomb on Hiroshima and kill that many people or to keep the war going and have even more people die in the trenches? Those are all incredible things to think about as a human. I don't know that the majority of people who go into journalism these days are going to have the opportunity to write at that level.

I'm sure people who write for the *New York Times*, some of the top newspapers and magazines, are thinking about ethics and morality, but does it help them to have that kind of foundation to do a listicle about the best places to get hot dogs by Dodger Stadium? I don't think you need it. I think the best thing you can do, which is advice you hear all the time, but I think it's completely true, is to just find a way to do it. Because the other part about being a journalist is you have to get comfortable talking to people and the only way to do it is to just have some low-stakes interviews.

Absolutely.

And you mess up and your recorder breaks, and you say something inappropriate and offend the person, and you have to take your knocks. I do totally believe in finding a community newspaper or starting your own blog. Probably a blog is a little different because I do think you need to *not* do it in an echo chamber. Anything you can do where you're involved with other people, both in the interviewing and having someone edit you, is really helpful for your writing.

Sarah Tomlinson Recommends:

Too much writing, without getting out for a run, would make my brain explode. My current favorite soundtrack is the song "Hunter" by Jess Williamson.

Like Mari, the character based on me in my novel, I drink a bonkers amount of tea. My favorite brand is August, for its bold blends and whimsical flavor descriptions.

I also have a chocolate habit, and my mom keeps me stocked with goodies from Bixby, which is made in our home state of Maine. (Go ginger pecan!)

My next novel is set in the Pacific Northwest, so I've been steeping myself in great prose from the region, including this deeply searching coming-of age-memoir: *Red Paint: The Ancestral Autobiography of a Coast Salish Punk* by Sasha Lapointe.

I live in Los Angeles, and yes, I start my day by doing morning pages and pulling a card from the gorgeous Wild Unknown Spirit Animal deck.

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