

On finding and nurturing your creative voice



Writer Sasha Fletcher on how to develop voice, the value of a writing community, working intuitively, and getting people to pay attention.

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As told to Michelle Lyn King, 2441 words.

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

You've mentioned to me before that craft is one of your favorite things to talk about. So, I'm curious: what elements of craft are you thinking about the most when you're writing? And is it different when you're writing fiction versus when you're writing poetry?

There is no difference in anything that I write in terms of process. Everything is written intuitively with very little plan. When starting a book, either a book of poems or a novel, what I end up doing is just writing as much as I can, until things start to feel alive and eventually the pieces slowly begin to seem as though they're in some kind of dialogue with each other. It only really functions intuitively. It never comes out [if I plan it]. I remember when they taught us how to write stories in elementary school or middle school or whatever. They had us write out the summary of what was going to happen in the story and then we would write the story. But I could never [write] once I knew what was going to happen because once I knew what was going to happen, that's the story. Once I realized that the point [of writing] is to find out what happens, it became much easier to write.

What do you begin with when writing? What's your starting point?

Voice, entirely. Without voice, I can't write. Once I know who's speaking and why they're speaking, I can figure out more about the world. And then once I know the world, I can write the book. So it's voice, and then world, and then story.

How did the voice for [*Be Here to Love Me at the End of the World*, your novel] develop?

This novel came out of a few stories that I'd written in, like, 2008. Then in 2015 I was looking at them and I hadn't written fiction in years. I used to write fiction and poetry at the same time, then grad school was really not okay with that, so I would [write fiction] kind of in secret. Then I just sort of stopped writing fiction for a while. I eventually started writing fiction again, and I was writing fiction and poetry again at the same time. I'd finished my last book, the book of poems *It Is Going to be a Good Year*, and I'd been through like a few weird breakups. I wanted to take the stories I'd written and try to see if I could turn them into something bigger.

It became very clear that what I was writing was not only very, very close to just being a poem, but that it made no sense as a story. It was too compressed and it needed a lot of air. It needed to spread out and it needed to explore itself a lot more. As I did that, it became a lot harder to not involve the world in it even more and more and more. The world just kept intruding in when I was writing. I decided it would be a lot easier if I just allowed anything that was going to intrude to intrude.

I've heard you say before that your book doesn't have a plot, so it's interesting to me that you realized that,

even without plot, you did need to have some shape, some container in order for the project to work. I'm wondering how you developed story and, more generally, what your thoughts are on the distinction between story and plot.

Well, I think part of it is—and this is not to be like plotted stories suck. Plotted stories are amazing. A well plotted thing is like a fucking work of art. I just don't have a brain that can do that. I don't derive joy as an author by writing that kind of story. [But] everything needs a structure, no matter how loose. For me, the structure that I keep coming back to and the structure that seems so foundational for me is a love story. They're the only kind of stories that seem to hold my interest enough. You have to understand who these two people are. You have to understand what their love actually looks like and what it means to them. Then you have to understand the world, both in which they operate in and in which they operate against. An aspect of love is creating this world together that is your own world that the two of you share. Love does, in some sense, provide some sort of haven from the outside world.

When you announced that your book had sold, you shared that you'd written two other drafts and threw them away. What was that process like?

Well, it was made a lot easier by [the trajectory] of my last novel, which did not sell. Before it went out on submission, it was like 140,000 words. Amelia Gray came and stayed on my couch for a few weeks. She had been up for and then won the Young Lion's Award and there were just like a bunch of things in Brooklyn that she had to do. We've been friends for like 12 years, and I made her line edit the first twenty pages of that novel and she just fucking gutted it. I took it from 140,000 words to 40,000 words by just looking at what she did and being like, "Okay, this is why she did that. I love this thing, but it doesn't work and she's smarter than I am." Then you build it back up. So doing that, cutting 100,000 words is like—once you can do that, it's a lot less scary to do pretty much anything.

I love that you just said that she's smarter than I am. I realize you were sort of making a joke, but I do think that when you're editing your own work, you can get caught up in this idea of "I know what's best." And maybe you don't.

Fuck no. We're vessels. Our job is to get out of the way of the work and clear the path for it to become itself. All of our mistakes are when we try to set the work on a path and we try to dictate what it should be.

How do you know what feedback to take and what not to take? Is it just a gut-level thing?

I think the biggest thing is that it's very important when giving criticism or feedback to try to ground it in a sort of context. To be like, this is what I'm saying and this is why I'm saying it. I had a really incredible teacher in grad school, Josh Bell, and the way that he would talk about work is he would look at a poem and he would say, "This is what it seems like the poem is doing. These are the reasons why it seems like the poem is doing that. These are the ways in which it seems like the poem is succeeding. And these are the ways in which it seems like the poem is getting in its own way. And these are spaces where you could do more or where change can happen."

