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As told to Maddie Crum, 3043 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Beginnings, Education, Mentorship, Identity.

# On finding your subject

Novelist Sigrid Nunez on the use of autobiography, writing without an ending in mind, taking responsibility for your work, and why nothing you write is wasted.

Your novel *What Are You Going Through?* begins with a lecture from an academic who speaks candidly and hopelessly about climate change and weapons of mass destruction. His audience's reaction is really negative. "Hope matters," they say. You aren't primarily a lecturer or essayist, but a fiction writer. So, I'm curious: does hope matter to you in contemporary fiction?

Well, I value hope in any human sphere. I mean, hope is a very positive emotion. But I can't say that if somebody writes a book, or a story, or a piece, or something in which... Well, fiction, we're talking about fiction. If somebody writes fiction, and that author's vision is a hopeless one, I can't say the book is no good just because there's no hope in it. If there is a work of fiction that is hopeful about any aspect of human experience, and communicates that hope to me, I would think that that was a very good thing. But it doesn't mean that if it isn't there, that I feel the book has in some way failed.

The most important thing for me is that it doesn't really matter how sad, or hopeless, or depressing a story is. A beautifully told story, no matter how sad, always lifts you up, like Faulkner said. So I feel that a work, whether it's fiction or a work of art in general, no matter how tragic or how grim the subject matter, if it's a fine piece of work, if it's a beautiful work, if it's a well-done work, it lifts you up. That's what I believe.

Throughout the novel, the narrator acts as a caregiver and a listener. Even though she has desires and makes decisions, I feel that we come to see her almost in relief.

Now, what do you mean by "in relief"?

We get to know her through the people she knows.

Yeah.

And through the struggles of the people around her, as opposed to her... well, I guess, in addition to her own struggles.

I know what you mean. I think there's something about this narrator, who keeps herself in the shadows to some extent and is really writing about other people that she encounters. Some of them are complete strangers, and some of them are these women that she was once very close to and is once again becoming very close to.

But I would say that the narrator becomes a character that you know because she's defined by the way she sees the world. She's observing other people in certain circumstances in the world around her, and it's a first-person narrative. So, we get her sensibility, her point of view, how she sees things, and that's how we know her.

Although it's a really different book, I'm reminded of Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy. In interviews, Cusk talks about the death of character, or the old ways of viewing characters as these heroes who go on journeys. What are your thoughts on that?

Well, her name has come up a lot. Not just in talking about this book, but in talking about *The Friend* as

well, my last book. And I am an admirer of Rachel Cusk's, and I have read the trilogy. I think one of the main things that she says that's been quoted a lot is her idea that autobiography is the only subject anymore for fiction.

And it's a little tricky because my work, the book that we're talking about, it reads like some kind of hybrid, maybe a memoir, or it reads like autofiction, you could say. And her work is often called autofiction, though I don't really have any way to know how much of it is auto, and how much of it is fiction.

But in my case, I too have found that certain traditional elements, or that certain elements of traditional fiction—plot, and character development, and a certain kind of narrative structure—just aren't adequate for what I want to do as a fiction writer. But it's not autofiction. I mean, the narrator is a first-person narrator who has certain things in common with me. But none of this happened. It's all invented. The encounters with various people, maybe there are some details from life, but I made everything up.

**I took your class at Brooklyn College, which was centered on autobiographical fiction. Your criteria for that genre was that the writers themselves had to claim the work was autobiographical. When did you first become interested in that genre of fiction?**

Well, my first novel came out in 1995, and it was written over a five-year period. It could have been a story, it could have been an essay, it was completely non-fictional. That is my father, that is my mother. That's a real autobiographical novel, like so many other first novels. 99% of it could have honestly been published as nonfiction. So I must have had a really serious interest in that kind of writing from the beginning.

When I was an undergraduate, I studied with Elizabeth Hardwick, and she was a kind of... I mean, she was a mentor, but she was also a kind of idol, and she had written this book called *Sleepless Nights*. And that's completely autofictional. And I think I somehow haven't always realized what a profound influence that book has had on me, and on my first book. And that book of hers, *Sleepless Nights*, was vastly influenced by Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, which also had a profound influence. And that is a completely essayistic, autobiographical novel, right? And another writer whose work I greatly admire, Renata Adler, who wrote even before Elizabeth Hardwick published *Sleepless Nights*, kind of right before, she published this book called *Speedboat*. I remember Elizabeth Hardwick saying that that book really helped her figure out how to do what she wanted to do.

