

On making space for the impossible



Poet, storyteller, and essayist Sabrina Orah Mark discusses finding structure in fairytales, writing through motherhood, and sticking with the work.

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As told to Kate Silzer, 2228 words.

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Your writing has an unreal, dreamlike quality to it. When did you start writing in that style and what has kept you engaged with it over time?

I'm really after understanding what the unreal even is. And I always find that it helps me access something that feels even more real. The unreal often feels like a portal to the real for me.

I think when I started writing prose poems, that was when I felt like I could have the real and the unreal live inside of a little box together. Charles Simic talks about the prose poem as being this impossible form. It's the coming together of prose and poetry and it shouldn't exist, but it does. And finding that form allows for this marvel, for the impossible to live inside of a space. And that was really how I accessed that aesthetic or mindset or dream I was always after.

As things in my life changed, as I had children, as I got older, my prose poems burst at the seams. I couldn't sit for 15 hour stretches anymore because I had little kids. And so I would keep returning back to what I thought were prose poems, but then they started getting longer and longer and turning into stories.

Can you expand on what you see as the role of fiction or fictional elements in processing reality? What role do you think surrealism plays in regular life?

I think in a lot of ways it works as a kind of cautionary tale. Speculative fiction imagines an impossible future to caution us away from that future. It's sort of like, be aware of this space. Be careful how you move through the world, because you might end up inside of this forest and you don't want to be inside here.

When you sit down to write, do you have a goal in mind of what you're trying to convey to the audience?

It used to be that I started just with an image, just a word or a name. And I wanted to open that word or open that image up and follow it as far as it might go. These days I think that I start with a problem. I start with something someone said to me and it's bothering me, or I don't fully understand it. I sit down often and I have no idea what I'm doing. Often I don't really know what I think until I write through it. I've been holding on to writing more and more as a kind of life raft so that I can understand what is happening around me.

Do you consider one genre more primary than the others in your practice? How do you experience the difference between those forms in your writing?

I always thought of [the poem] as a way to articulate the silences, like these little silent spaces inside of me or inside of some problem. But there was a thick veil between me as a person and the poem. And then with stories there was less of a veil, there was a little bit more of an exposure. And now with the essays, there are these holes everywhere.

My second book of poems, *Tsim Tsum*, had no "I" in it, there was no "I," and I remember saying, "I'm so bored with my 'I.' Like I don't want my 'I' as a character. I don't want the self here at all." *Tsim Tsum* is much more fiction than my fiction *Wild Milk* is. I think there are more "I"s poking through.

I'm very much first and always a poet, but I really do believe that the poem teaches us a lot about how to read an essay and the essay can teach us a lot about how to read fiction, and fiction can teach us a lot about how to read the poem and the essay. And I really value hybridity and I value that space where they can kind of all live together and help each other out.

When you get an idea, does it tend to come to you in a particular genre?

Well, these days things keep coming to me as essays, and then occasional flickers of stories. And then as I'm writing an essay, sometimes a poem or a piece of a poem will feel like it unfolds inside of the essay. I'm thinking a lot about the world as an essay.

How are you managing Happily, your column in *The Paris Review*, with your other projects?

I'm working on [the column] all the time. It's a month long of writing each essay. And I felt at one point I was really writing with the moon, because I would kind of start in the beginning of the month and be like, "Oh god, what am I going to do? What am I going to write?" And then I would call up this friend of mine, Amy. And I would say, "It's terrible. It's horrible. I'm not going to be able to write this." And then she said to me, "We go through this every month. Every month, it's the same."

So it has kind of taken over. I do write little things sort of here and there on the side, but in terms of the larger project, *Happily* has been my main focus. And then finding at the end of the month there is something there because there kind of has to be something there; I'm good with deadlines. Writing for me had always been a little bit more sporadic, where I would catch hours here and there where I could. But now I've just been more structured about it.

When you have an idea, how do you know it's something worth pursuing, especially if it's a more out-there idea? How do you stay confident in an idea long enough to see it through?

I say this to my students, and I truly believe this: I think everything has value, everything. It's just a question of sticking with it. I think that if you stay with something long enough, it starts to talk to you. If you care about something for long enough, it starts blooming in a way. I have one essay, "U Break It We Fix It," and the whole thing was [about] the annoyance of [my son's] iPad being smashed and bringing it to a place that promises to fix things and can't. It was just that, and I definitely struggled with it. And I'm like, "Just stick with [it], just stay with the broken glass." You have to really believe in it.

That idea of unconditional belief is a nice segue, because I want to talk about fairytales, which is a big aspect of your writing. What draws you to those stories? Did you grow up reading them?

