

On not being afraid to follow your own path



Writer Marya Hornbacher discusses moving past her early success, creative blocks versus distraction, why memoir is tapped as a form, and being ok with taking up space.

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As told to Elle Nash, 3265 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Success](#), [Mental health](#), [Focus](#), [Beginnings](#).

Could you talk about what it was like dealing with the critical success of your first book? It was so huge and you were so young.

It was a world before social media. We were still dealing with dial-up AOL. That's what we had. There were chat rooms. I was not really a part of that because I was grown-up by then and didn't really have the access to it.

When my first book came out, I was totally unprepared for what it would be like to be in the press as an object of attention rather than as a byline. I was used to having my work in print, not used to being the object of fascination or focus or attention or critical inquiry or scrutiny.

Critical inquiry was one thing, that was fine. People are reading your book because they're reading your book. What annoyed me then and continues to annoy me about social media is the objectification of personality and experience. Very quickly you go from being like, "I'm a kid, I'm an author, I'm a journalist" to, "Everybody seems to have an opinion about my influence." The term "influencers" cracks me up because I'm like, this has nothing to do with any one of us as people. It has nothing to do even with our work.

My experience of success at that time had nothing to do with me. It didn't even have anything to do with my work. This was a moment. It was a zeitgeist, as the agents love to say it. Me and Lizzy (Elizabeth Wurtzel) both had to deal with this idea of: "Are these iconographic women?" When, in fact, we were both just kids.

It was disorienting. I think the advantage of that time was that it was clear it had nothing to do with us. We were not confused about the boundary between public self and private self. It was a very clear boundary. I think kids growing up now and young people publishing believe their press and we never really did.

When you write fiction that feels so close to real-life, people assume it's you. They want to talk to you about the fascination of you rather than the art itself.

The best example I have of that is I went to sign the contract on my third book, and this woman comes careening down the hall of the publisher's office. I'd never seen her in my life. She throws her arms around me and is like, "Oh my god, I am so happy to see you." It was shocking. And she's like, "I'm so glad you're okay." I'm like, again, who are you? I have no idea what's going on here.

It was just this ability to recognize in my own life what the difference is between craft and fact is. Not that

the material isn't fact. It's that it's so partial and so curated and so edited.

You've done a lot of non-fiction work around mental illness and recovery. Do you get tired of talking about eating disorders?

Absolutely. I never talk about eating disorders publicly. In fact, I never talk about them privately. I find them deeply dull. And so, I never talk about them at all. I've done two interviews in the last 10 years on eating disorders. When people are asking me about the book, I talk about craft questions. I talk about memoir as a failed genre. I don't talk about eating disorders all that often because they don't interest me and I'm not up on the research. I'm up on the fact that treatment continues to fail because they don't have a concept of recovery.

So, that interests me? But one hopes that one's first book will become boring to one as soon as it's out because otherwise, you haven't grown. You're still stuck in your loop. That's cool. You wanna be John Grisham, do John Grisham. But if you're going to be a real writer, you need to write a new book and you need to have a new interest.

The fact that I have not published a book in 10 years and have been focused on publishing essays, short stories, and poetry is explicitly because I'm trying to and have now divorced myself to an extent from that era of my books. I needed 10 years between books to say, "I'm done with it now. I'm not going to answer for anybody else's idea of what those things are. They were what they were. I was where I was as a writer."

Do you ever feel odd about how you're a cult of personality, not you, but the idea of you as this icon of that eating disorder world?

The idea of iconography is interesting to me at a Susan Sontag level. What's interesting to me is like, "What are you making of that name? Of that person?" I can find a way to laugh at it in a very unkind way, but I can also find a way to appreciate it. What interests me about it right now is that I appear to have become something of an icon for queer kids, which makes me really happy. And also, for older women, which cracks me up because it seems as soon as I stopped dying my hair and went gray publicly photos of me get tons and tons of attention because I have gray hair.

All that means is I'm not willing to pay for hair dye. That means nothing. But if it empowers somebody to be like, "Well, this sexy." That's cool. And the queer kids, too. I can for sure live in that lineage. I can live in the history of mildly interesting icons. That's cool. In that sense, I don't confuse it with myself. I think that's the trick of it. I'm not confused about who that is. That's an icon, it serves its purpose. It doesn't have a lot to do with me as a person.

After having so much success for your first book, did you have worries as you were building your career that the next book isn't going to be as good?

