

On writing alone and with the help of friends



Writer Chelsea Hodson on keeping your work close to you, the different ways writing can be a way to document your own experiences, and how other people can support your process.

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 2775 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#).

You've spoken about how "the collage element of lyric essay really speaks to our time, and just the way that we're always absorbing different information, always looking at our phone, absorbing snippets." How do you think that way of absorbing information has changed expectations for authors publishing books?

That's interesting, because I certainly read a lot of authors who don't absorb contemporary culture or simply wrote before this was an issue at all. I don't feel like I come to a book with many expectations of how the work should be presented, but I think it's just changed how people live in the contemporary world, live with a smart phone, live with social media. I think you can fight against that and it's not necessarily artless to engage in it, but I definitely think my creativity is altered by staring into the void of Instagram and then coming out of it and trying to write. It's almost impossible for me. I can't be bombarded with images from other people's lives and then try to create my own world. For some reason, I can't absorb it and make something new. It's just their lives that are in my mind.

I definitely think the immediacy of today's culture feeds into this expectation that you should have a byline every week or every month or whatever. I encounter a lot of students that think this way—that their relevance is dependent on how frequently other people see their name. That's something I had to get over myself, but I think only through the help of my mentors was I able to kind of resist that urge. In the book, I referred to the desire to see one's name in print as "that old American urge."

I think that in America, in particular, having a byline feels like you're producing something, because I mean, technically you are. If you have a byline, that feels like a measurable thing that you did as opposed to something amorphous and elusive that you keep on your hard drive. A book kept private feels a lot less real, and so I think it's harder to value that in a culture that's always looking for proof of what you're doing. It was very frustrating to me over the years to not have that proof.

I'd be at a party or something, people would know me as a writer, even though I had basically only published one essay as a chapbook. I felt very weird about people asking about the book for four years after that. I felt this expectation to be showing more, but eventually I began to accept how long it was taking.

I purposefully went to a grad program after I wrote [the chapbook] *Pity the Animal*, because I felt like, "Okay, now I know what I want to do. Now I know the standard that I can hold myself to." That was the first thing that felt true to me and other people's responses seemed to sustain that feeling. I felt ready to go into a program and know somewhat what I was doing, whereas before I felt like I would just be floundering there. I wanted to use a program to really push the rest of the book.

I wasn't showing anything outside of the program. I wanted the material to be as close to me as possible. I think that ended up being a good thing. Some books of essays, they've already been published all over the place, and I didn't want that to happen. I didn't want them all online. I think that readers still value that, too—an element of mystery and privacy. Maybe books are one of the last remaining ways to accomplish that.

Do you feel the pressure to be working on something new is greater internally or externally?

I think both. I think the external pressure would come from talking to people at parties or editors or having an agent. There's all these different pressures of having something new to show, but internally, I'm someone that always has a new idea, so my struggle is actually just restricting myself to one project at a time. I never feel stuck. I'm always working on something. It's really a matter of focusing in on one book or one essay at a time, because my tendency is to daydream about the next thing. The next thing still has the potential to be perfect, whereas the project I'm in the middle of is usually a mess until the very end, and I hate mess.

What are you most bored by lately?

Boredom is something I almost never feel, but I am bored by performative social media outrage. I'm bored by seeing someone link to something they hate, something that was clearly written to make people mad and get ad money from the clicks. Why would anyone want to play into that cycle?

I heard Otessa Moshfegh on the Otherppl podcast and she was saying that from a young age, she learned from her parents, who were creative, that the purpose of one's life should be to be creative. Whether that's to create change, to create love. I really liked that. Creation versus destruction, action versus non-action.

I think it's strange that silence is often perceived now as non-action. Being silent doesn't mean you'll be silent forever. It just means that you're interacting with the world in a different way, and perhaps that's a sensible protest to a world that rewards shouting and instant reaction. I think that's why I like books so much, because that gestation period is so long that it resists that notion of having to be available right now, right here. It doesn't.

And even when the book is done, it usually takes two years for the book to come out. That's almost insane in this day and age, but that's the schedule of publishing and I kind of like that. It allows for a different level of interrogation into certain subjects.

I address that in my book, too. Towards the later period of finishing the book, I wrote the essay "Artist Statement," because something just felt missing. I felt like the book didn't need an introduction, but it maybe could use an essay where I was very declaratively stating what I was trying to do in my writing. It takes a couple different turns, but there's one part where I'm trying to "write my life down before it's too late."

A document of one's life can be a reaction to the world. It's an arguably small action, but it's the kind of work that I like to read and engage in.

Do you see your mentors and writer friends—thinking about Lynne Tillman and Sarah Manguso—as sharing a goal of documenting one's own life?

I'm not sure what Lynne Tillman would think about that. I see her work as a document of thinking rather than a document of the writer's life, but perhaps those are not as dissimilar as we think. With Sarah Manguso, she's definitely interested in writing down one's life. She wrote about this exact thing in her book, *Ongoingness*. I think about it a lot in Marina Abramović's work, too. I think about her a lot in terms of documenting a life, but not in the way you might expect. She did end up writing her memoir, but it's not like that's what her work set out to do. It's this very curated, performative side of documenting how she thinks and how she interacts with the world, which is biographical in the sense that her work changes as her interests and experiments change.

I really like the book, *I Await the Devil's Coming*, by Mary MacLane. It's from 1902. She was 19 at the time. She

was just convinced she was a genius and so she wrote this super audacious, wild document of her life, convinced that people would read it. It's weird to then read it 100 plus years after that. She was right—her act of keeping a journal was enough to sustain over time, to sustain over 100 years. That kind of determination gives me hope.

