

On asking yourself what kind of artist you want to be



Writer and multidisciplinary artist Fariha Róisín discusses hope beyond despair, the importance of resistance, and alchemizing grief.

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As told to René Kladzyk, 3218 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Art](#), [Process](#), [Politics](#), [Identity](#), [Inspiration](#).

To begin, can you describe the overlap between your creative practice as a writer and your work as an activist?

I was radicalized really young because of my father—my father is a dope human and a Marxist and anti-colonial and raised me on Vandana Shiva and Noam Chomsky. I think that that gave me an exceptional understanding that capitalism was built against me.

And so I was rooted naturally in a revolutionary politics, even if I didn't know what that meant as a teenager. I wanted to fight for people. And as I got older, I started to sort of put two and two together and I started to realize that I was a child sexual abuse survivor. And then that story has been the central focal point of my work in recent years, sitting with the grief of that reality and also sitting with the acknowledgement that I've never been normal and I don't know what that is. I think having your agency taken away from you at such a young age makes you confront the reality that that can even happen. And so you are forced into a position of fighting for yourself to validate your story, and to be seen in a world that doesn't want to see you on so many different levels.

What is the message that you have for other artists right now, in terms of the importance of political art?

I think the best and most interesting thinkers are people like James Baldwin and Nina Simone, and people that talked about how art and political action go hand-in-hand because they're the same vessel. Why make art if you have nothing to say? And why make art if you're not going to respond to the world around you? Everyone's implicated in this. Not only because of the US war machine, but because of the ways in which we've all played into this story. I've been involved in Palestinian organizing for almost two decades of my life, and that is also because of my father.

Something that I heard many times when I was growing up, this sort of question that people throw around in the playground. What would you do if a genocide happened? How would you act? These moral questions that we ask ourselves. I think that people think that they're much better than they are. Artists have a lot of ego about what they do and who they are and how they function in this world. And I don't think that you can be an artist of this world if you don't have anything to say about it, and especially if you don't have anything to say about the cruelty of it.

We owe it to the survivors of genocide, which my parents are, we owe it to people who have experienced this. We owe them our words, our language, our documentation, our resistance. I want people to understand that they owe resistance right now, we are all connected, we are all in this together, and that we are all responsible for one another. And I think that we keep going on this charade where we think that we are individualistic and that we

are only here to live our lives to the fullest, or whatever corporate bullshit people want to tell themselves.

We are facing mass death, we are facing ecocide. Scientists are telling us that we have gone beyond the tipping point. And is this the legacy that we are going to leave behind? That we as a society, allowed people to be subjugated to this kind of carnage. For the first time in the history of the world, we are actually being faced through mass documentation with what we've known has been happening for hundreds of years, through Western European imperialism. To me, it's just like, what kind of art do you want to make, and what kind of artist do you want to be?

You have such a significant body of public-facing written work, what was the journey to establish all of that? Did you always feel emboldened to share your words on the world's stage, or was it a process to feel ready to do that?

I never had anyone validate that it was okay or good. I didn't have that teacher that saw me and was like, "I'm going to pluck you out and make you a star." I don't have that journey, and I was always seeking that. I have a really backward story because I didn't go to school for writing, I didn't finish a degree. I'm out here without formal education.

I've seen it as something that has held me back. Not having the right networking or feeling like I'm not understood as a writer, has kept me in my own way. I feel like I'm too emotional and I feel like I'm too feeling. And I think that those things are really disregarded in the writing world, or even just in the world. And my work is about initiating the practice of looking at the world around you and understanding that there's just so much wisdom everywhere.

For me, the page is the place where I go to understand myself and to express myself. I grew up around a lot of rules, so I had to come home and that was it, and I couldn't go out again. That confinement kind of forced me to delve deeper into learning and reading and seeking. And that, to me, is a very Muslim pursuit. My entire practice is trying to decode something that has been lost through colonization, I'm trying to decode an ancestral art. This is the person that I am, and I have to have a place to release it and allow it to exist. Like a Bird, my novel that came out a couple of years ago, I started writing it when I was 12 years old. I know now it was the only way that I could attempt to say these things happened to me. It was easier to do it through someone else's story and just to let it be a story that I was writing.

