

Stephanie Danler on having your first book blow up



The author of *Sweetbitter* discusses the disorienting nature of sudden success, protecting your creative voice, and the problem of likability.

December 19, 2016 - Hailed as "the 'Kitchen Confidential' of our time" by the *New York Times*, Stephanie Danler's debut novel, *Sweetbitter*, became an immediate bestseller earlier this year. Not only does the novel provide an accurate behind-the-curtain view of the inner workings of a Manhattan restaurant (not so loosely based on Danler's own experiences working at NYC's Union Square Cafe), it also—perhaps more compellingly—captures the wonder and terror of being a young person in a new city with little to no idea of what they are doing.

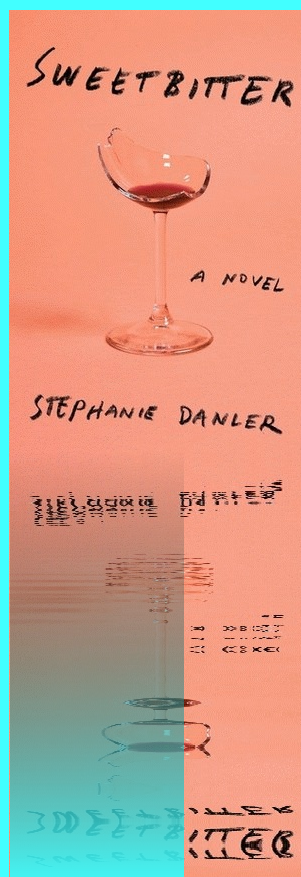
Danler now lives in Los Angeles and is currently in the process of recovering from *Sweetbitter* mania and working on her second novel.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3366 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Beginnings](#), [First attempts](#), [Success](#).

Your debut novel, *Sweetbitter*, seemed to be everywhere this year.

It will probably take me a few years to actually process all of it. I keep thinking about the contrast between this year and 2015, when I was going to a bunch of writing residencies and editing a book and mostly traveling alone. I created this very quiet and creative space for myself to work. I had quit my last restaurant job and was focusing on the book and was somehow able to get away with just disappearing. It feels like I haven't had a single moment to myself in all of 2016. I started doing press for the book pretty early on... and then it became a totally different kind of animal. And now I work for that animal. I basically work for *Sweetbitter*. I am now Stephanie Danler's assistant. The craziest thing to me is how far away all of this feels from my writing self—the person last year who was working on a book that no one yet cared about.



Did people have any inkling that your book was going to be so huge?

Everyone told me that things were going to be crazy, and my life was going to change. I was of the frame of mind that your life doesn't change if you don't want it to, which is part of the reason I'm in Los Angeles. I have a very quiet life here. It's on purpose that I've left the place that's the center of my industry. I didn't want my life to change and, as it turns out, you cannot prepare yourself for it. People love to give advice about it, especially writers who have had many books. They'll tell you to be working on your second novel when your first one comes out. They'll tell you to either read all the reviews or none of the reviews, or to take a vacation. Basically, you make it up as you go along. It's one foot in

front of the other. To think that I would be writing a novel in the middle of all this is actually laughable.

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I have also made choices that... well I don't know now if I would make those same choices. I just said yes to everything, and I continue to do so because it's such a privilege to be in the game, so to speak. I also realize that it's winning the lottery to have a book that generates this level of interest, so I feel that part of the job is to repay that interest, and to do the interviews, to do the events, and to talk to the young women, and answer questions that feel sometimes irrelevant or inappropriate. I do my best to give back. You cannot plan it. Everyone hopes for success, but you cannot plan that your book is going to become a best seller. Maybe you can, but those books are usually shit.

Were you surprised by people's reactions to the book specifically? Things that you just assumed people would like about it that they didn't, or vice versa?