You know, I didn't grow up reading fairytales. I had a collection of fairytales on my shelf. It had a crocodile on the cover that was salivating. My mother keeps insisting that that book doesn't exist and that I never had that book, but I remember this book and I remember this crocodile and droplets of saliva falling out of its mouth and thinking, "I am never opening up that book, it's too scary." I didn't read fairytales as a child, but I did have an Orthodox Jewish education and I went to Yeshiva and we studied the Old Testament. We studied the Bible for half the day, or a good portion of the day. And so I grew up on stories filled with miracles and a talking god.

And I grew up believing very much that these stories were written by God. And words have this divine power. They're spoken out of this divine being. And in a way fairytales have that feeling too. Because it began inside of the oral tradition, you feel like it's spoken out of the forest. You feel the trees tell the stories. So in that way, I did grow up with the texture of fairytale all around me.

I'm very invested in these kinds of ancient stories, like the story about belonging and the story about jealousy. Fairytales provide for us this ground where you can stand and imagine yourself as the mother, the father, the sister, the brother, the bird, the tree.

For *Happily*, each piece is framed by a different fairytale. What is the role of that structure in your writing and how does it inform your process?

I remember an editor saying to me once that she liked my stories, but they didn't have enough ballast. And I carried that around with me for a long time. And I think she meant, "Where's the spine here? What's the thing holding everything together?" I think the fairytale helps me bring a kind of spine in, sort of like a touchstone, a meeting, a gathering place. We could all agree that we're comfortable with the story of Cinderella. And so by planting the fairytale and letting it run through the essay, it allowed me to tackle questions that I felt really scared to ask.

For example, I don't think I could have written that essay about being a stepmother without collecting all the evil stepmothers from fairytales and letting them assemble around me and give me a kind of courage to tell that story. So I think I used the fairytale to give me guts. To have the fairytale beside me gave me a foundation that I felt I've always really needed in my writing, but I didn't quite know how to find it.

Fairytales are considered largely a children's genre. They're used as entertainment, but also a way to pass on stories, morals, aesthetic sensibilities even. How should we be thinking about the genre?

Bruno Bettelheim talks about fairytales, where the role of the fairytale is sort of like a talisman. We walk around with these fears and questions of how do we belong? Who loves us? Who doesn't love us? Where do we go? How do we find our way back home? All those questions that are so big and impossible. For a child there's the fears and the anxieties, but then you read the child the story, let's say of Hansel and Gretel. And you say, "Okay, here's a story about an unmother. Here's a story about abandonment. Here's a story about hunger." You can store all of your fears inside of that story so that it's not a dread that becomes a kind of air that you breathe. I think for adults it's the same thing.

There's a lot of play and humor in your writing, but you also deal with some pretty somber emotions. How do you keep the levity while you're dealing with more serious topics?

Laughing and crying in many ways share a space. And so, what's that line? "It's funny because it's true." I think that in order to access humor you need to access that thing that you're really scared to say. And that brings up all the emotions at once too. I know I've talked about this a little bit before, but I have a terrible laugh. My son, Eli has this beautiful laugh, which I just want to live inside. It's just like sunshine. When I laugh, I breathe in so you can barely hear the laughing, it's just terrible. But my mother happens to be very funny. And when I laugh with her, there's a sort of silence, just like horrible silence and a gasping for air and a losing your breath that happens all at once. And I always think of that ugly laughing that is also filled with a loss of breath to be the kind of jokes I might tell inside of a story.

How has being a mother impacted your creative life?

Getting to the essay was really connected to motherhood. I'm happy to just be in my house inside of my own imagination forever, and you can't do that when you have children. You have to go outside and you have to talk to teachers and you have to talk to other parents and you have to talk to the tennis coach. There are all these people suddenly. I just started thinking about the future very differently. And so I became more porous. And so my writing became more porous.

And then suddenly it gave me some courage because I thought—and this might also come with getting older— “I just kind of need to say the thing that is the thing, rather than hiding behind all of these veils,” because motherhood exposes you.

In many ways I started writing these essays because [my sons] would say the most beautiful things to me. And I knew I would forget it if I didn’t write it down. And that was really for me how the essays started. I need to write things down because otherwise I will forget everything.

Sabrina Orah Mark Recommends:

Bruno Schulz’s *The Cinnamon Shops*

Edward Carey’s *The Swallowed Man* (but also first read Carlo Collodi’s *Pinocchio* (swoon))

Leonora Carrington’s *The Hearing Trumpet*

Patti Smith (in general)

Donald Barthelme’s *Sixty Stories*

Name

Sabrina Orah Mark

Vocation

Writer

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