The book is so much about my life story. It's about a girl who gets gang raped and it's by a family friend. I wanted to understand what happens to somebody when they are abandoned, and what happens when life feels hopeless. Is there a possibility of renewal? And I think my own life is a continuation of that question, really pushing my own boundaries to prove to myself that healing is possible. I look to someone like Frida Kahlo as a blueprint for somebody who just was very misunderstood, and probably a lot of people thought was a kooky weirdo. She just had to do what she had to do. You just have to release it somehow. The only access point to healing is being able to visit that side of trauma and find a way to exorcise it.

You've touched on this already, but can you expand more on how you cultivate hope in all sorts of different circumstances? Because it sounds like you're very practiced in that.

I think when your whole life stops at a young age and what is good or normal is not accessible to you because you don't have those things in your family structure, you don't have the love of a mother, you have to learn external and internal methods and ways to believe in something more.

Maybe until October 2023, people might've thought that that was kind of delusional. I've seen that same belief that I've had to instill in myself in Palestinians. I've seen this extraordinary will, this believing that your life means something—even in death it means something. And that requires hope to go on another day. Like Refaat Alareer, we saw him break towards the end, but up until then, he had so much hopefulness. It says so much about the severity of the situation when people even in that situation begin to lose hope. But we can't lose hope for them. It is actually our responsibility to not lose hope. It sounds like sort of this political catchphrase, but I think that it's kind of how I feel about love.

I think that love is the most revolutionary act that any of us can do. This revolution requires more love than we can actually comprehend. You need to know that there's something that you're fighting for, that there's something that you're working towards. You can't lose that sight, especially when you're doing work like this.

The greatest of us, of artists, of writers, were people who hoped beyond despair. Someone like James Baldwin who experienced so much in his lifetime. He embodied and held so much hope and love for his people, and it's a hope and love even for a country that has betrayed him. That takes a certain kind of hope. It takes a certain kind of person, it takes a certain kind of humility. I think hope is also about humility.

I'm curious to learn more about the [grief studies course](#) you are teaching, and hope you could tell me a bit more about your philosophy as an educator, and your intention in creating a course like this.

I've been grieving my whole life: for a life I didn't get, for an experience that wasn't mine, for love that I didn't have. And I think that that is the product of being a survivor and also a child sexual abuse survivor. You're stripped of so much that in order to choose life, you have to choose not to die. And that requires so much work, and that is also grief-stricken. As a body that needs to do all this work, as a body that has a chronic illness, I'm constantly feeling annoyed by myself and by the reality of my situation. I think that everybody goes about their days just through disassociation and performativity of niceties. And I didn't come on this earth like that. I don't know how to do small talk. I don't want to learn how to do small talk.

[Nikki Giovanni](#), she has this [new documentary out on HBO](#), and I felt so seen [watching it]. She's like, "I don't like people. I love humanity, but I don't really like people." I really relate to that. Experiencing harm, experiencing traumatic events, being confused by other people, being confused by the stories people say about me, because being a public person, being a femme person, so much is thrown at you that you have to invisibly navigate. A lot of my experience is sort of stricken with grief, and I'm constantly trying to understand where to place it.

I feel safer in environments where I can speak deeply about things, where I can go to a place with somebody and they're willing to go to that place with me. Teaching is one of those places where I can do that. And I think that that's one of my key tools in the revolution.

I had to do so much to get here, and I wrote a whole book about it and that feeling wasn't quenched or satiated, because the book didn't become a bestseller. Nothing that I thought would happen with [Who Is Wellness For?](#) Nothing happened. I just was in this standstill for a year, experiencing so much depression because I talk about being an incest survivor and nothing changes. Everything remains the same.

So much happened in that process of putting this book out. I confronted my editor who was terrible, and it was just a really, really brutal experience. Once I was able to come out of that, I understood that maybe my work is more soft and noble and quieter, and maybe that's okay. Maybe it's okay to just teach for the rest of my life, and use the book as a blueprint of what I'm teaching, because I'm doing it myself and I've done it myself, and having that be something that's worth my time. I had to reframe what success looked like and reframe what I want to be known for.

Of course I have wanted the validation that a lot of us seek as writers. The checklist of, "you're in the *New Yorker*," "you're a bestseller," all of the things. What if none of that happens? Is the work still valid? Am I nothing if I feel like nobody's read this book? How do I find a way to channel my own grief of this experience, and alchemize it into something else that's actually transformative and interesting to me? I get to see the fruits of my labor, and actually people being shifted by it in real time. And that just is so much more significant to me than getting the pat in the back that I've longed for from this industry.