I think there are little surprises all the time. For the most part, the sentences get ignored, when that's all I cared about. It was so hard for me to fit a structure or a plot around the kind of sentences I wanted to write and the feelings I wanted to evoke. This sense of discovery and elation and melancholy. That's the stuff that no one, for the most part, ever talks about. Occasionally someone will say, "This is beautiful writing." I try to hold space for that and listen. I guess I'm not surprised that people are obsessed with the restaurant exposé aspect of the book, but that part of it is so uninteresting to me, and I don't feel like I really exposed anything. I could have gone that way and very consciously didn't. When people talk about the juicy details, I'm like, "What book were they reading? Maybe they're not reading my book."

As someone who worked in bars and restaurants for many years, I get why that "behind the scenes" stuff is interesting to other people. It's less interesting if you actually had to live that life. What was more fascinating to me was to see the ways in which people reacted to the book's main character, Tess. Some of the reactions to her were almost hostile.

I still haven't read any reviews and I totally stand by that. There's something that happened in March where I was on the internet and realized that it was now a hostile place for me. No writer has any business reading anything about their work if they want to protect the part of them that creates. Since then, my whole life has been about protecting that space in hopes that I can write something again someday. Maybe other people have thicker skin than I do, but I don't want that noise in my head when I'm going back to make art. I think it ruins the art.

As far as the book goes, I do know that people have a really hard time with Tess's voice. People will say things to me at readings about it. Last night I did a live comment and answer thing for *NY Magazine* on Instagram, and someone was like, "Do you actually like Tess?" That was their question. I was like, "Oh fantastic." My answer aside, it's been interesting to see that readers think part of their job as a reader is to judge whether they "like" the characters. That that is somehow integral to their experience of the book.

I'm not a reader like that. I think that a lot of us, either because we studied literature or we're active readers on our own, understand that there is merit in reading about unlikable people. There's also merit in reading about boredom, which is something that Beckett and David Foster Wallace do really well. Reading as a painful kind of experience. Then there's a whole culture of gory stuff, like Chuck Palahniuk stuff. These are valuable reading experiences to me. I never read and think, "I just didn't like the character." I want to have respect for whatever the author is trying to do or show us about the human condition.

With Tess, she's not nearly as complicated as most antiheroes or unlikable narrators. What's interesting to me is that it's often her femininity or her girlhood that makes her hard for people to watch. It's her naivete and, at points, her superficiality. The things that I thought were so essential to exploring this moment in your life when you're 22 are the things that sometimes make people cringe.

Behind this book, influence-wise, are the female writers of the early 1970s. I adore them. I'm talking about Elizabeth Hardwick, Joan Didion, Renata Adler, and Susan Sontag. Fiction and nonfiction. They created women that were paranoid and cynical and hard-drinking and cold. All of them were criticized for that personally, as writers. I think what I admire—and I didn't realize this until my book came out—is that I was always drawn to their sense of voice. They write incredible sentences. That's why I love them so much. Also, a lot of their books didn't have a linear plot, and I really respond to that. They often wrote about unlikable women. I really think that they're all known as being formally inventive, but I think that their difficulty is often the overlapping theme. These are women that are bitchy, women that didn't really fit the mold of what was popular in fiction in the 1970s.

Tess is not like that at all. She's the antithesis of that because she's not cynical, she's soft and sincere. We really are not comfortable with putting girls—and I use the term 'girl' on purpose—in morally ambiguous territory. I think what makes her tough for people is that she doesn't go through a catharsis or a transformation. There were different points when I was writing it where people would be like, "She needs to be more likable, she shouldn't do X, Y or Z at the end." The ending is a perfect example. I don't know if we need to put the ending in this interview and spoil it, but over and over again in graduate school as I was working on the book I was told things like, "It makes her too unlikable. It's too intense. Readers will stop feeling anything for her if she does this. Why does she do this? I cannot understand it." That was in graduate school. Fast forward to a couple months ago where a woman who ran a book club in Minnesota wrote my agent demanding an explanation, because she was so angry about the ending of the novel.

