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As told to Elle Nash, 2713 words.

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On diving into what scares you

Television writer and producer Sera Gamble discusses being obsessed with your work, becoming compulsively responsible, and why there's no shortcut to good writing.

You recently posted about writing poetry on Instagram and dealing with rejection. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your more literary ambitions?

I wrote poetry before I ever wrote screenplays. I studied it in college. I took a lot of creative writing classes at UCLA. And even before that, I was doing open mic nights in high school with my tortured poetry I thought everybody needed to definitely hear. Reading poetry has never left. I go to that, it's almost spiritual. It makes the concerns of the rest of my life shrink to their proper size. The pandemic struck and that put my job into such a strange perspective because I was working pretty much every waking second of my day. It was so complicated to figure out how to produce a show during COVID. All the fun parts of doing the job suddenly seemed far away. I wasn't hanging out in a room with writers, shooting the shit, talking about our lives. I was not going to drinks with friends. It was only the work part. I had to find something that was for me and not related to the stuff of career.

I'm not a good submitter, I don't have any method to my madness at all, but when I'm reading a book, I go to the back of it and see where those poems were previously published, and that will lead me down a little rabbit hole. What is this literary magazine where the poetry editor is obsessed with Franny Choi because I'm obsessed with Franny Choi, too?

How do those disciplines like poetry, screenwriting, and producing and show running interrelate for you?

When I'm approaching something from the art and storytelling perspective, a lot of those hard boundaries between different forms melt away for me. I think, frequently, when we're writing, it's from this impulse inside us that doesn't make logical sense and doesn't start in words. It's a feeling or an experience that's haunting us. I think of them as different tools in a toolbox. One thing I really know at this point in my life having written pretty seriously since I was 16-ish, is that you need to write a lot to become a good writer.

There's no shortcut. You're going to have to write for years and years to be good. That's the spiritual side of it you embrace. This is not an easy thing. You're going to be on a road and it's going to go parallel to you learning about yourself.

Is it okay to abandon a project? When do you decide that abandoning a project is actually in your best interest?

Sometimes I'm like, maybe now is not the moment. This is a very tricky thing we're talking about, because writers are sneaky little bastards. We have to learn how to tell the difference between "this is so fucking hard, I'm having a complete temper tantrum about it, and I have seriously hit a wall and I don't know how to solve this problem right now." Or "I thought this premise had enough juice to write a whole feature, but I'm now not sure it does." The discipline is in saying, "This is hard, but I have to keep pushing at it." The self-doubt has come in and I have to push that away. Some stories, they don't give themselves up so easy.

John McNamara, I wrote *The Magicians* with him, has been a friend and a mentor to me my whole TV career. There are ideas we've been talking about for 10 years at this point. When it comes to writing and fiction, one thing for me, is I have so much control of the world when I write, I can make everything feel exactly how I want. But when it comes to adapting someone else's work, like with *The Magicians*, it's more of a collaborative process.

I was wondering if you could talk about what it's like to bring someone else's vision to life in a way that still feels authentically like what you want.

It is a collaboration because you've been handed this story that has been told a certain type of way, almost never in a way that will translate totally seamlessly to television or film. Novels are a completely different beast. You can spend the whole novel inside somebody's head and in fact, the novel, *You* [which Sera adapted to TV on Netflix], does. I think you have to approach each one on its own terms. I think that that job is different if you happen to be adapting something mind-blowingly popular with a pre-existing fandom that's especially intense. For me it's like, why do I love the book? What was the moment in this book where I started texting all my friends that they have to read this? And this is something I keep private, I don't necessarily wave it around and advertise it, even in a writer's room, but I also ask myself, "What is the weird spikey, unhealed thing inside of me that's being spoken to so directly by this character?"

Sometimes we are attracted to a character because somehow the pain they're in mirrors our own, or the problem they're in rubs up against something raw inside of us. It's powerful to examine yourself and be like, "Okay, I'm going to get really honest about something, that excites me. It scares me a little and excites me."

When it comes to collaborating, are there times where it's become difficult? What happens when there are creative disagreements or different visions?

It's quite common for people to disagree in a writer's room. That's part of everybody's job to, we call it, kick the tires on the idea, where someone will pitch something and if something is bothering us or it feels like it's not going to work, we have to pursue that because we want the story to be really airtight. There is a writer's room etiquette that I try to instate it in any room I'm running, where there's a way to be additive when you're criticizing something. You're looking at this mushy cookie dough that might one day be an episode, scattered on a corkboard in little cards and you're going, Will that one work?

It is quite aggravating to look at because it's stressful, all these problems that have to be solved. The rule I like to have is, don't kill anything if you don't have an alternate pitch. Buying that little space of time in a room with eight people in it, frequently is enough to let that weird little nonsensical idea grow enough roots we can now take care of it and make it make sense.

You worked on Supernatural until season seven and moved on to other projects. How did you balance those different projects? How are you balancing different projects now?

My loved ones would be like, She doesn't handle it well! I've never been that balanced. I don't know why we would ever hold up people who clearly obsessively work all the time as people who will have mastered balance because I don't know that I ever will. I don't know that I even really want to. I don't want to be actively murdering myself with my work, but I have always worked all the time in my head. I think part of being a writer for a lot of us is that it never fully turns off. You think you're chilling out and watching *The Great British Bake Off* and suddenly you have an idea and it's not like you knew you were on or off the clock at 10:30 at night, you are in it when you're in it.

