

On healing through your creative work



Journalist and author Rachel Krantz discusses the process of writing a memoir, reframing creative blocks, and allowing yourself to feel gratitude.

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As told to Janet Frishberg, 2985 words.

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How did your book, *OPEN*, come about?

I had just started writing in *Bustle* about being in a non-monogamous relationship, but it wasn't that personal. It was more articles on what jealousy is and how we can understand it, using reporting to better adapt to this new paradigm. An agent reached out to me and said, "You should write a book about this, something that's memoir and journalism." I said, "Maybe someday, but I feel like I'm really bad at this. I'm not an expert in everything, I'd rather it be written by an expert." She said, "Just start writing things down."

I was already keeping a journal, but that idea became, over the years, a sort of elaborate coping mechanism. This idea that it wasn't just my journey, but it was something that would maybe be stigma-busting on a larger scale, or lifting up the voices of the other people practicing non-monogamy in all these different ways, who I was meeting. And then with the consent of Adam, my primary partner, I was also recording a lot of our conversations. Our couples therapy sessions, my therapy sessions.

Part of that was because there was so much gaslighting in the relationship with Adam. He was often saying things like, "You're remembering things wrong," or, "I didn't say that, that's not true," or, "You're misinterpreting reality." So I felt increasingly confused over the years. I needed to have some sort of solid record. And this was all at the time of #MeToo as well, so I was watching certain women being believed when they talk about their experiences, and some just discredited because they didn't have evidence.

It was a very writerly instinct, or reporter's instinct, to be like, I'm just going to amass hard evidence of something like reality, even though I wasn't sure I'd ever do anything with it. As those conversations became increasingly distressing, and I couldn't figure out how to assert my position any more, and felt so turned in circles, I think the recorder was a witness. It was a way of feeling like I was not alone. There was a sense of: someone else is watching, even if it's my future self, and I'm going to record it accurately.

When I emerged out of that experience, after a period of introspection and coming back to my mind, I decided to actually turn it into a book. I had a record of all of these different people within the non-monogamous communities, and of how regression and emotional abuse happens, and gaslighting, and the intricate dance people get caught in. It struck me that that might be kind of unusual to have chronicled over the years. I wanted to see if I could make sense of it, and also prove to myself that I was capable of discerning, again, and doing things that are incredibly difficult, after years of being told I wasn't capable.

Was there any point in the book writing process where you got really blocked? And what helped you get unblocked?

With writer's block in general, I find a better way to frame it is in terms of this idea of seasons that mimic external seasons. They mimic my cycle, too. There are these fallow, withdrawn periods where you're menstruating, winter, when you're "blocked," but maybe just not producing. That's a necessary part of the cycle. You're taking a step back, you're reflecting, you're gaining perspective, you're often coming back to yourself, getting quieter. Things are fermenting beneath the surface.

How can you expect yourself to have anything interesting to say if you're just constantly writing? So much of being an artist in general is being one of the people who has the ability, luxury, whatever you want to call it, to pause and ponder, and then make something beautiful out of it, something worth sharing that evokes emotion. If we try to just be in a perpetual spring, it's not actually organic. There's not going to be that much worth expressing.

I found, and I still do, that the seasons aren't always the same in length, but I can sense where I'm at. So when I'm in a prolonged fallow period, like I am now, I try to remember this. How can I give myself permission to take that step back? What would nourish the soil, rather than me being like why the fuck isn't it spring?

Was there any reckoning that you had to do about speaking publicly about some topics that are still fairly taboo in our culture?

Definitely. I felt a lot of fear even though I was already out about it on the internet. It just felt like writing a book was going to be...I don't know, much more permanent somehow, even though things live forever on the internet, too. Also, I knew I was going to go so much deeper with it. Not just in terms of the explicit detail about sex, but my psychology. There's pretty much nothing I'm holding back in the book. Definitely a lot of things my family didn't know. I wasn't even fully out to many people as bisexual. But beyond that, it was talking about my kinks, talking about even just the fact that it had been so dysfunctional of a relationship.

A lot of it was kept a secret, so I had to have a lot of support along the way. Support from friends, and from my counselor Kathy Labriola, who's in the book, and from my teacher, the Buddhist monk Tashi Nyima. I'd check in with them periodically, being like, "Is this a mistake?" And they'd remind me why it was beneficial.

