

# On not making things harder than they need to be



Writer Sarah Rose Etter discusses getting the first draft out of your system, accountability, and why writing isn't a competitive sport.

September 11, 2023 -

As told to Sara Tardiff, 2377 words.

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

**You've said before that the first line in *The Book of X* felt like "a door was opening and all [you] had to do was step through it and follow the path beyond." I'm curious about your latest book, *Ripe*, and what about it felt like a door to you? What was your entry point?**

I always think it's the first sentence. That's something they talk a lot about in movies, that the central conflict is usually introduced in the first three to five minutes—and a book feels similar for me. The first sentence has to hold a whole world in it. If a sentence feels like something I can chew on or that might be loaded enough to open that door up, then I usually know that I'm cooking with something.

In the opening for *Ripe*, it's grounded in a moment just a couple weeks after I moved to San Francisco. I was in a coffee shop, and I was still bright-eyed and bushy-tailed about moving there. And the woman who owned the coffee shop was pouring me a cup of coffee, and she told me that I should be careful in San Francisco. I said, "I'm not really scared of San Francisco." And she said, "Well, it's a different kind of thing to be afraid of here." And she told me that the night before a man had set himself on fire outside of the coffee shop, and she had tried to put him out. She was so shaken. And although the scene in the opening of the book is quite different, that real-life moment was such a strong foreshadowing that San Francisco wasn't what I had imagined it to be.

**When you're working on a project that has surrealist elements or a non-linear timeline, how do you go about outlining and researching?**

When I was 25, I went to see [Mary Gaitskill](#) talk before I ever even tried to be a writer in a real way. And I asked her a question at the Q&A portion of the event, and I said, "How do you know if a project is worth being a book?" And she stared down into my soul with these ice blue eyes, and she was like, "I don't believe in waste." And I was like, "Jesus Christ." She completely eviscerated me. But I do understand in a more gentle way now that there is truth to it. I work full-time, and I don't want to spend 10 or 15 years on a book, so I do outline. I try to leave room for there to be surrealism and play, but it's much easier for me if every day I sit down and I know exactly what scene I'm going to write. Because if every single day you're going back to, "*Where's this going? What am I doing next? Where can I find the story?*"—that alone is a huge hurdle to constantly come back to.

It's very easy to overthink parts of writing a book that are simple. We are human beings. We've loved certain plots since the dawn of time. Cave paintings and the Bible and myths: all of these things have a plot structure and that's why we're drawn to them. Whenever I teach, I always encourage my students to find a simple plot structure and use it. Everything else is where you can play, but don't make it harder for yourself.

**I know with your last book, you've said how you wrote down scenes on index cards and chose one at random to work**

**on for the day. Did you take a similar approach with this book?**

Absolutely. It just works for me because it reminds me of pulling a tarot card every day. There are certain scenes that I have a red "X" on, because I know they're going to be really emotionally taxing ones where I know I'm going to have a hard time when I write it or I'm going to cry or it's going to break my heart a little. So I try to be careful about those.

**What does your writing schedule look like while you have a full-time job?**

I work in tech and manage a team of five content designers. So it's a really rewarding, but definitely a challenging job. If I'm just trying to get the first draft out—which I try to do really quickly, within five months or so—then I'll have a really rigid schedule. I'll write an hour every day after work, I'll write nine-to-five on Saturday and Sunday, I'll take two weeks off work and write the whole time instead of going on vacation. And that's just to get the first draft out. I encourage everyone to just vomit it out. Everyone's first draft sucks. It is a known thing in writing. Every writer you talk to will tell you this. I'm pretty sure I edited this book for three or four years, and so the real labor to me is in the editing. You can't edit if you have nothing. You can fix anything in post, but if you don't have a draft to edit, then you're just telling everybody about your idea for a novel.

**What are your ideal writing conditions?**

With *The Book of X*, I was in a writing residency in Iceland and I wrote the whole first draft in a month because I wasn't working full time. I wrote 70,000 words in a month over there. It was the first time I had ever gotten dedicated time to just write, so I knew I had to get as much out of it as I could.

With *Ripe*, we were in COVID lockdown. And so it was more about figuring out how to work around this new way of living where I wasn't going to be able to go anywhere. What really helped me was one of my best friends, Tommy Pico, and I started this really wild writing schedule where we would get on Zoom and we would talk shit, then we would go write for two hours and leave the Zoom open with our cameras off and our mics muted, and then come back and talk shit after two hours, and then go for two hours and then come back and talk shit. And we did that for a lot of this project. It was super helpful because it kept me accountable, and during a time when I felt so alone, it really helped me to have somebody to work alongside. I really don't know if there's anyone else I could work with in that way because it is kind of an intimate way to work. I don't think I ever could have written this book without Tommy.

