

On learning to direct your creative energy



Author Sarah Manguso discusses her advice to young writers, breaking the constraints of memoir, accepting your voice, and being part of a community.

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As told to Colin Everest, 3018 words.

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

You've been talking about the "big book" for a while. I'm going to read something from an interview you did with [Kate Zambreno](#) in 2019. This is what you said, "I keep trying to write a big book, grand book, a centerpiece around which the rest of my books will gather, but either my fear of death or my general inability to be grand and prevents this." Do you feel like you've written the grand book at this point?

No. No, in no way, but the book that I was referring to in that conversation with Kate was the idea that I had of the book that I would write about Massachusetts. I think at the time of that conversation, I was still conceiving of the book as a work of nonfiction, sociological, researched, serious...A real non-fiction book, not just another book about me. I thought of it as a sort of capstone. I was drawn to the idea of it being my book, because I've been trying to write it for 20 odd years and the material was ancient. It was the place where I was born and raised, and the particularities of that place, Massachusetts were just increasingly interesting to me as I lived in other places. My adult experience really threw my childhood into relief.

Then, I wrote a book about Massachusetts [[Very Cold People](#) (Hogarth, 2022)]. It was not non-fiction. It was not researched. It was not particularly long, but it still served to do what a book needs to do, which is to empty myself of the material. It really feels like an almost surgical or almost a religious experience in eliminating all of this so-called raw material for my working memory, and so it did that. Then, as soon as I finished writing *Very Cold People*, I had idea for another book about Massachusetts and I'm not working on it right now. I'm working on three other books, but what I learned from writing *Very Cold People* is that...What I learned is something that I already knew and have relearned over and over, but somehow need to keep relearning, and it is that you can keep writing about the same thing forever.

The example I always use is William Maxwell, a novelist that...I don't have anything in common with him cosmetically or stylistically, but one of the things about his work that I continue to learn from is the fact that his mother died when he was four of the so-called Spanish flu. In every one of his major works, there's a missing mother, dead, gone or there's some sort of person in a care position with respect to the narrator or some other major characters who's gone. He teaches us that you can just keep writing that same trauma over and over and over and over again.

One of the things is you feel like you were emptied of the subject matter in terms of *Very Cold People*?

Yeah. It's the same every time. It feels like an exorcism almost. Another example that might be helpful is that the fact that after I wrote my first autobiographical book, which came out in 2008, it's called *The Two Kinds of Decay* and it's about a neurological autoimmune disease that I had in my 20s. I wrote that book from memory and I wrote it at some distance. It was seven years after, I think the last moment in the book that I write about that I

began the book. I wrote it from memory. It was very easy to remember everything. Then, within a year or two of publishing the book, I realized I didn't remember what was in it anymore. At the time, it felt like such a novelty that I no longer sort of holding onto that, which I had written about.

But then with every other book that I wrote after that, the very same thing happened. Whatever material, whether autobiographical or in the case of *Very Cold People*, having to do with fictional characters that I had invented, what I had been thinking and thinking and thinking about constantly for a period of years, it took multiple years to write each of my books, was gone. It was gone. A book is an amazing magically functioning instrument for emptying myself of what I no longer need, what I no longer want to think about.

Does the desire to write the big book remain?

No. I think *Very Cold People* is finally the book that cured me of that idea. I do certainly think there are writers who have one or two major works. I am not the person who decides what my major works are, but there are other writers who just keep putting out small to medium size books or books of similar length, depth, breadths, style at more or less regular points along the timeline. I think I had a romantic attachment to the idea of an author who had put out one book every 15 years. Every time a new book came out, it was just this sensational culture wide celebration. I'm just not that writer. There's a writer named James Richardson who wrote an amazing book of aphoristic tiny essays called *Vectors* in 2001, which is a huge influence on me even now. But one of Jim's vectors as he calls them, goes like this, "If you're a Larkin or Bishop, one book a decade is enough. If you aren't, it's more than enough."

We can go back to Maxwell - *So Long, See You Tomorrow* is a short book.

It's true. Yeah. It's his major work, isn't it?

Maybe you'd say, "Well, there's a centerpiece around which the rest of [Maxwell's] work 'gathers'?"

