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As told to Resham Mantri, 1861 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Beginnings, Creative anxiety, Mental health.



On writing what you know

Writer Nina Renata Aron discusses what it means to write thoughtfully about addiction, the complications of criticism, and finding the freedom to write what you want, how you want to.

You write honestly about addiction, as it's affected your own family as well as families in general. What has that been like for you?

I only started doing it in earnest recently. I read an addiction memoir last year and reviewed it for *The Millions*. I ended up writing that review as sort of a personal essay. It was the first time I'd publicly written about that stuff. But I was also, at the same time, working on a book proposal about all these related issues. When I was a teenager, one of my sisters was a drug addict. That experience shaped my adolescence, and, I now can see, really colored the rest of my life.

I ended up having romantic relationships with men who had similar problems, and from a very early age, as a teenager, I was starting to look for resources for how people live around this disease. I started going to Al-Anon... I don't know if people even know what that is. It's the parallel program for friends and family of alcoholics and addicts.

I'm always reading addiction memoirs. I think I can safely say I've read them all. I became an addiction memoir junkie, and I still am one. Addiction is one of those issues that refracts all human questions and problems in an interesting and often really sad way—it's kind of like the whole human drama is in there. But there's so little for families of addicts and alcoholics. There's this long history of, often women, living alongside this disease. But women's experiences are seen as this secondary emotional corollary to the much more important story of male alcoholism and all the storminess that it entails.

There's so little good writing about the experience of living with an addict, or an alcoholic, and the need to write this has become louder and louder for me. Starting to dip my toe in and write about it has been therapeutic, and also scary. With these issues, I'm sort of dealing with other people's shit and baggage. The wreckage or the pain this disease has wrought in my life is considerable, but it's not necessarily always mine to talk about. I can only speak to my own experience. So it's something that I approach gingerly, but with great enthusiasm, and it's been therapeutic so far.

The process of writing the article or a book is one piece of it. Then when it's out there in the world, dealing with the reactions or fallout is a whole other piece.

Absolutely. This is obviously something that we're dealing with at a broader cultural level right now, but it's something we all have to take responsibility for, and think through in our own work—about how it will reverberate outward. That review piece was the first time I'd ever written about those issues as they'd affected my immediate family. I was really careful to run it by everyone.

But now I'm writing a book—the book is much more about romantic love and addiction as they're often intertwined—and I'm like, "Do I need to run every chapter by all the people who are implicated in it?" I don't know. That's something I think about often, now that I'm writing.

How do you approach reviewing another author's work?

Most of the time, the book choice is mine. Occasionally I've been asked to review a particular book. That's always more challenging, because if it's a book that I've chosen myself, it's something that I've come to very organically and I'm kind of chomping at the bit already to say something about it even though I haven't read it yet. If it's an assignment, you have to do a little bit more research. But I think book criticism is some of the best writing I've ever read. There's a debate right now about whether there remains enough freedom in that space.

It used to be a place for people to flex their muscles intellectually, and now it's a common complaint that the book publicity machine necessitates that certain books get attention, and certain books get a certain kind of attention, and that it's not really a space for people to truly engage. I think that's probably true at the super-mainstream level. Some of the things that I read are smaller publications, where people still do have quite a bit of freedom to say what they want, and they're not under the gun to review only the five biggest books of the year, or whatever.

I work as a features editor for *Full Stop*, which is an online literary magazine. We specialize in debut authors, small press authors, literature and translation, and there are other sites like *Full Stop* that I think really champion a kind of fine-grained criticism.

So you're publishing a book. You have a book deal.

I do.

In terms of the nuts and bolts of writing a book, what's that process like?

That process was interesting. I'd wanted to write a book my whole life since I was probably four. This experience has made me realize that all the ideas I had before this one were not really ideas. I had the desire to write a book, without an actual idea for a book. I know that that's true, because I remember I sent my agent half of a novel some years ago, and it just wasn't really anything. It wasn't really working, and she was just like, "Yeah, keep going with this, if you want." But once I'd settled on the idea for this book that I'm writing, I understood that I had something.