At the end of the day, it's a rigged game, and we know that. It really isn't a value judgment. Being in this post-October landscape of seeing, if I am for Palestine, then that means I have to be willing to lose it all. And if I lose it all, where do I start? I have made a lot of enemies in the last couple of months, but I've also gained so much. And learning even more about the ways in which cultural institutions are being re-envisioned to prioritize and platform Palestinian writers and voices, acknowledging this is a liberatory resistance. Alongside Black

liberation in the uprising of 2020, this is sort of one of the biggest movements that we've faced. To me, that says so much about what this moment means. I feel excited about all the things that are going to come from me burning the house down and just starting anew.

I think that that comradeship is actually way more significant, is going to give me way more sustenance to keep going than a fucking PEN Award ever would. And that is the real tea. The institutions know this as well. They are betting on our willingness to keep silent and to keep pretending as if this isn't a genocide. I think a lot of people are feeling hopeless right now. I feel very hopeful. Because I've seen the ways that these political movements, regardless of the ways that the fascist governments confront us, I've seen this deep strengthening of our principles and our vision. Our vision is getting clearer, of what we want, of what we believe is responsible and true and utopic, even. That all of that is really vital right now.

If liberation is possible, what do we want it to look like? A prompt that I've been saying in class has been, what does a liberated and free Palestine look like to you? And using it as sort of this imaginative beginning of something that could become reality. When you want something, you can make it happen. There's no other answer for my life. There's no other reason that I am here, other than that at a very young age, I knew I had something to say. Nobody helped me get to the place that I wanted to get, so I knew I had to get myself there. My life is an act of liberation. I know it's possible. And I think all of us are required to exercise that muscle. That hope is discipline. That ability to believe and hold that focus so acutely in our minds that there is liberation on the horizon, and to know what it feels like, to know what it tastes like, to know what it is. That, to me, is really exciting about this time, and we're really getting to do that together.

Fariha Róisín Recommends:

Fallen Leaves by Aki Kaurismäki. I watched this film on my birthday this year (I have to go to theatres on my birthday every year, it's a tradition - alone or with friends) and Kaurismäki really delivered. It was everything I've been thinking about, like, what does "working-class" cinema look like in the U.S, or within the imperial core, and why aren't more filmmakers making anti-capitalist films? I also love that it's a romantic comedy, so essentially... it's an anti-capitalist, working-class rom-com, which is just so refreshing to me. I want to watch films that don't feel like an ad for prisons or cops or some multi-corp brand. What if we just had filmmakers making films for art again... imagine if more artists actually had something to say, and actually something that they're responding to...

Minor Detail by Adania Shibli was astounding. It left me in a fit of hot tears after I finished it, the elegance with how she wrote about occupation... I am still speechless, still weeks after finishing it. Also, for anyone who wants to read any Palestinian writers right now, Shibli is a great place to start. This book is almost the length of a novella, so it's deft but she's so miraculous in her storytelling that every page feels like an enunciation of the truth.

Life and Debt by Stephanie Black is one of those seminal documentaries that came out in 2001, it tracks the policies of the World Bank and the IMF, and it was integral for me as I researched for my last book, *Who Is Wellness For?* Westerners or people in the Global North have a responsibility to know the global cost of our greed and consumption - how does our overwhelming need for avocados, quinoa, and bananas strip the economy, markets, livelihood and existence of these communities, like Jamaica for Bananas or Bolivia and Peru for our quinoa or Mexico for our avocados. The U.S. has forced nations into predatory trading, and this is so relevant to everything that's going on in the Congo, especially with the mining of Cobalt and copper, and how this demand is only expressed through the literal genocide and dehumanization of the Congolese people, who are forced to fulfill our needs. It's all related. All interconnected. But our consumption has a huge cost, and I think it's important for us to know how important it is for us to liberate from under these systems, so we can help liberate the global South. *Life and Debt* really tackles this, and (I hope this isn't cheating) but folks should watch "Exterminate All The Brutes" by Raoul Peck for more if they're interested on how exactly we're all implicated here.

I love **Christina Sharpe's mind**, and I recently finished *Ordinary Notes* which was just... outstanding.

Creative Elders. A lot of my heroes are people who recently died: Etel Adnan, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Nawal El Saadawi, Toni Morrison—people who created culture to a certain degree, all four of these artists were prolific and equally as seminal and impactful on an international stage—and I owe so much to the artists that came before me, these

artists that I devoured to help me get closer to myself. I'm grateful.

Name

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Vocation

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