No, I completely agree. Yeah. Again, that's such a great lesson that apparently, to some degree, still need to relearn, but yes, that's a major work. It's widely read. It's taught. It's studied by other writers and artists. It's been in print probably longer, or I don't know what the print status is of his early novels, but they're longer, but I think that's a shortest book and you're right. It's his major work. Yeah. Certainly, we're talking about something other than length, but at least in the beginning of my so-called career as a prose writer, I had a bit of an inferiority complex about page count. I really admired people who could publish an 800-page novel every 10 to 15 years. It seemed like a moral excuse for not having a full-time job with benefits and a pension and all the other things that we forgo in order to be artists in this country.

Maybe I'll put it in my own words: part of writing this book has expelled the source material; part has expelled the desire for the big book, because part of it is understanding what kind of writer you are. Is that right?

That is so beautifully succinct. Yes and yes, both of those statements are right. Yeah. That second thing, just accepting that I am what I am. It reminds me of something I saw on Twitter, from [Mat Johnson](#). There's a tweet that he wrote many years ago that stayed with me. The sentiment of it is you may as well stop trying to emulate any one of the writers or artists that you admire because the whole project is just accepting that you are the writer who you are. It sounds like such a kindergarten lesson, and yet here we are. There are plenty of mid-career writers and artists who still have the vestiges of these old ambitions to become something that is not what they are inherently.

I want to push a little bit on the idea that the big book was an idea for emulation rather than as an organizing principle for your own work.

Yeah. I wasn't trying to emulate anybody in particular, but it was more that I had this abstract idea of what a mid-career author should have produced, or it was an idea of the kind of book that I thought would pay appropriate deference to the material, which was vast. I wanted to write about an entire culture. I wanted to write about an entire place and I wanted the place to feel real and the characters to feel real. I couldn't

conceive of doing that in a work of autobiography. As the alternative to writing the kind of book that I had written up to that point, I hit upon this idea of this vast sociological researched non-fiction tome.

I hadn't even considered writing a novel. I just thought of myself as somebody who would never write a novel, and this is something I've talked about in several interviews for *Very Cold People*. In these conversations, I think I kind of excavated my personal history as an artist and realized that the original source of this belief that I wasn't a novel writer was graduate school because I went to a program in which you could be a fiction writer or a poet. There was no such thing as non-fiction and whatever you chose, fiction or poetry, you were staunchly on the other side of the fence from the other... We had softball teams. The poets played the fiction writers. It was very adversarial, and the poets had their bar, fiction writers had their bar.

There's like a little bit of dating in between, but my partner was a poet and that was appropriate. Yeah. All of the really conventional lessons that we were given, either through osmosis or through actual instruction about the division of the genres was it was really formative for me. It's taken me decades to unlearn and relearn. Even now, I think I'm still figuring it out. Soon after I finished writing *Very Cold People*, I thought of it as an aberration like, "Okay. This is my Massachusetts book. I had to do a novel. I'm sure I won't do that again." But within weeks of turning it in, I immediately started writing another novel. Something has happened. I think it's a good thing. It feels like an opening up of the freedoms of possibility that I think I had artificially set for myself.

I have in front of me, this is: "How To Have A Career: Advice To Young Writers," by Sarah Manguso.

Oh, not that piece...

You had a very strong negative reaction just now. "Not that piece," you just said?

It's okay. I have feelings about it. We all have feelings about earlier work. No, I'm interested in how you're going to frame this.

The framing is, "That was right. That was wrong. Here's what I'd say instead," etc. Okay? I'll give you a few hits here. If it's not fun, then we don't have to do it.

No. I actually know what I'm going to say. Should we do it in points? You know what? Let's do it the way you planned.

Okay. How about this one? This is an easy one. "Buy books used, perform periodic calls and resell them." True?

I still do that. Yeah, I do buy more books new. Yeah. I do buy more books new than I did at that time, because I am able to, materially.

All right. Number two: "Avoid all messy and needy people, including family. They threaten your work."

Absolutely, yes.

"Enemies: know who they are and monitor them."