It took me drilling down on this idea for a couple of years to figure out a way to represent it that was actually unique. I think that matters. I know books get published all the time that are a lot like other books, but for me it was important to take the time to figure out something that I could do, that was truest to myself, and that also didn't exist yet.

Are you still finishing chapters and pieces of the book?

Yes, I'm working on the book now. I am at the point where I know what I have to do, and I can see the kind of cartography of the book, but I have a lot of filling-in to do in all those places. I keep thinking of it as passing all these ideas through the eye of a needle. I have all the stuff, and now I have to fit it through this tiny space, and make it work.

You write about the importance of portraying addicts as complicated humans, and this one line in a recent article you wrote really struck me. You said "the proliferation of a kind of heroin porn may be normalizing the epidemic, but it's failing to humanize it."

What I see just doesn't usually jibe with my own experience of living with people who have struggled with opioid addiction. We're still relying on some pretty old-school ideas about drug addiction, and about who does drugs. It feels voyeuristic, the impulse to continue to represent addiction as a needle going into an arm. I rarely see any representations where people's full humanity is on display.

Having friendships and relationships with people who have actually struggled with this, the people in my life at least are so interesting and brilliant, and they have a lot to say about it. They have a lot to say about what it feels like to live with that addiction and they have a lot to say about what drew them to those drugs and experiences in the first place. They have a tremendous amount to say about how you get out of that, and how you approach a daily life after addiction. I understand why we dwell in thinking

about this as an entrenched, protracted problem that there is no easy solution to, but I'm always amazed that recovery itself is not really represented anywhere.

Leslie Jamison has just written this book called *The Recovering*, which asks the question of whether you can continue to have an interesting, dynamic, creative life after getting sober. She's moving the conversation in a new direction. I think we're kind of inured to these images of people shooting up, but they don't really strike us as people, exactly. It would be great if that picture could just become more interesting.

It seems part of the solution is more diverse writers?

Yes.

Can you speak about your particular road to writing?

My road to writing was reading, in that I was always really into books. I was also really into music, and I got really into punk rock. In the mid-'90s, I was fortunate enough to experience riot grrl's intersection of feminism, punk rock, and bouffant hairdos—that moment was a lot about a kind of dirty, glamorous girl-gang mentality. My interest in writing as I was becoming an adult was manifesto-driven. Even if it wasn't overtly political that really drove me.

When I got to college and I took a Soviet history class, it set my mind on fire. I felt like the Russian Revolution was the punkest thing I'd ever heard of. We were learning about samizdat, which I understood to be zines, basically, and I became obsessed with Russian history. I spent 10 years of my life studying it.

So weirdly, my trajectory as a reader and writer passed through academia. There was a long stopover there. Then, I realized that academia was not for me. I had kids and I couldn't really do both things at the same time. I admire anyone who's able to do it, but I couldn't. I also felt that academic writing was really stultifying. I just felt my writing was never going to work in that context.

I left academia, and I have had a number of strange jobs, really different kinds of jobs. I worked for a global health non-profit for a while, working on blood safety and maternal and child health in the former Soviet Union. I worked for a boutique branding agency for a while, and then I started working for *Timeline*, this historical online publication that's focused on putting the news in historical context.

Some combination of actually working in media and writing every day, and having permission to write every day, and having slightly older children who are not dependent on my body for sustenance, created this space. Having a certain amount of distance from academic thinking and from all of the demands that it makes on your writing, I've finally had the freedom to write what I wanted to, and in the way that I wanted to.

Nina Renata Aron recommends:

"Blow Dry" by Huggy Bear

Hope Gangloff's paintings

Cinnamon ice cream

Suite for Barbara Loden by Nathalie Léger

This Japanese miniature food Instagram

"Nothing But A Heartache" by The Flirtations

Name

Nina Renata Aron

Vocation


Writer


Fact



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