Why specifically?

They wanted to know why she behaved in certain ways. They thought it makes no sense. Why did she unravel the way she did? It bothers people to see good girls making bad choices. It also titillates them. There's an entire industry based around that. My character is not... It's not an addiction narrative. She's not becoming an alcoholic, or a drug addict, or a sex addict. She's not going to be diagnosed and put on pills at the end of it. She's just living. It's messy. The second you think you understand sex, you realize you don't. The second you think you understand intimacy, you realize you really don't.

People's reaction to the book, they speak to so many things. I've been thinking a lot about this. It speaks to how conditioned we are to expect certain kinds of narratives—that at the end there will be some catharsis, or they'll get back together, or there will be some triumphant moment of closure. We're so conditioned for these narrative expectations. I'm sure all of those writers I mentioned earlier—these amazing women writers in the '70s—must have felt this really profoundly. I'm still amazed how often I talk to writers and filmmakers who can't extinguish those ideas and expectations out of their heads. They can't accept that this one person in my book and her story is not necessarily me, and that she isn't supposed to represent all women of a certain age.

The issue of "reliability" is one that comes up again and again.

That's something else about readers' expectations that has been interesting to learn. They'll say, "Well, this isn't what it was like when I was 22!" That is the criticism, or that's the beginning of the conversation. I'm like, "Yes, of course. It's a piece of art. It isn't what it was like when I was 22 either." I mean it's similar, but it's exposing a moment in time. A very highly, highly congestive moment. I think probably every writer goes through the exact same thing. I wasn't prepared for it. I find the characters, especially Tess, redeeming because of their sincerity. I think what holds her moral fiber together is the fact that she really does want to do a good job. That sounds simplistic, but I personally think that's very brave. I think it is a really noble idea: I just want to do a good job. I don't want to make art. I don't want to take over the world. I just want to become an adult and do a good job. All she's doing is pushing these buttons and trying to incite her real life, which is a huge part of what I went through in my 20s... as well as a lot of the people around me.

Increasingly, people seem to feel that if they're going to invest the energy into reading a book or watching a movie, it needs to be relatable to them in some way... or else, it's simply "not good."

This is going to come down to a art commerce conversation. Art doesn't owe the reader anything, but a *product* that someone buys and invests time in does owe some things to the reader. There is this idea that you owe them a "satisfying" story, a "satisfying" investment of their time. When you're writing the book, if you're trying to make something larger than itself—which I think most art is trying to do—you can't help but think about that. It's trying to take your miserable move to New York City and make it into some sort of heightened moment, and make a lesson out of it. I realize that not all art is moralizing in any way, shape, or form, but I definitely wanted to do that. That is kind of the opposite of wanting to make something relatable to everyone.

Stephanie Danler recommends:

Everyone is due for a visit to Mexico City. Yes, the art is fantastic, but so is open-air museum of mid-century buildings, markets, parks, and cafes. Walk-it's big so take the bus and then walk, or take a cab, it's cheap. Splurge for dinner at Pujol or Maximo Bistro. Drink mezcal in the afternoon at your neighborhood bar. And yes, it's safe.

The Pedestrians by Rachel Zucker - Colloquial, quiet, profound. Poems on marriage and motherhood, malaise, escape, and art-it's one of those collections in which you can't separate a single poem from the whole.

White Burgundy from Vezelay - I can't touch my white burgundy habit. Which leads to slightly off-the-radar appellations, which tend to have stellar producers and a fantastic price to quality ratio. Though Vezelay (which touches Chablis but is slightly cooler) was traditionally a bulk wine regions, the terroir is granite heavy and it's definitely the steely, stony side of Chardonnay. Try the producers Domaine la Cadette and Faverelles in the current vintage.

Slow Days, Fast Company by Eve Babitz - A recently re-published classic from the sixties. Babbiz has dark humor for days.