After *Wasted*, because of the success, I didn't publish anything for seven years. I was clearly not trying to build on that success, and it made my agent and my editor and everybody else insane. I don't think *Wasted* is that good. I think it's right. But as a creative endeavor, it's a first book that's super fucking flawed.

It's problematic in every imaginable way. I knew that and I was way more concerned about getting distance from it so I could figure out what to do the next time and how to do it in a way that was more challenging to me, and more innovative as a writer.

I was worried about never living it down and I still am. I am grateful for the fact that I don't hate it as much as I did 10 years ago, but the trigger hysteria seems to have largely passed. I certainly knew I hadn't peaked. I still haven't peaked. And so, the idea of how to match the last book? That's never been concerning to me. I think that presupposes I care if the book sells. I do not. I care that the book is as good as I can make it by the time it comes out. And I do not feel every one of my books has been.

It's difficult to embody that feeling of not wanting to give a fuck, because I think that would make you creatively free. If you do become too concerned with marketability, you're putting yourself in a cage.

The idea of marketability exhausts me. The idea of being triggering and problematic, the words are so diffuse at this point due to overuse they are meaningless. What's triggering to me should be published. What's triggering to someone else should be published. The publishing industry and authors are not beholden to my trauma. They do not answer to making sure the world's corners are padded for me. And in the same way, I do not assume other people in my life have to tiptoe around to be aware of my triggers. I am aware that books I have written are triggering for some people, on the other hand. I don't make those people read my books.

You've taken a long break to focus on different types of writing, how has that changed for you?

I think it may have been in some ways advantageous that I was so young when I published the first book because I did it on the fly and was just doing what I was told was the next thing. I never really was committed to the idea of, "I'm going to write books." What I was committed to was, "I am going to write." And I can do that fine without a publisher. That's what I did for 10 years. I'm not writing for my publisher. I'm writing for readers. And that keeps not making my publisher happy, which concerns me about what my publisher's agenda actually is.

For the last five, six years, mostly what I've been doing is writing books and sticking them in my drawer for when the match was over and we could go on with life. I have four books done and I'm working on the proposal for the book that's going to come out next. The four books that come out after that are already in my drawer. I still challenge myself as best I can. I still write for the reader and I'm still not doing it the way anybody wanted me to.

When you're working on something, how do you know when it's done? Is it just when you are happy with it?

Michael Chabon talks about staying with projects that you should abandon. He talks ignoring what he called "the hand of dread," which would grip his throat every time he sat down to write. He worked on this project for five years and I took that to heart. I'm like, "Don't ignore the hand of dread. If you know, the project is wrong, walk away or you're not ready to write the project walk away." And it doesn't, at that point, matter whether the publisher thinks it needs to come out or not.

If you know you're answering for it, no one will ever remember who published that book, but they'll know who wrote it. So being responsible for your own artistic maturity, or lack thereof, is way more important to me and other authors than in who put out what, how fast. [Sarah Manguso](#) is fabulous. Every book she puts out is finished and fantastic. Is she publishing every 20 minutes? Absolutely not. Do I remember all the books? Joyce Carol Oates wrote many of which are awful because she writes too fast. When she nails it, she nails it. She's brilliant. And then there are all the other books she writes.

It's a little bit hard to believe her output. Honestly, it's so much. It's too much. I mean, I disregard her books until I hear that this one's one of the good ones. It's not that she's not talented. It's not that she's not a fucking genius, but like shush, nobody needed to hear from me for those 10 years. Nobody was harmed by me being quiet and learning.

I feel it seems so disciplined. It's idealistic, I guess to say that, to be able to let go.

The market has changed. The readership has changed, just as publishing has changed, and they adapt to each other, but they also create each other. The fact that the market is what it is, is because publishing became hysterical, and publishing became hysterical because the market became what it is. So, it's a recursive loop, but there are a whole lot of writers out there. Sarah's one of them. Minding their own business, putting out good books and somebody else gets on their butts and says, you need to tweet about this.

Do you ever get stuck or do you believe in writer's block?

I think most of the ways we get stuck are self-imposed, but I also think most of our problems are in how we respond to the world or our situations. So I can't say it's false. I can't say it's not a thing. I think what it is is a broad term for the experience of being creatively stalled, or not being able to align your vision with your practice. The points where I've found myself stuck have been points where I could imagine what I wanted to write, and did not have the skill, or did not have the tools, or did not have the bandwidth, or did not have the space, or the money, or the time. That writer's block. I will also say, as an addendum to that, I think a lot of what people call writer's block right now is such a profound level of distraction that it isn't actually writer's block, it's a block of [having too much] online and screen time.

