

On being frustrated with ambition



Author and journalist Marisa Meltzer discusses fantasy as a form of creation, the anxiety of creative advice and the unpleasantness of ambition.

December 20, 2023 -

As told to Isabel Slone, 1587 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

When you were a child, what did you dream of being when you grew up?

As a child, I spent a lot of time fantasizing about my adult life. I was going to have a dog, live in a big city, and spend a lot of time walking through parks. I definitely had some kind of job and boyfriend but those things were vague. I didn't have a very strong idea of what I wanted to be. A job was more of an afterthought compared to the rest of my life. But I was always a big reader. I grew up reading books and my parents also subscribed to a lot of magazines. I'm an only child and had a lot of time on my hands, so I used to read them all the time. I think my life is still very rooted in fantasy, whether that's career success or a vacation I'll take.

What do you fantasize about now?

Pedestrian things, like clothes, boyfriends. I'm so shallow. I was recently discussing fantasy boyfriends with a friend. We were putting them together in bits and parts, like someone with dark hair, who wears gold earrings, trying to manifest. It's kind of ridiculous.

What initially drew you towards writing?

I've always been really into beauty, fashion, pop culture, feminism and history. After I finished up at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., which I chose because it was the birthplace of riot grrrl, I felt like I had fewer outlets for writing my opinions. I must have really missed that, because I felt like I had a lot to say. I started out writing for *Bitch* magazine. The movie *Shallow Hal* had just come out and I wrote a story called "Are Fat Suits the New Blackface?" I grew up in Northern California and had what I would describe as a neutral relationship with hippie culture. The concept of drinking green juice, going to yoga and getting acupuncture was very much the milieu I was raised in. So when wellness culture was on the rise, people gave me those stories to write about because my reaction to [phenomenons like [snake massages](#) and [scalp facials](#)] wasn't automatically "This is weird" or dismissive. That's how I ended up writing a lot about lifestyle and wellness stuff. There was no part of me that ever wanted to become a theater critic.

I'm interested in the idea of readiness when it comes to taking on larger creative projects. How did you know when you were ready to write a book?

I don't tend to put in a lot of thought about whether I'm ready for something. I more just dive into things, which is probably not a great trait on my behalf. I should probably think more about those things. But when it comes to writing books, I remember having a great desire. I had book fever the way some people have baby fever. There were people around me getting book deals and that was all I wanted. I was really just operating on pure

desire.

That sounds like a great trait because you're not overthinking anything, you're just doing what you have in order to make things happen.

I overthink plenty of things, but whether or not I'm ready is not one of those things.

How do you approach writing?

I tend to think about writing very structurally. I'm obsessed with pacing and architecture and the way things flow. The rhythm of sentences. That can be a little bit straining, because often I'll write something and think, "This doesn't match the tone." I get very distracted by art that has different tones or feels unresolved. Those things drive me crazy in both my own writing and other people's art.

Do you have any techniques to help you to achieve that super tight tone?

I definitely map things out. I use Scrivener for first drafts. I come up with an outline, organize the information into piles, and think about what sections flow into one another. I move everything around a ton while I'm writing and editing, especially if something is driving me crazy. For example, this section about a department store doesn't quite fit here, can I move it to another chapter?

What feeds your own creativity?

I watch movies, read books, and look at paintings. I love going to a wing of a museum I don't know very well and spending 45 minutes there looking at everything. I love absorbing things and bringing those themes into my own work.

When I was working on my book *This is Big*, I watched *Call Me By Your Name* and remember thinking there was so much daring in Timothée Chalamet's performance. He was putting it all out there, leaping around, making weird faces. My takeaway from that was: try it all, don't be afraid of putting anything weird in there. I also remember watching *Nanette*, the Hannah Gadsby comedy special, and being struck by the juxtaposition of jokiness with really raw emotion. They're crying and being incredibly vulnerable and it's a bit dark. It reminds me of Pixies music, where it can be tender and loud in the same song. I remember thinking it's okay to have these very conflicting emotions in a single piece.

How do you decide what subject matter is worth exploring in your work?

Usually, I'll get personally obsessed with something. But what makes for a good book and a compelling narrative is pretty different from what makes a good personal essay. A book really has to prove itself. It has to be able to sustain several hundred pages of exploration and there's a story with a beginning, middle and end. With an essay, you can write something that's slightly more fragmented.

What is your relationship with ambition like?

I often wish I was less ambitious. It stresses me out all the time. I get really emo. It brings up things that I don't like about myself. Someone I don't know will win the National Book Award in a year when I haven't even written a book and I'll be like, 'Goddamnit.' I wish I could chill out a bit or be less childish about it. I'm also grateful for my ambition, because it's what fuels me. But there is a part of me that wishes I could be a little more content.

Do you think that discontent is somewhat central to being a creative person?

I think so. I'm not sure if it is for everyone. Some people seem better at being content than I do. I watched that Kelly Reichardt movie, *Showing Up*, recently and I felt very seen in the Michelle Williams character. She is

pursuing art and seems to have a slightly cranky, ambiguous relationship to her own creative practice.

It sounds like your definition of success is linked to outside recognition. That's okay, it's mine too and I'm pretty sure it's the same for a lot of people.

I do a lot of yoga and have had a lot of therapy. I wish I could have some sort of inner wholeness and see that everything is fine. But I'm a person that always wants more. I'm the same way with a lot of things: food, travel, clothes. I'm smart enough to know that's not the healthiest scenario but I also accept it about myself and keep it in mind as I try to navigate the world.

Why advice would you give to anyone deciding to pursue a creative path?

There's so much advice out there [on how to spark creativity], whether it's 'draw in the morning' or 'write things down.' I've never felt it was very helpful and sometimes it makes me really anxious. I'm not sitting down writing morning pages. My advice is more to soak up everything like a sponge. Everyone should just read more books, period. I love going to cities or a neighborhood I've never spent much time in. Broaden your worldview, and read/watch as much as you can. It's especially easy nowadays to get caught in an internal feedback loop of following people you know and looking at the same things all the time. So do whatever you can to get yourself out of that comfort zone, whether it's literally or figuratively.

Marisa Meltzer recommends:

Marseille. I have only been to this city briefly but it feels like one of those perfect places where there's a really creative community, good weather, reasonable cost of living, and amazing food. Should we all move there?

Glossier You perfume. My favorite Glossier product. There's no top note so it smells kind of ambiguously nice and slightly different on everyone.

Restorative yoga. I love yoga as a form of exercise but restorative yoga was kind of revelatory as a form of relaxation for me. You use props like blankets and cork blocks and bolsters to allow your body to sink into long, relaxing poses and your mind just wanders. I love it so much I learned to teach it.

Yogurt. I like to evangelize for it. I try to eat it pretty much daily. I don't know if it's the probiotics or the protein, but it feels so healthy and satisfying.

Sigrid Nunez. All of her books are worth it, but my favorite is *The Last of Her Kind* and the memoir *Sempre Susan*.

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