-People nowadays get upset at the idea of being in love with a city, especially Los Angeles. People think you should be in love with other people or your work or justice. I've been in love with people and ideas in several cities and leaned that the lovers I've loved and the ideas I've embraced depended on where I was, how cold it was, and what I had to do to be able to stand it. It's very easy to stand LA, which is why it's almost inevitable that all sorts of ideas get entertained, to say nothing of lovers."

Kaputt by Destroyer - I do a lot of driving in CA, and if I'm heading out to PCH, or going into the desert on the 10, I still love to experience a whole album. This is my latest though it came out in 2011, I'm slow-there's a perfect melodic unity and nostalgia to the songs and the lyrics always surprise. Listen to "Chinatown" driving around any downtown and you'll be hooked.

Maybe it's about a change in the way people read-that it's so rare for people to read now. It's not our preferred mode of consumption. People aren't reading to get information anymore... or rather, they are not reading novels to get information or to get access to other worlds or points of view. They're reading novels to confirm the way that they already think is okay, to confirm their existence. I think I even fall prey to this as well. I read very deeply, but sometimes I find myself reading narrowly. I have read everything that Joan Didion has ever written, for example. I reread novels all the time, but then I've never read a book by Phillip Roth, mostly because it feels outside of myself... so maybe I'm guilty of the same thing. I know that I *should* read him. I'm interested. I really push myself, especially with fiction, to read outside of my comfort zone, but I think all of us fall into that trap of reading the things that give us confirmation about our interests and obsessions and feelings.

If you've done anything with a specific point of view, people are going to disagree with it.

It's something like: "I know I should read that, but the idea of reading it exhausts me and life is too short. Also, I don't care."

That's different though. I think that's also really valid. Life *is* too short. That is something else to consider when fielding criticism. When you put out a book that's important to remember-if you've done anything with a specific point of view, people are going to disagree with it. There are a million books that I see and I know that the people that wrote them are brilliant, and I'll just be like, "It's not my thing. It's 1,000 pages. It's not my thing."

It might be too early to say, but how has your experience with *Sweetbitter* affected what you might do next? How do you get back to that quiet, normal working life of a writer after you go through this roller coaster experience?

I don't know how the logistics will occur. I don't know that. I don't know when my schedule will open up. It probably will when I finally put real boundaries around my time, which is what I had to do in order to write the first book. I cannot recreate that life or death drive that motivated the first novel, but I... I want to think about how to phrase this appropriately... Publishing *Sweetbitter* was not what that life or death drive was focused on. The drive was simply to become a writer. Publishing *Sweetbitter* got me there. I've always seen a career out in front of me... and I'm four books ahead in my mind, which is very strange. I have a friend that's a director, and he talks about this film that he's been nurturing, and he's like, "Probably in seven years it will be my project." I was like, "Oh my god, that is how it works at this point." When you are generating your own content, and you've put something on the back burner to let it simmer, eventually it will come to the forefront. Those projects have always been in my mind, even while I was writing *Sweetbitter*.

Thankfully I don't have the, "Will I ever write again?" fear. That's not what it is. What will be interesting is the relationship with knowing that I have an audience and feeling obligations to that audience. Even if I don't. I think this happens to a lot of writers and they get rebellious against it in their next book... and then everyone hates their second book. *[laughs]*

It changes things to know someone is listening, even if you're trying for it not to.

It totally does. I'm so aware of it. That doesn't mean that I'll escape it by any means. With my next project, it's really going to be about challenging myself. I'm a nerdy lit major, so I'm like, "Okay I don't want to write in the first person for a long time. I want to do close third person thing, three different characters, rotating." I'm a writer. That's the stuff that excites me to think about-what I can do formally that will stretch me and make me better. Then there's also that rebelliousness, which is that everyone is going to want me to write about food in New York City for the rest of my life... and I'm never going to do it again.

Name

Stephanie Danler

Vocation

Writer

Fact

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