

On protecting the magic of your creative work



Author Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah discusses the value of shifting it up, shunning stereotypes, the power of rejection, and navigating the overt connection between art and commercial.

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As told to Sammy Maine, 2713 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Magic](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#), [Success](#).

Was there a moment you remember or a choice you made that led you down the path that you're on today?

I know the exact moment I became a writer. I had come back home from school during my freshman year of college and we were in a place that was not ideal housing at all. My mom and I had also been a certain kind of sick and it was really apparent. I couldn't really stand it. I went to the Dunkin Donuts and I stayed there for eight hours and wrote a story in one sitting. That was the day I became a writer. It became my de facto. This is where I go to be okay.

Thinking back to that day in Dunkin Donuts to now, have you developed any specific writing practices over the years? There seems to be a lot of rules in writing.

There may be a set of rules, but it's for you and it may change all the time. So basically there is none. If there was one way of doing it that was correct, a lot more people would do it. Also that wouldn't be art. Part of the magic is our diverse processes. Part of the magic is the ways we contour our lives around the thing.

When I'm really, really locked in, there's time periods where I try to hit 1,000 words a day. [Jami Attenberg](#) has the 1,000 words of summer and I adopted that to get through this [new] novel. For me, the power is in switching it up. It's similar to working out. You have to change your workout schedule so your muscles don't get too familiar. Sometimes it might be changing the place, changing the time, changing what part of the day you do it, and for what length.

I do think consistency is very powerful. It doesn't mean you have to sit down and write five hours every day. Reading or writing on most days is helpful to keep your brain in the tune of what you're doing because writing has so many different phases. When you're in the initial generative phase, it's really important to be consistent because you're going to keep the momentum. You need to have your brain tuned to this thing so that you can be constantly open and inspired. You can cultivate that by being consistent. There's no one way to do magic. We all have our different ways of thinking about it.

Recently you [tweeted](#) that you wrote a book before *Friday Black* that you thought would be successful and save your family's life, and it did nothing. So did you have to change your approach to your craft in order to continue after that?

Yes. That was me trying to force the will of a creative life. I thought that if I just write this book my effort

would just translate to an outcome because I didn't know anything. I wrote that book mostly on the upside down of a Red Rooster vacuum box. I didn't even have wifi at home at the time, I had to steal the neighbor's. I don't think about craft actively in the process of doing, I think craft is something you cultivate over time. In the process of writing, you get lost in the magic of it. But in writing that first book, I would just knockout pages after pages after pages. I had read a lot of books, but I hadn't studied a lot of writers I really loved. There's a lot I did differently moving forward.

Talk about key moments: when you don't quit, because writing is more rejection than acceptance for a long period of it. Many people teach writers fear and doom and gloom and with that tweet, I was trying to say, "Maybe that's true, but you're leading with that so much that you're clipping their wings before they even try to fly." After that book didn't do anything, I had a two year period at school where I was getting trained by people like Lynne Tillman, who changed my life completely. I wasn't tapped into the literary world at all. She gave me short stories. She made me close-read them and I could see what the stories were doing and why this was or wasn't working, then she was able to talk to me about why my stories were mostly not working. I was in this conversation with the work as opposed to just trying to force a wheel to steamroll the thing. Your taste will far exceed your ability in the beginning of your forever, but especially the beginning of your thing.

I'm not naive to the realities of any artistic world, particularly the writing one. Personally, I felt very late. I wrote that first book at 19. I thought I was going to have a successful book by 20 for sure. *Friday Black* came out when I was 27. Of course, I was young by the standard, but I felt old and I felt very late because I had been trying the whole time. I had years of Submittable, years of red rejection bars on there. I submitted a lot and these are stories where many of them ended up in *Friday Black* but I had to learn to revise and really make something undeniable.

I feel in the culture of writing and beyond, there's this stereotype of the struggling, starving artist. There is some truth in that, but do you think that that hinders the craft by people latching onto that stereotype?

Definitely. On the back end, it makes you think that you don't deserve this or that. It brings something very dead and weird to the magic and alive part. Those numbers, the statistics, all those are nothing. You're trying to make life with your soul using this particular medium and that's so much bigger. I understand that we live under the capitalistic thumb of this society and I write about that and I get that, but I'm talking about when you are a mentor—part of your job is to bring up the next group. You can overemphasize the fear aspect, and it makes people go in half hearted. I'm the kind of person where the more you tell me I can't, the more I'm sure I will. I know that everyone's not like that. We have to protect those students who have the thing, the flame; you've got to keep it protected for a little bit. You know that it could become this huge inferno, but if you blow too hard on it with the doom and gloom shit, it could go out. I understand the reality, but I think that by overemphasizing it, you're doing a disservice to the people wanting to do it.

You've also recently talked about your hatred of how overt the connection between art and commercial is. How do you personally navigate this industry that is focused so much on commercial success?

I try not to think about it. It's funny because that's the very opposite of how I came into this. I was trying to save my family and I meant that financially and obviously I chose a stupid path to do that, but here's a thing I could do for free. Writing is free. I mean, it costs a lot, but in a different way. I like the work to be for itself as opposed to anything else. You have to have an active idea about protecting the work because publishing companies are publishing companies. They exist to make money for somebody and definitely not me. That's not to say that they don't have a mission as well but the primary mission is money. There's a lot of niceties they'll say after that, but if it's not making money, you're not even having a conversation. I understand that and I try to make sure that I protect my work and my integrity above all. It involves close conversations with my agent, and my agent having a clear understanding of what my goals are, what I desire, who I am. It's me having a realistic look about all the people in my life who I have to support and what I'm willing to do to be able to do that. If I feel like some aspect of something external to the work is being used mostly to sell, in a way that I think could potentially be a disservice of the work, I try to eliminate it.