**You've mentioned that first novels are often closer to writer's lives. Why do you think that might be?**

Well, it was 100 percent true for me, and as a matter of fact, I had made quite a few false starts, as I recall, before I wrote that book. And I have always thought that the reason why those false starts happened is because I was one of the many, many, many, many, many writers who needed to get certain life experiences on the page, certain autobiographical material on the page, before moving on to other kinds of fiction. I think it's just some kind of housekeeping that has to be done before you can even let yourself into another level of imagination. You want to try to understand who you are. I mean, when you write that first book, when you write an autobiographical work like that, I think what you're trying to do is figure out something about your identity. Where you came from, who you are, maybe why you're writing.

There are plenty of books out there. It's not like the autobiographical ones are better or worse. But that's why I wanted to teach that course, because I felt, I'm teaching all these emerging writers, most of them pretty young, most of them unpublished, and a lot of them, what they're going to be working on is something that's autobiographical, and that can be extremely difficult. So, I want to show how many different ways people could do it, and some ways we agreed were better than other ways. We didn't think that all the books were equally successful.

**There was a lot of division. Nobody liked Eileen Myles's novel *Chelsea Girls*, which I think about all the time.**

Right. And then Eileen did write a memoir about [their] dog.

**Right, right. I read that. I loved that.**

I loved it. I absolutely adored it. Yeah.

**I love nonfiction by poets in general.**

Agreed.

**So, I want to discuss the responsibilities that writers have or don't have to the real people in their lives. What in your view are some ethical or artistic guidelines for writing about real people?**

I think the most important thing to remember is that it's not enough to say, "I'm in the right, because this is me, I'm a writer, and I want to tell this story, and I need to tell this story." You really have to take responsibility for what you're doing. I mean do it if that's what you want to do, but don't poo poo or dismiss the fact that this could be hurtful to some other person. And then you have to weigh that. You have to figure out what you're doing and why, and you have to face up to that responsibility. And I think that you have to acknowledge that people don't want people to write about them, generally.

And if you write a certain kind of book, one that clearly has the agenda of telling the world how much you suffered at the hands of other people, and everybody was mean to you, and they were so bad to you, and your father was awful, and your mother was awful, it's just no matter how good a writer you are, if it comes across as a desire to get back at these people who hurt you, as a work of literature, it's going to be unpleasant. I don't want to read it. I don't trust it.

Toni Morrison had a very strong feeling about this. She said a person has a copyright on their own life, and it shouldn't be available to other people for fiction. She didn't do it, she would never do it.

**It must be hard to suss out when you're drawing on other people's lives and when you aren't, though.**

I know what you mean. Right. But I think she was really talking about all these writers who write very transparently. And so, I mean, I completely respect what she's saying, but I didn't obey what she was saying. So, I see both sides of it, but I take what she said very seriously, and I think whoever's doing this, and involved in this, in writing about other people, should take some time and sit there with what she said.

The only other thing that I'll say about that, is that I think you also have to trust your conscience, because unless you're a psychopath, you know almost physically when you are doing something wrong. I mean, your stomach churns. When you lie, in certain situations you almost wet your pants, your cheeks turn very red, your hands might shake when you lie, if you cheat. You have a physical response. And so, I feel like, you know when you're doing something evil. And if you're getting that feeling, not just anxiety about what your mother's going to think when she reads this, right? But this other feeling, I think that's what you have to trust. You have to trust that you know when you're doing something really wrong, as opposed to doing something that might have repercussions that aren't wonderful, and that you're going to have to deal with. And that is how I felt. I knew there would be repercussions. I knew there would be problems with my family. But I did feel that I had to do what I did, and I also have not regretted it. That's important, too. That you not end up regretting it.

**What is something else you wish someone told you when you began writing?**

That nothing is wasted. If you write these 40 pages, and none of them are working, and they all go in the garbage, right? They feel wasted. They weren't wasted.

Sometimes you have to write many pages that are not going to end up in the book. They're going to end up elsewhere, deleted, thrown out, whatever. But you would not have reached where you were going if you hadn't gone through all that process. When you're writing, nothing is wasted. No matter how many drafts aren't working, or how much material you end up not using. It's all part of the process, and you have to go through that to get to something that does work.