When you get stuck on a project, what are some things that help you to get unstuck?

Poetry. I read a lot of poetry, and short-forms, and responding to what I'm reading and writing. So if I'm really stuck on an essay, I'll go read poetry. If I'm stuck on a poem, I'll go read essays. But things in short-forms that provide that quick switch of attention to acknowledge that my brain's fragmented, it's not responding in the long-form that I need it to. And something that's heavily imagistic that sparks different parts of the brain's neurology of the brain, because if I'm thinking visually, it gives me handholds and footholds in writing that strictly narrative or academic or strictly cerebral stuff does not. In the same way icons provide a point of prayer entry, that window. For me, imagistic and visual work provides that window into my own thought process, which allows me to write again.

You said you felt like the memoir was a failed genre.

If not failed, I think it is tapped. At least as we have understood it thus far. The number of tragic white lady memoirs has so far exceeded any readership need. It makes me want to throw up, frankly. Memoir as a form has as much interest for me as the mid-century American male white novel. Updike did Updike, memoir has outdone itself. There are enough. I've had a couple conversations with people who have memoirs coming out, and they're like, "Oh, how do you handle this? How do you handle this?" I'm like, "Don't write a memoir." No offense. But it's been done.

Unless some formal changes get made in how memoirs are being written. People I would look to—Sarah Mendoza would be one, who can do things that are innovative. Jo Ann Beard, another person who writes slowly, carefully, and what she freaking means, wants, and puts it out. I'm like, "That's a book I'll read. That's a book I'll show up for." But these effusive, everything is fucking tragic memoirs, I'm like, "You know, we're all here in this world, everybody's clear on its tragic and hard. We got it. And until something formally innovative can happen with that, I'm kind of done." That's the question I've had for a long time. Yes, sharing the experience is great and is important, but if one more person says to me, "I have a story to tell," I'm like, "You and everybody else, baby." Memoir somewhere along the line got hijacked from being a literary form into being the repository of "everybody's sad."

At the start of the 2010s through 2016 or so, the confessional female essay had its moment online. Like, here's all the things I can confess at once.

Again, the question is always about this cult of personality. What does craft have to do with the author's real life? Everybody's got a confessional booth on public media. If you want to know who I am, you're going to have to chat with me. Why does it matter who I am behind the writing?

That's a hard one. I've been trying to focus on letting go of caring what people think of me.

Be aware of how you're affecting other people. That's one thing. That's keeping your nose clean—knowing where your edges in other people's lives begin. I still, and I think I always will, because I'm a human being in the world with other human beings. I'm aware of how I bump up against other people's lives and it concerns me at times. Those are the areas of my life where I have to work on stuff. That said, I'm also done making myself as small as I can so that other people are comfortable. That isn't necessary either. That's not healthy. I feel like it's creating that balance.

In terms of my own [eating disorder] recovery, I was like, "Okay, I can write this book now. I'm ready to exhaust it." It was about realizing that not being small doesn't mean in body, but it also means mentally and how you interact with people. I can still sense that I interact with people as though I am small and shouldn't be there. I have to project that confidence, it takes time.

I'm okay with taking up the space I take. That seems to be very unusual to this day. I think it's especially unusual for women, and that concerns me. I feel like some people are icons just because we're doing stuff that everybody knows they need to be doing, like owning where we are, and owning who we are, and being okay with that. There's nothing magical about it, it's just that we all want to be able to take up a little space.

Marya Hornbacher Recommends:

Not looking at my phone for at least an hour after I wake up. It gives me time to meditate, work out, and get myself oriented according to my own internal compass rather than always looking outside myself to decide what I think, what I feel, where to go.

Reading while I write. When I get to a natural pause, or a stuck point, I can turn to a book, read a paragraph, a chapter, an essay, a poem, and it restarts my brain. Lately I've kept A. Rafael Johnson's novel *The Through* and Karen Babine's essay collection *All the Wild Hungers* on my desk, to great effect.

Ignoring my phone for the rest of the day as well.

Writing prompts and writing in forms, whether given forms or ones I invent. Making up rules, creating parameters for myself—it gives the process a heightened attention and intentionality, and I become more deliberate about trying to say what I'm trying to say.

Losing my phone altogether. Throwing my phone in the trash. Throwing my phone out the window, or into a river. Dropping my phone into the ravenous sea. Writing on my computer, in a notebook, on a napkin. Writing better. Writing more. Writing for the reader. The reader cannot reach me on my phone. The reader will have to wait for the book.

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Vocation

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