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As told to Rachel Brodsky, 2605 words.

Tags: Writing, Anxiety, Mental health, Time management, Money, Success, Identity.

On self-advocacy and the pressures of success

Author and public speaker Stephanie Land on the pressures surrounding a sophomore book, dealing with writer's block, and becoming a public speaker in spite of having crippling anxiety.

In both of your memoirs, *Maid* and *Class*, you include a lot of detail around juggling child rearing with non-creative work, going to school, and writing. What does a typical writing day look like for you?

Well, I'll be transparent. I started promoting *Class* before I started writing it. I've never at any stage not been in promotion-mode with this book. I started writing it in the summer of 2022, and at first, I kept things very organized, which was part of my procrastination process. I had rainbow-colored files. I printed out everything I had written that year for school. I went through all of my Facebook posts. I read all the notes I took in class because I took notes alongside my day planner. A lot of it was just sitting down and trying to remember stuff.

I agreed to an October deadline in May, and I hadn't even started writing the book. I didn't even have an outline. My editor had said, "Sure, write whatever you want." I got some advice from Neil Gaiman. He was in Seattle for a reading, and we met him afterwards. He said, "Let me know if you ever need any help or advice or if you're blocked." I said, "I've been blocked for two years. I am under contract. I've been under contract since January 2020, and I can't produce. I need to have this book written by October."

He shooed off his assistant and pulled me aside. He's like, "Okay, this is what you need: Get a hotel room. It should not be a place that you actually want to be. No internet, no television, no phone. Go on a walk every evening. In two weeks, you will have written a book." Then he said, "You will go insane." That is what I ended up having to do.

We were all living in this house together, and I couldn't get away from my family. So, I proclaimed that I needed a She Shed. We built this fancy, expensive shed in the backyard. It's not a shed by any means.

At the beginning of the summer, my husband had to have surgery, and that delayed my timeline a little bit. But I made a schedule: I'm going to get up and I'm going to exercise and eat, and then I'm going to go in and I'm going to do this. I did that for two days. It was so hard to get the mental space because even up in the shed, I still had to come inside the house to use the bathroom. Then it was like, "Ah, there's a mess here." My kid's asking me something, my husband's doing something that I need to be involved in. But I still did the same thing that I did with *Maid*, where I make a Word doc, put the title on it, and then I just start writing straight through without looking back.

I keep a ledger—a piece of paper where I record how many words I produce in one day. One day would be 3,000 words, and then I wouldn't write for two weeks. Then I'd have another spurt. By the beginning of October, I asked for two more weeks, and I wrote most of the book in those two weeks. [Part of that time was spent] in one hotel in Livingston, Montana. I had a speaking gig there, and then I paid for the hotel room for three extra days. Then, I did the same thing the next week in Seattle. The final weekend I think was 16,000 words. But I physically wrote the book in 31 days.

What do you think was going on behind the block?

I was blocked for a long time because I didn't want to promote the book. I knew that every word I wrote

got me closer and closer to having to promote it, and that is the most horrifying thing. And I was writing book two, so there's a lot of pressure—the sophomore book can make or break your career.

I also knew that a lot of people were probably going to read [Class] and have thoughts about it. There are places on the internet where people go to talk about how horrible your book is. I actually named the voice—I call her “Barbara from Michigan.” She was the voice of the woman on Goodreads, too. It was nice to give her a name and imagery. Barbara was not happy about some of those sex scenes [in Class]. I had to compartmentalize the fear of talking about my sex life to a bunch of strangers and having to go out and talk about it on book tour for a month and knowing that there were going to be a lot of people mad about the content.

When I wrote *Maid*, [I knew that] 90 percent of books only have 5,000 copies or less that are sold. I assumed that that was going to be me. I just hoped that the people who need to read the story will read it. I didn't know that Obama was going to read it. But with this one, I'm pretty sure Obama is going to read it. It's just like, “Oh my god, I want him to get a redacted version where there's black lines over the sex scenes or something.”

Now that you've experienced how brutal the feedback cycle can be, particularly on the internet, what would you tell a writer about to release their first book, particularly if there's a lot of early buzz surrounding it? Avoid the comments section?

There are people out there who genuinely do not read the comments. I don't know how [not to]. I was talking to an author about this horrible Goodreads review about my book, and she was like, “Oh, yeah, I never look at Goodreads.”

I ended up talking to Jason Isbell about it, of all people. He had a concert in Missoula and my husband and my nine-year-old got invited backstage to hang out. We ended up talking until 1:30 in the morning about how there's a certain type of—he referred to it as a darkness. I think there are some people who have a narrative about themselves that has either been created by another person, or another person's actions have caused them to have this, where they feel like the biggest failure. Like, “Oh my god, you're so terrible. You don't deserve any of this.”

Don't quote me or anything, but he said, “I think that there is a need in some of us to feed that.” I think that's true. When *Maid* came out, and when everything was going super great, everybody seemed to love the book, I didn't really understand [why]. I had been a freelance writer for a couple of years. I knew what the internet thought about poor people because I had read the comment sections. I usually got material for another piece out of it. I started to recognize the PTSD symptoms in myself, like, “Something bad is going to happen. There's something brewing somewhere, something is going to blow up.” I would start looking for that on Goodreads, on Amazon reviews. I am really trying to not do that this time around.

One of the things that has helped me the most is having a social-media manager. I don't feel a responsibility to go through and read comments. Some of them I never read. When the [Netflix] series, [Maid], came out, I experienced something that was completely on the flip side. My platform grew by 100,000 in a week. It was insane. Most of the comments, at least on Instagram, were people telling their stories of domestic violence.