**How do you start a project?**

Well, it's very simple for me. It's pretty much always the same. I might have certain things swimming around in my head. We all always do. What's been on your mind lately? You could ask anybody that, and you'd get a couple of answers. But, I always jump in. I always just try to think of a first sentence. Well, actually, I decide firstly if it's going to be in third person or first person. And then I just think of something, I just get something moving.

In this case, I was at the Djerassi Foundation in California as a resident, and I hadn't started a new book yet, and it had been a whole year since I finished *The Friend*. And it just came to me to say, "I went to hear a man give a talk." That just entered my head. And then I just thought, "Well, what man? Who is 'I'? What talk? Where is she?" And then I just went with it, and it's pretty much always been that way.

With *The Friend*, I had on my mind this idea of Cambodian women and their psychosomatic weeping, that I had been thinking about that for a while. I had been thinking about suicide among my friends, suicidal thoughts among my friends, and I just started with that. And so, I just really... I don't try to think it out beforehand, or make a lot of plans, or do a plan or anything like that. I just try to think of something, anything that sounds promising. And then I just try to stick to it, as opposed to having 10 options.

**So you find the beginnings of your novels tend to stay intact through revision?**

Yeah, totally. I mean, that's why I stick with this plan, because it's almost like I set that task for myself. I don't allow myself to deviate from it. I think, "Well, there must be a reason I came up with this sentence and not any other sentence."

Even with something as simple as my book about Virginia Woolf, and her husband, and their pet monkey, Mitz, which is largely nonfiction, because I use the Woolf husband and wife, their journals, and letters, and biographies, and all this stuff to construct this story. It just came to me, to say, "It was a Thursday in July." Which is not a great way to start any book. I mean, anybody would tell you, "don't start with what day it was." But in this particular book, I wanted to start with a certain scene that actually took place that I took from her diary. And I kind of liked the way that it sounded almost Woolfian to me. "It was a Thursday in July." Right?

And as you know from writing, the more you write, the more you put down, the narrower your opportunities become, because you put it down, you committed to something. I mean, you've introduced a character, now you can't get rid of the character. Who is this man giving this talk? And what would he be talking about?

**In Heidi Julavits' book, *The Folded Clock*, she uses this metaphor of driving up an icy path—she and her friend actually did this—and it keeps getting narrower, and they can't go back because it's icy. And so, it's this sort of, I don't know, irreversible trip ahead.**

Yeah. Yeah, and I think that's a good thing. A really long time ago, there were so many things you could not write about in fiction. You could not write about sex, for example. There were all kinds of things you couldn't write about, because there were these rules, and there were these laws. But now, of course, you can write about absolutely anything. Anything, anything at all, and it's a little overwhelming. And so to pull things in and narrow things down is actually helpful.

**Right. And how do you know when a project is done?**

I think that's the part of writing that I think is the most intuitive and unpredictable. What happens to me is that I—unlike other writers that I've known, particularly mystery writers—I don't have an ending in mind. And it might happen when I get to a certain point that I think, "Oh, I know how this is going to end probably." And then I write a little more, and I think, "Well, that won't work."

So, what always happens is that as I approach the ending, I can sense myself coming to an ending. And then because I've been working for such a long time on the book, and it's all in my head, and many things have happened supposedly, the thing just starts to draw tight. The threads start to come together. "Well, I've left this loose, and that loose, and that loose. So how can these be pulled together? And what can I say that would make a satisfying close?"

It doesn't have to be a resolution to all the problems I bring up, and it doesn't have to be a surprise ending, or a slam-bang ending, but I find that at a certain point when I'm writing something natural starts to happen. And even if it takes a lot for me to write the ending, and sometimes it does, it still feels natural. I can feel myself moving toward ending in a successful way.

One of my big anxieties is I'm going to get somewhere, and then think, "Well, how do I end it?" But I think that's false. I mean, I think it has to end. It has to end somewhere.

#### Sigrid Nunez Recommends:

Botanical gardens

Birdwatching

Very long solitary walks (remembering what Nietzsche said about all great ideas coming to a person while walking).

Learn tap dancing

Learn to read in another language besides your native one

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