You mentioned Lynne Tillman earlier, and you've also studied with Lydia Davis and George Saunders. How much do

others figure into your work now? And do you have a radar for when to take advice and when not to take advice?

My circle of advice is much smaller this time around. Almost any writer I respect, I'll be willing to get writing advice from them, just to get another eye but you also might have had experiences that your mentors have not had. George told me, "What's happening to you didn't happen to me, in terms of your first book being received that well." So, there's challenges that come with that: out the gate suddenly your life is different. People are regarding you differently, you have to move a certain way. A lot of the people who I went to MFA with, both teachers and students, I get advice from. Just yesterday, I was with Caleb Azumah Nelson. He's from the UK and he wrote *Open Water*. We were just chopping it up. It's not necessarily advice but we're about the same age, we're in a similar space that's pretty particular: young Black men in the literary world with books that have been perceived well. So just talking and trading stories is very helpful for me. I do pride myself on being a sponge. I could learn from really anybody at any level, whatever it is with this craft stuff or if it's more on the professional side. I think my students teach me about craft all the time.

***Friday Black* really focuses a lot on consumerism, violence, racism... as an artist today, do you feel like you have a responsibility to highlight these things and point at them in order to hopefully enact change? Or is there room for both kinds of art where there's art that just tries to distract away from it?**

I hope it's not either or. I like to think about fine art or music because I think that we don't necessarily put the same burdens on those forms as we put on writing. I understand myself and I know what I'm doing with my writing. I do think of it as, like George said, a truth telling weapon. The other day I was looking at Matisse's *Red Studio* at MoMA, and it didn't feel like a distraction. It feels like the ability to "wow": this breakdown of beauty in this form feels very important to me. The making of those other modes of art, of trying to pursue beauty or aesthetic is really sacred and important. Those types of things are assertions that we need in a world that can sometimes be really brutal. I want us to have more room for those modes. Arthur Flowers once asked us to write a story to save the world and it's one of the stories in my book, "Things My Mother Said," which is about a mom and poverty and housing insecurity. To me, it's a story about how my mom is great and that felt like saving the world, too. So to me, it's all magic. I think there's room for all the art types. Just like there's no one process, there's no one form or style. It's truly just about being your essential self to the fullest, and then see how that looks.

You released a song earlier this year and you've also shared some of your photography. Do these different forms of creativity pour over into your writing?

They absolutely do. Just like certain stories are for short stories, some stories are for a novel, some stories are for songs, and others for a photo set. These stories end up being ways to create feeling—it's all these different feeling machines. I'm pursuing mastery in writing and working on that form most seriously but it's tainted in a lot of ways because of the professional aspect of it. I also know that maybe I'll talk about something in a song that I don't feel brave enough to talk about in words. I only have one book and I very well remember when I had those same stories and no one cared, so I like putting out a song and no one giving a fuck. The novel for me is extremely ambitious and experimenting with other art forms is how I capture some of that energy back. These other mediums make me feel connected to that feeling I had back when I had two years of getting rejected from Submittable, which is core to me actually. Rejection is the fire I forged myself in and now I have to create that for myself.

What were the biggest lessons you learned from *Friday Black* that you brought to this new novel?

Seek leverage. No matter who they are, you seek leverage and that's how you get the deal you want to get. You can't negotiate unless you're willing to walk away completely. In terms of craft, *Friday Black* was me discovering exactly who I am as a writer and embracing that. My new novel, *Chain-Gang All-Stars* is: I know who I am as a writer. One of the things I pride myself on is that I can do a lot of things. *Chain-Gang All-Stars* is me having no hang ups. In the literary world there's the sense of the highest form of writing is a story about a sad couple about to get a divorce, in their apartment and that just isn't me. I know what I can do. I know it's valid. I know I'm making art. People think style is owning syntax or whatever but it's what you choose to engage with and I have more confidence in what my style is, and I'm more affirmed in my purpose, which is connected to potentially

creating a palatable way for people to engage with radical ideas.

What is the most rewarding thing about what you do?

Giving the people some hope. Someone once told me that *Friday Black* was part of the reason they moved from China to America to write. That's awe-inspiring to me because I know what they really mean when they say that kind of thing. I remember when I found a George Saunders story and it made me feel a little different about myself and my situation in my life. If you can be there for somebody else, it's very humbling and I take it really seriously. If I can help someone feel like they deserve to be a little bit more as an artist or as a person, that matters a lot and I think some of these writers forget that you have that. It matters how you move. A lot of it's connected to teaching. That's why I like being a mentor to someone because I've had really great mentors and I like creating spaces where people can discover a way. You have this power just like anybody else.

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah Recommends:

Meeting people and going on excursions with them. I recently went to a museum with a relative stranger and it was great.

Getting lost riding a bike somewhere new.

The Sea/Bodies of water. Even though I can't swim, there's just a power there.

Listening to poetry in languages you don't speak accompanied by the translation you can read. I got to do this a lot at a festival recently and it might be my new favorite thing.

Working on a craft/skill/hobby you enjoyed as a child but lost connection to because of adulting.

Name

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah

Vocation

writer

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