

On needing to tell the truth in your work



Chef and Author Gabrielle Hamilton discusses the proximity of the beautiful to the grotesque, the dangers of voyeurism in memoir, and not running away from your writing tendencies.

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As told to Megan Fernandes, 2699 words.

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I want to know about cravings. There's this whole section on hunger in your book where you say, "Hunger really taught me how to be a chef." Is craving a euphemism for desire? Does a craving relate to memory or is it something future-oriented? A fantasy structure?

Yes, when I have cravings, it's almost always for something I already know and I am evoking from the past or I wish I could have it, but I don't have it then. But I know it's not dreaming up or envisioning something, so I'm definitely pulling from a glossary or encyclopedia of experiences or taste that I've already had that would be so perfect at this moment or whatever at this time that I'm craving it. And then I think there's this other aspect of remaining for an endurable period in the state of longing and not satisfying the craving.

Do you write in your head when you're cooking?

Yes.

What does that look like?

Well, I do love a prep day because it keeps your hands occupied and you are getting a lot of work done, but your mind is pretty free. It's not that hard to have a free mind while you're doing some repetitive kitchen task over and over, so that is a really good time to get a lot of things worked out.

I'm a very bad writer, meaning I think I can get the words on the page in a nice way eventually, but my work habits are not professional or good. I think I'm probably like that annoying person in an office or a kitchen who's like, "Man, they make really tasty food, but their station is a freaking mess the whole time." I've learned in the past couple years to, as they call it, habit stack. I get up and I have to get to the page right away, otherwise I won't get it done.

Because there's a million other things to do?

Too much stuff. I used to push it, and push it, and push it. When I had little suckling babies and this suckling restaurant, I used to just write standing up on the line. In between services, I would rip a piece of brown paper off the prep roll and start writing like, "Okay, remember to write that down, write that down." Now I'm not so guerilla insane.

Do you have a crazy memory for details? Because a lot of the book is reaching back pretty far.

Yeah, I do. Especially from my childhood. It was such an abbreviated childhood, and I think that life was so spectacular and vivid. Certain memories that I have, they're so indelible. And there were so few of them that I think I have them...They're not lost in a huge crowd of tons of memories over years, and years, and years, and years. It was like, when you really come to, when you're like five, you start to know what's going on, vaguely in the room. And then at 10 it was like, "Whoop, mom's gone. It's all over." I think those five years of accrued memories are like crystal.

There's also this attention to the diminutive and grotesque in your writing. I'm thinking about the part of your book where you're about to open your restaurant and you find this dead rat outside, but it looks like it's kind of moving? And you realize that it's full of maggots. I guess this is a foregrounding question, as in, how in a scene of sensory objects do you choose your focus?

I do notice that I have some sort of commitment to, or fixation to how beauty and lusciousness is often in unbelievable proximity to horror and the grotesque. And I don't feel like I invent that. It's just crazy how you can be right about to have the beautiful dinner and there it is: the rat with the maggots, or you're just about to have lunch with your parents, and then there's shit all being swept off the table and your father's in a fit of rage. Or isn't it M.F.K. Fisher, who was describing peeling an orange as the Germans are storming Paris, and they're goose-stepping down the boulevard, and she's like, "The smell of the orange peel as the soldiers are arriving." Isn't that her? Do you see what I'm saying? I don't know if I see them that way or that's how they appear to me.

It's the dissonance of that proximity between revulsion and pleasure that the writing is coming out of, I think. Do you want to talk about the new book and what it's about and how it's going? Where you are in the process of it?

Sure. It's due, it's really due.

Okay. Opening line is the deadline.

What can I tell you about it? I'm laughing because it is in fact funny. There's a lot of humor in the book, but the material is not that funny. It just happened that way. I have figured out point A and point B. And now that I've figured that out, I just have to get from point A to point B.