Back in the day, there were a lot of shows that had 22 to 24 episodes a season, *Supernatural* was like that. Your year was pretty carved out. You also, by the way, had a couple months to take a vacation in between seasons, because it was definitely going to take up most of your year. Now seasons are 13 episodes, or 10, or 8. It's more common to see writers have to put together their own slate in the course of a year. If you're creating shows, if you're pitching ideas and hoping that somebody puts them on the air, you don't have control over that. You have to have a lot of irons in the fire in the hopes one of them will go.

The stuff I'm working on now, it's this pile of stuff and hopefully one or two of them in three years will be [picked up]. It could happen quicker, could never happen, but you have to do a lot at once because otherwise you'll hit the end of your year and there'll be nothing lined up. It's not helpful for living a really chill life.

Do you ever get burnt out on what you're doing?

Usually the creative side refuels me. Going to actual writing, unless I'm fully exhausted, most of the time I can count on that to put me in a state of flow that is nutritional, rejuvenating to me. The managerial aspects of being a TV producer have the capacity to burn me out if I'm not careful. In my case, that wasn't anything I came into the business thinking I was capable of, much less that I was seeking out. It turns out I'm a compulsively responsible person. I have a good personality to be a producer, but the tricky thing about that is it could eat your whole day, every day forever. Then there's no room for the writing part. Other people are doing all the fun stuff.

By the time you've jumped through all the hoops and you're actually writing the dialogue, it's like eating the icing off the cupcake. The icing is my favorite part. If you're not careful, there won't be much icing for you if you're in meetings all day, every day. That's the thing I've had to learn how to have stronger boundaries around.

During the pandemic I was teaching a writing workshop on top of finishing manuscripts, and what slowly happened was I taught all the time and edited other people's work. I was like, "Well, where's my writing? Where's my stuff?"

This is so common. When younger or newer writers say to me, "But I have to have this day job and I'm taking care of my children, it's so hard to find time to write." That struggle is real. We shouldn't discount that our culture doesn't give us enough space to be doing what we're supposed to be doing. But it's also really good practice for being a professional writer because the dirty secret is you never get time. There's no regular time in my schedule that says, Sera is writing. That, I fill in before and after and on a break and on the weekend, my whole day is other stuff.

Can you talk about your relationship to social media and digital spaces?

I definitely had some bad moments with that early in the pandemic where I realized I was doom scrolling to the point of actual depression and had to be really strict with myself. Almost like you would be with somebody who had gone off the deep end with cocaine. I always like to have a lot of input, not directly about my work per se, but I like to find other artists, I love going on Instagram and finding art I've never seen before, poets and sculptors. I follow them and get really inspired by that scroll.

I like the side of good where it enables you to get actionable advice from people in the business you want to be in. I try to do that, I try to answer people's questions. Teenage me didn't have the internet, it was before social media. But I would've killed to have a professional writer explain to me how they learn how to write a spec, for example. So, that I've really embraced. I am definitely at the point where I have realized that I don't get much of value out of reading reviews, though.

I think each person gets to have their own relationship to that kind of direct feedback. We can be compassionate about it to ourselves and other people because there's something almost genetically primal about going, "Oh, people are saying things about me. I probably need to know and listen." If you got picked down on the playground, that's hitting you right in your nerdy little strange girl who was picked on and people were talking about her. If you don't know what boundaries you need, you will be completely porous in 2021. Privacy is dead. Twitter has no guardrails. There is only the deep end of the pool.

I have really asked myself what helps me challenge myself to go further in my work, what enables me to be open to criticism. I'm not trying to avoid people having a problem with what I'm saying. I want to have those conversations in the writer's room. What do I need to do to wake up the next morning and take a risk again?

When did you become enlightened to what you really wanted to pursue?

Even as a little kid, I always wanted to perform and write and learn how to play musical instruments and sing and dance. I wanted to do all of it. I think it's my home frequency to want to do all of those things. I did have this very old school Eastern European father who came from the intelligentsia who went to those universities there that have been there for a thousand years. This whole country is too young. He said something to me that I don't know now if I agree with, but he was like, "You're not an artist yet, you have to really work at it." And that is such an old fashioned view of things. Go to the conservatory, become a concert pianist, then you can call yourself an artist.

For better or for worse, whether or not that's actually true, whether I was born an artist or became one through sweating over years, I couldn't shake that. He said it to me too young. It was never disconnected from the feeling I had to work my ass off and expect no laurels or rest. This was going to be a really long haul. I was writing stuff to perform [as an actress] and that led to be asked to write more, and I decided to really try to get a job in that area. If it hadn't worked out, I would've tried something else. Either it's total fate or it's total coincidence that I ended up in this job.

What would you say is the most surprising thing you've learned about yourself in doing this kind of work through your creative career?

A surprising thing. I love this question. I think, in retrospect, it probably wasn't a surprise, but part of being the artist black sheep of my family, is that I had a reputation for being a bit of a flake growing up and for being off in my head a lot. I had to be told three times what the curfew was or when I should be somewhere. "I don't know how she'll do in the real world." It turns out I love the external structure. Like I said, I'm compulsively responsible. Listen, I definitely have had some jobs before this one where I wasn't employee of the month, we'll just say that. Maybe it kicked in because I loved it and it was the right place and I wanted to fight for it.

Sera Gamble Recommends:

The poetry of Tracy K Smith

Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro

Tigers Are Not Afraid

Carrying a journal at all times, and filling it with your pettiest thoughts

Picking one bad thing you're supposed to self-improve your way out of and deciding that instead, you are going to keep it and also never apologize for keeping it.

Name

Sera Gamble

Vocation

Television writer and producer

Fact

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