I'd also check in with my friends within the non-monogamous community, with my repeated fears of, am I going to make non-monogamy look bad? Or am I going to make BDSM look bad? Because many of the things with Adam reaffirm negative stereotypes, or they're really cautionary tales of what can go wrong in those situations.

Those friends really were helpful in terms of being like, "No, this is important. We need more nuanced stories. We shouldn't be held to having to be perfect. It's kind of equalizing in its own way." I had a lot of people helping reflect that back to me. Then, I just kept trying to come back to my own sense of purpose, who was I writing this for. That gave me some courage.

How did you think about pacing when you were editing and writing? How did you think about holding your narrator in her patterns and stuckness, but still making it a pleasure to read?

I worried about that, because I can't really control the order things happened in. Part of it is you're feeling my exhaustion, and how there's drama after drama. I'm trying to leave, and then I'm getting pulled back. I wanted to show that cycle, but also it was different each time.

Part of it was leaning into showing what was sexy about even the darkest things, I think, helps keep the reader titillated, or curious. Another good tip I got was to start chapters in the middle of a scene where you can, or much later than you'd think. And then when you can, end with a hint of what's coming next, or a sort of cliffhanger. I found on my first draft I was more likely to want to make the end of the chapter beautiful. But that's also easier to stop reading.

It's also helpful to keep surprises coming. So there are points at the end of the chapter where you hear from me in the future, and you have this sense as a reader of: she is going to get out of this.

Definitely. It's like the fact that the book has been written and published is the promise to the reader that you got out. Because there's no way that somebody who's still in this is going to write a book like this successfully.

That's true. The other thing I'd add is leaning into humor. Where possible, if you're funny in writing, be funny. There are a lot of things that are very dark, but also very funny, and that's okay, that can coexist. In the book, I am falling into addiction, but it's also kind of hilarious to read some of the journal entries. Or at least it is to me. I tried to have a sense of poetry and poignancy, but also humor.

Throughout a lot of the book, you're struggling to feel a sense of entitlement to your own narrative of things, rather than letting Adam's narrative be the predominant one. From my experience, when you're in that dynamic it can take a lot of work to undo that, and get that person's voice out of you. Was writing this part of unlearning that dynamic? What else helped you step into that narrator role in your book?

Writing was definitely a big part of the process of how I continued to clear his voice out of my head and have my own get stronger. It was this really elaborate way of proving to myself that I was capable, that I had a right to tell my story. Obviously his voice, especially in the beginning, was still in there being like, "This is how you're going to spin it, like you're the victim now, and you're going to throw me under the bus like this?" Even as I was trying to make it nuanced, or talk about the suffering on his end, or show how I was also a pain in the ass. It was very hard not to feel the whole time like that was betraying him on some level, even if his identity was protected.

There's something very powerful about seeing the transcript with that distance of: This is Rachel and Adam. It's already not me any more. It's me in the past, and it's already not him, because I'm sure he's someone different now. But there's an irrefutability to what was said. This was the way I was being talked to. And there was so much more than what I included, including conversations that were more egregious. I included what felt the most emblematic, or actually sort of normal.

Then, I had this reason to talk to all of these psychologists and have them literally looking at certain transcripts of our verbatim conversations and then comment on it. They weren't there. There was something very validating in that process itself.

I also talked to different Buddhist teachers who could help me reframe. We talked about not just why am I doing this, or how could this be helpful, but what are ways of talking about this that don't just perpetrate more binaries, or more anger or hate? Because I knew I didn't want to do that. So it was a really interesting opportunity for me to model: what does it look like to hold someone accountable, and work on my own healing, and reclaim my own sense of self and capability? And have boundaries, serious boundaries, but at the same time, not really feel angry at him, and still have a curiosity and a compassion for what was going on for him? I want to understand that better, too.

The other thing is, before I started writing I started meditating regularly, which was really an important part of that process of beginning to clear out his voice, just so that I could better hear who's talking. I also had a long period where I was very sensitive to noise and I wasn't really watching much, or listening to much, besides meditation podcasts or reading. I wanted everything to be very quiet so that I could hear what was happening in my head. As time went on, his voice began losing some of its power. Time really did help, it got farther away. It took years. But after going through all this, there is a sense of some degree of exorcism that took place.