When you were working other jobs, did you see them as grist for your writing?

I didn't think about it at the time, no. There's so much working in the book simply because that's been my life, that's where I spent my time. Ever since I was 16, I've had either a full-time job or multiple part-time jobs, even when I was in school.

It just kind of inevitably happened that I became kind of obsessed with money, because it takes up so much of my mental space. How am I going to pay my bills? How am I going to do this? I never thought about these jobs as anything beyond a means to an end, but they ended up informing so much of my life and even my relationship with my body. That's kind of a wild thing that a job can inform that for you, but working in retail really did make me think about my body in a totally new way.

I had to work those jobs to come to the ideas that I was having in my writing. I'm lucky in that I'm not someone that's always thinking about my work. I have a lot of essayist friends who will be like, "That's a great idea for an essay," as it's happening. I think a lot of writers think that way. We take from our lives, so it makes sense, but I'm actually not someone who thinks that way usually. I am only able to make connections much later in life. It's only in looking back and having part of the memory gone, actually, that I can see it crystallized. It's only in piecing together things towards a question or an answer in an essay that I begin to understand the connections of my life.

When I wrote *Pity the Animal*, I was just thinking about art and women's bodies, not even my own experiences or sexual desires or jobs. Those all came in as I started to think, "How can I further sustain my interrogation of what a woman's body can be?" And then I thought, well, there was that time when someone paid me an hourly wage to be in a bikini at my job. That seems pertinent.

How well do you work when you have company?

I work best when I'm alone, but I also work really well at the Rose Reading Room at the main library in Midtown. So I can be okay with the presence of other people if it's genuinely really quiet or just kind of a white-noise element. People there are really quiet. That's the only public library I've found in New York that's actually quiet.

I wrote most of *Pity the Animal* there and so I have this connection to it, but shortly after I wrote *Pity the Animal*, the ceiling collapsed. It didn't all collapse, but parts of it fell and it was closed for like two and a half years after that. I feel like I would have been working there every day since that point, but I kind of got out of the rhythm of it, so I don't do it that much anymore.

I went to a residency for the first time last year. I went to MacDowell Colony and had a cabin of my own. I know that's kind of a classic writer cliché, but I really liked it. I had ideas that I was surprised by the next day, because I didn't even recognize them. The element of solitude really worked for me in some capacity where I was so deep in the ideas that I actually felt like I was dreaming them. I felt kind of detached from the real world, because someone was cooking for me, I didn't really have to clean, and I wasn't running errands. All art, no life.

What are some ways your ideas of needing other people have changed since publishing your book?

I definitely have a new appreciation for how much other people help with a book. It's actually crazy to think how many people have helped me, even just in terms of going on a tour. I just hit up my friends in other cities and people were so gracious about helping me find people in the community to read with and people that I could be in conversation with and even finding event spaces. I think that has been the most illustrative of how a community

can help you, because these are people who I've either just known on the internet, or met at a writing conference once and they're totally willing to put in hours of work to help your book succeed. That was really amazing to see and really encouraging.

Growing up, I didn't know how people even worked as artists. So to see how much other people can influence that has been really interesting. In our day and age, it's so much about publicity and getting the word out and social media. I kind of accept that. I feel like I'm willing to use the tools available to get the work out. But yeah, that's definitely been eye-opening for me, because I think I used to really romanticize this idea that I could do it myself. I'm someone who's very self sufficient, so it was a learning experience for me to let certain things go and to let people in.

Why is it important to you to have friends who aren't also writers?

I love having friends that aren't writers, because it gets you out of this New York mindset where small things take on the biggest significance. I think it's really good to occasionally remove yourself from that so that you see the scope of the world and how certain things feel big in New York but don't feel big almost anywhere else. I love living here in certain regards, but I think perspective is really easily lost. I've seen people lose themselves in competition and that loss of perspective of, "If I don't make it here, then my life is over." That's just not true.

There are so many different lives that you can live. My best friend from college has a totally different life than mine. We met in journalism school and then our lives took on two totally different paths. She lives in California, I live here, and I love being able to talk to her about things that have nothing to do with writing.

What does it mean to you to lead a private life?

Only divulging the details that I'm comfortable with sharing or that make their way out through the art that I make. I feel that if something is beautiful, then it's perhaps worth sharing. But I'm very satisfied by having a level of intimacy with my close friends that I don't share with the world every day.

I feel a lot of pressure to always reply to people, so hearing from people all the time kind of stresses me out. Replying to my friend's tweets or Instagram posts or something like that feels safer to me than a lot of one-on-one conversations. I find it much more rewarding to have these really intimate relationships with a small group of people. If I had more than that, it would feel like I was spread too thin.

I think friendships can become unnatural, too—people change, or lifestyles change, and when that element of forcing the friendship comes into play, I tend to let it go. I think that can come across as cold to some people, and maybe it is, but I don't think it has to be sad. I have a line in my book where I wrote down a question I heard someone ask at a library talk about drawing—the person asked, "How can we document the forms of people as they move in and out of view? How can we, in a way, keep them?" I think my writing is somewhat of an attempt to keep them.

Chelsea Hodson recommends:

Writing while blindfolded

Sending fan mail without expecting a response

[Suburbanite LP](#)

[The Complete Madame Realism by Lynne Tillman](#)

[Hunchback '88 by Christopher Norris](#)

Blade Runner 2049

[Name](#)

Chelsea Hodson

Vocation

Writer



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