And so point A is, I haven't talked to my mom in 30 years. Point B is, I'm tucking her into her hospital bed and I'm changing her smeared diaper, and I'm putting her tooth under her hospital bed pillow for tooth fairy money at 92 years old. That's point A to point B. And the way I get there is my oldest brother kills himself, the next oldest brother dies from a rare stroke...There's all of this death, and demise of, and the actual destruction of the bodies of people in the family, but also there's sisters fucking over sisters, brothers who hate sisters, fathers who don't speak to daughters. It's just what had been a very ripe, potent, bright, shining family, somehow shrivels on the vine and rots and dies and doesn't thrive and prosper and go forth as it should have in a way. So that's the story.

I'm giggling because I met my mom, who I haven't seen in a thousand years. And she's like, "What are you writing, Gabri? What are you writing?" And I was like, "Oh, mom. You know what I do. I do it all the time." Even my stupid *New York Times* columns about, like, vinaigrette, they're all about the same thing. They're about the loss of my family, my love of, my love for, and the loss of my family. I'm joking to her. I was like, "It's demise, decay, death, destruction of our family." And I pause and I said, "It's a comedy." And she pauses and she says, "Of errors."

Oh my god!

I know. And I was like, "Mom."

The timing!

Coming in clutch right there.

Has it been hard for you to write about your family?

It's the hardest thing on earth.

I noticed in the book, you skirt...

Everything, everything bad.

You're very fair to your intimacies. And I think in a way that's something so admirable. And I really struggle with that in poetry because I'm like, "The poem is not a jury. The poem is not a jury."

That's right. But It seems to me the expert or careful reader gets the whole story.

There's a cost, though. Can I ask in what capacity are you still able to surprise yourself in your writing?

It's not a positive surprise, but I am surprised frequently at how stubbornly, I don't learn. How stubbornly my bad habits remain. When I can't get it going, I'm like, "Why can't I get this fucking part to work? Why can't I get it to work?" And, every single time, the answer is, "Because you're not telling the truth, Gabrielle." Every single time. And you would think by now, I would have gotten hip to that. I'm like, "Well, I know why this isn't working. It's because I'm probably not telling the truth." Nope. I still show up stumped by the problem. I'm like, "Why doesn't this work? Why can't I just shoehorn this fucking scene in here?" I'm just a dope.

The amnesia.

A fucking chronic, relentless dope. It's so bad. That's a surprise. And it's so fun when it does finally start to roll and, oh my god, then the spigot opens and it's just like, "Ah, duh."

Sometimes I think the book is ahead of us, as writers. The book is just like ahead. It's like, catch up. This is it.

Waiting for you.

It's waiting for you.

"The bus is leaving, let's go!" Well, also I'm at the writing stage of cleanup and building a bridge and destroying that bridge. And now I have to build a new state of things. That beginning part is never a problem for me. Never. And then you struggle. Someone said to me the other day, what I find to be the most offensive thing anyone could ever possibly say, I'm joking, but they're like, "God, that must have been really cathartic for you to write that book." And I just laughed so darkly when I hear that, because as anyone who tries to write a respectable, legitimate memoir knows the last word you want to use is "cathartic." It's like, if I think of catharsis, it's like fucking or drinking or dancing all night or bawling your brains out. Those are cathartic enterprises. Writing carefully-well, it's like having a urinary tract infection. It's just, you pee little dribs and drabs and it burns the whole time.

That's going to be the quote of the interview. Writing is like having a UTI.

In this genre. In this, I would say memoir, just because you have to be so extra careful and you have to be so good. For me, I have to. I cannot indulge myself in bad memoir. It's already, for me, a bastard step daughter genre. It's usually ascribed to the ladies. Men are not confessional, the ladies are. I am haunted by all those

horrible, disparaging ways people speak of the category. And, unfortunately, that's what I do for a living. Just naturally.

I'm not a theory writer. I'm not particularly a fiction writer. It just happens to be my format and to have heard all the insults about the form itself, of "Every memoir is written by someone named Mimi." Okay, so you have to deal with the fact that with everyone, you already come off as some sort of wildly self preoccupied narcissist. Then you're confessional. You have no respect for the family secret. You're dangerous. Anyway, you know what I'm saying? All that sits there on your shoulder while you're trying to actually just write a good book in the format. And that's why I'm saying it's not cathartic.