I am an empathetic [person], and I felt responsible. I felt like I needed to be there with them in that moment and at least read their comments. After a while, I just couldn't do it anymore. My doctor calls it “secondary trauma.” That was almost worse than the bad comments because it was like I couldn't just say, “Oh, fuck you.” But it was like, “Oh, you're sharing this.” So, I'm not saying that all comments are bad and should be ignored. It's overwhelming either way most of the time for me.

I would love to get your perspective on what it's really like to have your book optioned. As a writer who has cleared that hurdle, what was the reality of having your book made into a series?

My experience was so unique, amazing, and beautiful. The people who made the series—most of the writers and directors—had some kind of lived experience with domestic violence or poverty or were a person of color. I think that was why the show was so successful, honestly. They knew to look for stuff like, “Oh, no, there's no way that she'd be eating that kind of cereal.” It was authentic. So many survivors of domestic violence or people who had lived in poverty were able to see their own experience for the first time.

There was a lot shown in the series that I don't think has ever really been shown before. I feel like I won the lottery in that aspect. I'm credited so much in every episode. I think that is very rare that the original author is credited as much as I was. I also think that was something the producers and Netflix made sure of.

But money stuff, I have no idea. I know now that the public assumes that I got millions of dollars, and that is not the case at all. If you're looking to become rich off getting your book turned into a series or movie, that's not going to happen.

Ron Lieber from The New York Times wanted to do a profile on me. He went into it thinking that I had a brand-new, bought-and-paid-for-with-cash Volvo in the driveway. He thought I was living large because I had all this series and a bestseller and all that. And I was just like, “No, I'm not.”

There's a lot of misconceptions about that, I think. I don't know what is included with the WGA's new

contract, but I don't get any money from the residuals. It was just one and done, here you go. It blew up and everybody's watching it, and it's just kind of like, "Oh, cool." I'm not going to see any more money from *[Maid]*. I don't know if there's a way to make sure that that's in the contract or not, but with streaming platforms, that I think is a big problem.

Going forward, what else will you do to mentally prepare for book tours, interviews, or anything else that might be demanding on your emotional energy?

I don't know if there is any way to do that. With book one, I was having a panic attack every morning. Every day was morning till night, being on camera, on the radio, or standing in front of people all by myself.

The tips that I have are expensive. I am in a place where I can kind of afford it. My publisher is paying for my assistant to come with me. She's my social-media manager, but she will respond to emails that I can't respond to.

One of her main jobs is to make sure that I'm eating—I ordered breakfast this morning and I still haven't been able to stop and eat it. I have two assistants right now. My other one, Amanda, she was with me for *Maid*, too. She used to be a paralegal and do a lawyer's calendaring, and she was recommended to me. She does my calendar and keeps my [personal] Google calendar updated. That has been huge, to have someone who keeps track of that. And to have someone who is willing to make sure that I'm not being treated like a robot. Much of what's been exhausting for me is advocating for myself and reminding people that I have mental illness.

I am not just saying I have anxiety because I have stage fright or something. I have full-blown, true, several-different-kinds-of-medication anxiety, and I have personally found ways to survive with that and be a public speaker. It's been a constant need for advocating and having someone else to look over the schedule and be like, "Okay, the times line up, but Stephanie is also a human being who needs to eat and go to the bathroom. When is that going to happen?"

[Self-care] for me is preserving energy. I am so introverted in real life, and speaking gigs wipe me out. I'll get home and stay in bed for a day or two sometimes. I don't have FOMO at all. I travel all the time for work, and I'll get requests for dinner. I'll get like, "Oh, you need to go see this. You need to go eat at this restaurant." "No, I don't." I really don't leave my hotel room. I don't feel weird or bad about that.

It sounds like you've learned the hard way how to set personal boundaries. You don't want the people who are giving you these public opportunities to perceive you in any way as ungrateful.

That's a lot of it. With the book tour for *Maid*, I didn't want people to think that I couldn't do something. I said yes to everything that they offered. I didn't want to miss an opportunity because I was a single mom to two kids. I needed things like childcare, and [wondering] what if one of them gets sick? I wanted that whole thing to be outside of my publicist's mind. I did everything, but I had panic attacks all the time, and it was traumatic.

Then it was also hard with the success because a lot of writers—I'd say most writers, especially writers of color—they do not experience that level of success. If I tried to talk about it and say, "I'm really having a hard time with this. This is really traumatic, and I'm panicked," they basically told me to sit down and shut up and enjoy it and feel lucky and all of that.

It was the most isolating experience of my recent life. I lost friends. People sent me angry text messages in the middle of the night for no reason and unfriended me and blocked me. And I'm just like, "What the...?"

Because you were being open about the stress?

No, because they were jealous.

That's a shame.

I went through a lot of it completely alone. It wasn't until just a couple of years ago that I started to have close friends again. With this book, I am still told, "Well, most writers would say yes to this in a heartbeat. I can't believe you're turning this down." I'm just like, "Well, I can't do it." But one thing I did go for this time was making sure that I get a cake. I wanted a book cover cake so bad, and everybody gets a book cover cake. I was just like, "This time I'm getting a fucking book cover cake."

Stephanie Land Recommends:

"The Mighty Rio Grande" by This Will Destroy You

"Perpetuum Mobile" by Penguin Cafe Orchestra

"Hold On" by Tom Waits

"Welcome Home, Son" by Radical Face

"Cruise" by Florida Georgia Line

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Stephanie Land

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