It's so much easier to understand how to process that kind of feedback. You can take that little step back and look at your own work and be like, "Does what the person is saying make sense to me?" If it doesn't, if they're talking about what seems like an absolutely different thing than what you've done, then you have no common ground. But if you can see what they're talking about, that's the common ground and you listen.

I want to talk to you about rejection, especially because I get the impression that rejection doesn't really get you down and that you just sort of let it roll off your back, but that might be entirely incorrect.

I think a lot of [my relationships to rejection] comes from having a lot of really combative experiences in grad school. I wrote prose poems and all the feedback I got would be about where my line breaks should go. It became very clear that my work isn't for everyone. If you're going to make art, it seems incredibly important to understand that it's not going to be for everyone. Rejection is just going to be a part of it. If it's good, it

will find an audience. If it doesn't, it's either not good or [the project] and the world are just at different points. If you read about people's publication history, you realize these writers that you really love had a lot of rejection. It just happens. We make the work, that's all we can do. Hopefully [the work] finds an audience, but if the work isn't up to it, the work isn't up to it. And if the audience isn't up to it, the audience isn't up to it. All we can do is just try again.

I couldn't have written this book if I hadn't read *Speedboat*. *Speedboat* came out in 1976, it went out of print in 1988. It was reissued by the *New York Review of Books* in 2013. But I was reading about it on the internet in 2008, 2009 as this cult thing that everyone kept talking about. And it came out in 1976! This is what happens with art. Anything really good will survive.

Do you think there are ways that a writer can go about developing voice?

For me, it came down to just rip people off when you're young. Rip them off all the time and figure out what parts work. The easiest way to begin defining your own voice is to look at the pieces and the things that you're drawn to the most. When you're reading them, be like, "What would I do differently?" This is a very, very, very arrogant thing to do, but the only way to do it is with the hubris of being like, "In what ways does this thing that I love let me down? What would I do differently?" Look at the work that you love and that speaks to you the most and think about the ways in which you yourself would've done that differently. And then do that. The more you do that, the more you'll begin to write the thing that only you can actually say.

For me, a lot of [how my voice was formed] came from poetry and from moving to Brooklyn at a time when it was just really easy to do a reading at a bar. You'd go into a bar and start reading poems and you'd think, I want everyone to pay attention to me. You began to realize the only way to do that is by writing something that will make them pay attention to you. No one owes you attention, no one owes you anything. You have to give them something. It became much easier for me to write towards a voice when I had an idea of what that voice was trying to do. I realized that the point of voice was to draw people in.

You mentioned that you came up in a time when a lot of readings were happening in Brooklyn. How has community helped to shape your writing?

I can't imagine being a writer without community. I really started [writing] after art school. I was living in Philly. I think HTML Giant started in, like, 2009 maybe, and right before that, it was basically just people leaving comments on everyone's Blogspots. It became this kind of online community, and it was really formative for me. It was all of these people who were a few years older than me, who were a lot smarter than me. The more you can talk to people who are a little smarter than you and who know a little more than you, and who've read a little more than you, the more you can figure out what you want to read and what you should read. They tell you what you should read and you read some of it and you can't stand some of it, but some of it you're obsessed with. You just follow those things.

The more people you can talk to, the more you can remember that writing is a process. On the one hand, writing a book is the loneliest thing you can do. On the other hand, when everyone else is doing it, it's also somehow less lonely. No one is going through this alone. Everyone is able to sort of look at each other and help each other. It feels essential to me to have some kind of community. To have people you can talk to who you trust and who you trust with your work and who trust you with theirs. I really truly can't imagine what it would be like to create without that.

Sasha Fletcher Recommends:

Reading Shane Jones. I don't ever want to stop. All his books are amazing. Please buy them and read them. His work's the sort of aching tenderness you feel waking from a dream.

Watching [*Death to the Tinman*](#) and [*Jettison Your Loved Ones*](#), both of which I must have seen in 2009 or 2010 and which have meant an enormous amount to me.

[*Kentucky Route Zero*](#) claims it's "a magical realist adventure game about a secret highway running through the

caves beneath Kentucky, and the mysterious folks who travel it" and it is, it's also about debt and art and how to escape or live with either one in a world that gets harder to explain the more you see of it. All you have to do is pick dialog choices and click on things.

Cooking dinner for other people. I always end up cooking better for someone else than I do myself. I don't know! There is nothing at all like cooking dinner for someone you care about and then sitting down and eating that dinner with them while outside the window the sky does whatever it's going to do.

Brett Story's work, oh my god. *The Hottest August *is on Criterion, and The Prison in Twelve Landscapes is breathtaking in that it is sometimes hard to breathe when we watch the pain we allow the state to inflict upon us day after day after day after day.

Name

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Vocation

writer

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Alexandra Tanner