**What parts specifically of the novel writing process do you feel the most resistance? And also, which part of the process do you feel the most ease?**

Writing a novel is just so big and unwieldy. It's such a massive undertaking that I'm going to write 300 pages of something that's going to somehow function together. And especially when you're writing really dark work. I think a lot about *The Art of Cruelty* by Maggie Nelson, where she asks: "How cruel can a work of art be before people can't engage with it?" Because there is a certain line that if you cross it, you kind of can't come back or you lose a lot of people. So finding that line and figuring out how to do this in a way that is still enjoyable to the reader on some level is probably one of the harder challenges. And then there's also some resistance because in certain scenes, I'm definitely cracking my heart open and having to revisit trauma and having to be really cognizant of that, because the whole book doesn't need to be me cutting my heart open and bleeding on the page. But there's definitely got to be moments of that, or it's not worth it.

The easy part is when I'm playing, when I'm doing the structure stuff. It's not necessarily easy, but it's fun in a different way. I need to be working on something and that doesn't bore me. It helps me to keep coming back to the work, because if I'm bored, I'm definitely going to bore the reader.

**When your work involves tapping into pain as a regular practice, how do you come down from a heightened emotional state?**

A favorite pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt that I have. I can order whatever I want for dinner. I can watch TV, whatever I want to do. I've really fallen in love with K spas ever since I moved to LA. Also, Tommy and I go to Alamo Drafthouse because the seats recline and they bring you bottomless diet Coke and popcorn. And that is, to me, returning to the womb. I will go see any movie and that solves all my problems for the most part.

#### **Speaking of movies, what were you consuming while working on *Ripe*?**

I really was stuck on *I May Destroy You*. I was so blown away and was listening to a lot of interviews with [Michaela Coel], and it was really helpful to hear someone who was trying to process trauma about how they did it, and also just her confidence in standing by the work. It was like preparing for being on the press junket, which is demanding in really different ways than writing. They're two very separate things.

I was talking to Carmen Maria Machado about this a couple days ago. In order to do this work, you have to have a really special set of skills, and you need to be able to endure writing the first draft, and you need to then endure editing it, and then you need to endure selling it, and then you need to endure editing it again. And then you need to endure getting a cover and a title and then it coming out and then doing the press, and then hoping you sell it. They're all very different skill set sets, right? Like, do you have a business mentality? Can you now sell the thing that you just poured your heart into? Because my work does not get to exist unless I sell copies. It is literally just a fact of being a writer that if I want to keep doing this, I have to go sell the thing. I'm very lucky in some ways that I have a background in marketing. That helps a lot, but it does require all of the skills. You need to be introverted and extroverted. You need to be private and public. It's just so many dualities. And so that's something I've been thinking about a lot is the ways it requires you to be resilient.

#### **At what point in the process does marketing come into your frame of mind?**

I was in an interview recently and they said, "You've gotten a dream publisher for every book. How did you do it?" And the answer is, I've really just gotten lucky that people showed up at the time that I had work ready and were willing to take a risk on it. I did not have a plan. I've dream editors and dream presses in my head, but I never sat down and said, "I'm going to write a book for this editor at this press." That is the fastest way to make a piece of shit. And it's the same thing with when people ask, "Did you set out to write a feminist book?" No, I never did that. I sit down and I write what guts me. All the other stuff has to be figured out later.

You know what's crazy about this book? It actually blows my mind that I wrote and sold this before Roe was overturned, and so the abortion in this book, when we sold it, I had been thinking about taking it out because I was like, "Oh, wow, Sarah, you're so edgy." But now I'm like, *Thank fucking god, it's in there*.

The world at this point moves way too fast for you to be able to even predict what the market is going to want, unless you're doing genre stuff. But yeah, the part of releasing a book that's always nerve wracking is you can't control the world around you. I have friends who had books come out the day Trump got elected. I was kind of joking to my friends, "I'll be in okay shape as long as there's not a new COVID that gets announced the day this book comes out."

You just can't even guess what's going to happen. I definitely was looking at *The Bell Jar* and *Play It As It Lays* and *Problems* by Jade Sharma. I was looking at things that are about women up against the world around them, who are really sad and how they could stand the test of time. If you're thinking just about the marketing side, you're more likely to write something that's not going to last. I always joke that my competition is just dead writers. Writing is not a competitive sport to me. I literally ask myself, *Can you be as good as Sylvia Plath? Can you be as good as Joan Didion?* That's the mark.

#### **Sarah Rose Etter Recommends:**

*Cleaner* by Brandi Wells, a killer novel about a cleaning woman who becomes obsessed with the people she cleans up after every night in an office.

*If Books Could Kill*, a podcast about books that shouldn't have become bestsellers but did. The episodes about *The*

*Game* and *The Rules* books are both incredible.

*The Bear* Season Two, obviously.

*Let The Right One In*, the novel. I don't know why I didn't read this sooner—just devoured it! Very ahead of its time somehow.

*There Are Things More Beautiful Than Beyonce* by Morgan Parker. Found myself coming back to this one recently. I'm so excited for Morgan's next book.

Name

Sarah Rose Etter

Vocation

writer

□

Lee Jameson