But, no, I still always am disciplined. You know what I'm saying? But my point is I'm not Hemingway and all that shit, like "Kill your darlings." I'm like, *a man wrote that, that's so not..I would never kill my darling. I would rescue my darling. I would get it out of that dangerous place where it doesn't belong and get it in a better home or save it. Don't be all Chekhov and kill your darlings. I agree with all the rules, but I'm not killing any darlings. I'm just taking them out of this story.* Yeah. Again, one could keep one's darlings safe over here in this notebook for another time, another use elsewhere.

Well, not every beloved also has to be a plot device. It's like I don't need to literally murder you in order to get where I need to go. But that's also something interesting about the genre too. Like when is showing something voyeurism and when are you just telling us something that happened that maybe is hard to see?

Is the one speaking the writer or the voyeur in a given scenario, you're saying?

I'm asking, yeah.

If it's at all titillating, if you as the writer feel any little electricity, any little tremor, don't do it. Often it's excitement at your own good work, people get that where they're just like, "Oh, that's going to cause a frisson," or whatever, and it's just "Get it off the fucking page." No, don't do that. It's a sign. It's telling you this is too hot, too wrong. If there's any charge for the writer, it's over. In fact, going back to catharsis, that's what it is. They come to the theater and see the tragedy about war, and the viewer is having a cathartic experience. The playwright writing about war is not having the cathartic experience on the other end. Anyway, no juice for the writer, only for the reader. I don't know if that really addresses that idea of voyeurism. It's a great concern. For memoir in particular.

What is the question you want to be asked? I always want to be asked what I'm reading.

It's funny. I needed some permission, so I started to read this Saul Bellow...It's funny, now I can't remember the title, but I pulled this Saul Bellow, and I picked it up because I know that he breaks some of the rules. And I was like, "I'd like to see someone break the rules handily or masterfully on this certain thing." It's just a rolling practically all dialect, and there's no punctuation. I just wanted to see how it went. I have to admit, though, it's pretty hard to read. I'm struggling.

Who has the time?

Well, it's true. I'm not reading it for pleasure, but I am awake at night a lot because of all this *(gestures to the construction in the restaurant)*. I was going to ask you. *Why* are you reading what you're reading at the moment?

I guess I'm trying to be forgiven.

Have you trespassed in some way or transgressed?

No, I was just a very compartmentalized person. The problem with that is then you're three people and you never know who's going to show up. You just don't know.

You got to be integrated.

I don't even know if I believe in integration, but I don't believe in not writing the thing that you need to write. But also like, why am I reading all this shit about Islamic mysticism and god's forgiveness? I don't believe in god. Why do I need that?

You cover your bases.

Exactly. It's like on the plane where there's turbulence, just checking in. *[makes the sign of the cross]*.

Sometimes I bring the most savage, harshest, most afeared critic to pull up a chair right next to me and I turn, this is metaphorically speaking, and I turn my knees towards this imagined person and I say: "Go." And then I'm like, "You're right. That's true. That is the stupidest, most boring dribble ever. One moment, please. I'm just going to work on it and then I'm going to come back. Okay. What else? Ok, yes, my concerns are vapid and absolutely irrelevant to more important things in the world. You're right. Hold on one second." My advice is you've got to know all the rules before you can break them, and also, don't be boring.

A challenge you exceed at because describing food can be really boring and your work is not.

Right. Let's be hospitable to people's time and that they've decided to spend some time with you and your words on a page, let's be a good host.

Let's be a good host. I love that.

Let's just make sure everyone has what they need.

Gabrielle Hamilton Recommends:

Looking through [the Aventine Keyhole](#) at the Knights of Malta in Rome

The portrait paintings of [Megan Moore](#).

The slim but fully-realized [Elegy For an Appetite](#) by Shaina Loew-Banayan

The iced matcha latte at [Maru](#) in Los Angeles

[Kazimiroff Nature Trail](#) at Pelham Bay Park before 9am

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