Well, okay. I wrote this when I was in a more vulnerable place and the culture was also different. I think it was less democratic. I wrote this before Twitter, I believe. When I started submitting work in the mid to late '90s, you did it on paper in an envelope with a self-addressed stamped envelope inside wrapped around the manuscript. People could get up to no good. You heard stories about people shredding things and throwing them out and lying. I think people didn't have to be as accountable as they do now with all of the things the internet has done, good and bad. There is, I have to believe a democratizing effect that it's had on especially marginalized people who would not otherwise have been able to become writers in the commercial universe that's always been open to some people, but not everybody.

The thing about this piece and the reason that I immediately responded negatively, and I should have known this, had I been more online savvy at the time that I gave it to my publisher's blog. It was for the FSG blog for the launch of one of my books with them. I failed to predict that people would choose one or a few of these so-called... What is it called—advice? Rules? I think advice. People would just take one piece of the advice and repeat it or reprint it. Then, say like, "This is bad," because I think by itself, each one of those is bad except for the fucking last one, which nobody ever talks about, and which basically throws over everything previous and says, "Forget this. This is the only real advice." If you would, could you read that last piece of advice?

Absolutely. "Onward. Once you've truly begun, slow down. The difference between publishing two good books and 40 mediocre books is terribly large. Don't expend energy in writing and publishing that would be better used in your family or community. Come tempered by life. Make compromises for love, provide a service to the world. These experiences form the adult mind. Without them, both you and your work remain juvenile."

That's the advice. Everything before it is... It's almost like each one before that is preceded by, "You may think dot, dot, dot. You may think dot, dot, dot," but really that's the advice. Now, you know the source of my complex feelings about how this has been... This piece had a life far beyond what I had expected and it doesn't come up as often now, but it certainly had a really long tail and I don't think it was good for me to be associated with it.

"Onward" continues to be the good advice. "Once you truly begun, slow down." How do you slow down now versus how you slowed down before?

Oh, the slowing down? Once you've truly begun, slow down. I think what I was trying to articulate for myself in writing that one was a reminder that the important work isn't the typing. It's the thinking obviously, but if the thinking you do best is done through writing, through arguing with one self on the page, determining what one truly believes while making that determination within language, then there's no reason to artificially stop oneself from writing or even from typing.

I think what I was reacting against in my own work was a kind of desperation to keep going after the first book. I saw something on Twitter today about somebody was asking about what the hell do you do after your first book that you've been working on all of your life, essentially? You've been thinking about this all your life, and then it's out of you. How do you write the next one?

The second book just feels much more different from the first book than any other book will feel from the second book. I think that's just a fact and although I don't remember exactly what I was thinking when I wrote that sentence, but I think it was added to the piece in order to just provide myself some kind of comfort about the wasteland, in which one finds oneself after the first book.

But that's not that part of onward that I think is really the best advice. I think the best advice is don't waste energy trying to write something in particular or write in general that you could better expand in your family or your community.

It's this idea, and I don't think this idea is as strong in the cultural imagination as it was in the '90s when I started out, but there was this idea of the always male writer who would go and just wrestle with his typewriter while all around him, a wife, a secretary, an assistant, an army of women would just take care of everything else in his life. I wrote all of that advice before I really knew I was a woman. As a young person, I did not have any responsibilities beyond myself. I wasn't part of a family. I wasn't a mother. I didn't even have a cat. It was very easy for me to identify with this kind of masculine ideal of the writer only ever writing. Then, of course, time passed and I made culturally inflected decisions that worked against myself as a writer. I married a man. I've since divorced that man. I had a child. I still have the child.

I understand better what I was just beginning to articulate in "Onward" back when I wrote it, which is that I had a sense that it wasn't good to just be a writer because it just becomes this masturbatory and ultimately boring—boring to others, boring to oneself—practice that doesn't really belong anywhere. It's not for an audience. It's not to anybody. I will say of everything in that little piece, each of its little articles, the one that most closely represents the way I feel about writing now is that last one, and I knew it would. I knew it would.

Sarah Manguso Recommends:

Betty Boop + Grampy in "House Cleaning Blues"

Leland Palmer's delivery of the line "Would that it were so," Twin Peaks, Episode 11

"Meeting the Devil," Hilary Mantel, London Review of Books, Nov. 4, 2010

Gesualdo's Tenebrae Responsoria Feria Quinta, Graindelavoix (bootleg)

Silk Poems, Jen Bervin

Name

Sarah Manguso

Vocation

writer

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