I don't know if you worked with the idea of right speech, but I'm curious how that and your relationship with Buddhism factored into your thinking around writing about other people in the book. Not just Adam, but all of the people you write about in this honest way.

Right speech was big for me. I even had the principles on a bracelet while I was writing to remind me what they were. It was a very useful framework; is it true, is it kind, is it timely, is it necessary? There would be things that were true, but upon further reflection, were not kind, or things that were timely, but not necessary.

I talked with my teachers a lot along the way because I felt that the whole thing is unnecessary, writing a memoir. But they were like no, necessary in the larger sense of, basically, is this helpful? Does it help the helping?

That helped me sometimes. There would be a lot of things that were true and funny, and maybe made for a better read, but I had to look at them and be like, there's a little bit of pettiness there, or a little bit of me revealing something about him that's not actually necessary to reveal. Which might sound crazy because I reveal so much about him.

It was a sort of effective altruism approach of: what will help the greatest numbers? Of course not everything, some things are just jokes and not that serious. But even with that, I would ask, is this helpful? It was tricky, because sometimes there would be things I knew would hurt him to read, but I felt it was necessary, not just to the story, but for the readers to understand. Or it was the kindest thing to do for the greatest number of people. So I was constantly trying to weigh that. I even did a read-through with the right speech lens, and took some things out because of that.

One of the ideas Tashi introduced to me was how we tend to absolutize and exaggerate a lot, and use phrases like only, never, best, worst. These extreme binary terms. I was able to go through and do a word search for any of those, and that was actually very helpful in tightening too. Anywhere those words were coming up unnecessarily, it was either a weaker sentence that could be omitted altogether, or it was a completely unnecessary filler word. Or there was some way I could be more specific.

I've found that those words in my own writing are associated with trauma. The less traumatized I become, the less I want to say those really extreme words. It's like it stops making sense to me as the trauma heals. What inputs did you find to be supportive to your body, or your body-mind, when you were working with such challenging content?

As I was writing, I was reading a lot. I relied on meditation, but also gratitude practices woven in through the day. I keep a five good things journal, and write down five good things that happen every day. I've been doing it for several years now, and it really has helped me retrain my mind to be on the lookout for the good, and to feel just more of a sense of gratitude and ease in my life. It's so easy to focus on everything that's difficult or going wrong, but many of us are very lucky that there's plenty of things going right, even if we're in incredibly challenging circumstances. Things like having running water, or sun on our skin, or food, or shelter, these are amazing. Or parts of your body that didn't break down today. There's so much all the time.

Also, practices like pausing to savor. I had a tree outside the window, and when a bird would land on it, I made it my practice to pause whatever I was doing and linger on the bird until they flew away, which was like 10 or 15 seconds, usually. Just doing that, and trying to really appreciate, would snap me back into the present. It didn't disrupt my workflow. It was helpful.

From the research that I integrated into the book, I learned our positive experiences are not encoded as readily as negative ones, because we're wired to be on the lookout for potential harms. You have to make a deliberate conscious effort to combat the negativity bias by really making yourself notice, and feel in a deep way, that sense of wellbeing.

Baking was major. I was probably baking something every day. I'd reach that point in writing where I'd wonder, why is my heart beating in my ears? Why am I sweating? Then I'd realize it was because I was writing about this super traumatic moment over and over. I'd get up and bake, usually in silence, let my mind wander, and just process.

Dancing is also major for me. Dancing in nature, especially, whenever I can. I was lucky I was living somewhere private, and there were trees. I'd go to my tree worship, I consider that my synagogue, and dance to music, and just listen to the birds and feel that sense of connectedness, and remind myself that there's so much beyond my story.

Rachel Krantz Recommends:

Marco Polo app & voice memos on Whatsapp for introverts who have phone anxiety but want to connect on a more intimate level than texting

Abolishing prisons, factory farms, and all forms of nonconsensual entrapment

The Eco Womanizer & Lelo's Nia 2

Meditation in all forms

Keeping a journal of five good things about each day

Name

Rachel Krantz

Vocation

writer

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Beau Saunders