

# On writing as an impulsive act



Writer, teacher, and activist Sarah Schulman on the experiences that fuel her fiction, responding to criticism, and the value of activism.

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As told to Ruby Brunton, 2256 words.

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

Congratulations on your new novel, *Maggie Terry*, which has just been published by Feminist Press. It's your first book since publishing your non-fiction title, *Conflict is Not Abuse*, which is obviously a quite different project. So I was curious to know how you go about deciding what form of book project you want to take on next? Or does it sort of happen more by accident?

Thank you. I really don't know how it works. You know, writing is about impulse. Except in the few cases where I wrote something like *The Cosmopolitans*, which was originally a play that never got produced, so I made a novel out of it. *Maggie Terry* started out as a television pilot, and I didn't know what to do with it, so I novelized it. But other than that, I really don't understand the whole process.

Do you still have plans to consider turning it into a television pilot?

Well, it's possible, but somebody would have to be interested in it.

I think it would make a great television pilot, personally.

Well, if you know anybody who works in television please let them know.

All right, I will. In the introductory letter that you wrote to your reviewer in the galley of *Maggie Terry*, you said that you wanted to return to the detective genre after 30 years of writing very different kinds of books, and you state, "One reason is to give the reader a fun bathtub read." What is it about the detective genre you think that makes a good bathtub read?

A lot of my books are page-turners, but some of them aren't. Sometimes I become interested in more formal inventions, or experimental styles. When I do write something that's literary fiction, or historical fiction, or some kind of genre fiction, I tend to use a lot of reversals. You know, where the reader thinks one thing is happening, and then it turns out something else is happening. That cross is very conducive to the noir, murder-mystery genre, although this is kind of a faux mystery. I mean it has all of the page-turning elements of a whodunnit and whatever, but I think it goes much deeper than that. It's actually really a novel, you know, more than a mystery novel, even though it gestures towards the fun parts of mysteries.

You've mentioned that another reason to return to the detective genre had to do with spending over 20 years teaching with people around you who were either tangentially or closely connected to the police. What was it about that experience that made you want to return to this genre?

I teach on Staten Island in a working-class school. Most of my students are immigrants, but about 15% of the students are white working class, or black or latino kids, who are connected to either the New York police department, the correctional officers from Rikers Island, or to the Port Authority police. So I have students who are third-generation police, their parents are police officers, and they also want to be police. I've been working with them for 20 years, and there's a very specific kind of logic system embedded within them, embedded in their family relationships.

There was the famous police killing on Staten Island of Eric Garner, the man who died in a choke hold, saying, "I can't breathe." A lot of people know about that case. What's interesting is that regardless of race, whether they were black, Latino, or white, for the students who were connected to the police, their identification with the police was stronger than the racial identification because of their sense of loyalty to their family members. So being exposed to this and working with these people for years—and since there's so much discussion in the United States about police violence, and how people who are killed by the police or cannot get justice from the courts—that is a subplot of the book.

You also state that Maggie, who is the protagonist of the novel, has been suffering from a long-term addiction, was disgraced from her job, spent time in rehab, and is hoping to start anew. The last quote of the letter in the galley reads, "After all, sometimes the real mystery is how we each survive our lives and the solution only lies within ourselves." Could you talk a little more about what you mean by this?

Well, I think in the construction of the novel, you have a normal plot, but then there's the detective herself and her own rapport. And the two have to conform. The narrative ultimately unfolds as the protagonist has to impact the actual plot, as she is changing or trying to change, and change is very hard. But as she's trying, she begins to understand that change is quite painful. And it's that what helps her process.

It was a very interesting point for me, one that really resonated with my own personal journey, and it seems to recall some of the points in your non-fiction title, *Conflict is not Abuse*. In my research for this interview I could see that while this title had received a mixture of praise and criticism, some of the criticism was very strong. Does this kind of criticism have an impact on your work, either negative or positive?

Well, I mean I've written a lot of books and people have had a lot of feelings about them. And *Conflict is Not Abuse* was my 18th book. What was unique about this book was that there were very, very strong opinions by people who never read the book. Before the book was even available, there were people claiming certain things about the book—claiming the book said certain things when actually the book is arguing the opposite. Obviously they had never read the book because it wasn't even back from the printer yet. That's a sign of the times. There was just a lot of hysteria that was not rooted in anything real.

Fortunately the book held on incredibly and actually went into five printings in its first year. So by the end of the year, so many thousands of people had actually read it and had heard about it, and so that whole kind of critique kind of just disappeared. Now I think there's a critical mass of people who have actually read it and there's a lot more interaction that is legitimate. All of my public talks on the book, which usually have between two to four hundred people each, were actually long, long conversations. My presentation was only 20 minutes, but beyond that, there would be an hour of discussion.

From that experience of people basing critiques just off the title alone, or misinformation they'd heard, do you feel like you would do anything differently next time? Would you have any advice for other writers who are looking to publish something like this?

You can't do anything about it. All you can do, the only thing, is try to address each person. I offer them a copy of the book so that they can read it. If they refuse it then that's their own drama. I offer each of these people either an invite to a public conversation about the book or a private conversation. None of them actually came to my talks. None of the people who were doing this stuff online, none of them showed up. It's hard to follow up on the internet, right? All you can do is hope that a critical mass of people actually read it.

Alongside *Maggie Terry* and *Conflict is Not Abuse*, your back catalog includes 18 other titles—fiction, non-fiction and drama. Since writing is not the only thing that you dedicate your time too, how much time would you say you do devote to writing, and what are your writing habits like?

It's really hard to say because my process is very impulsive. There could be weeks where I'm writing every day, and then there could be times where I'm not writing at all. I don't have any kind of rules around it. I'm very comfortable writing, I can do it almost anywhere. Sometimes I have the time to do it, sometimes I don't. I have a teaching job and my job has to come first. When I know that I have time, I usually work.

**You don't put undue pressure on yourself to devote more time to writing?**

No. Writing is very easy for me. It's not like I have to justify it. By the time I sit down at the computer, I kind of just know what I want to do and I just do it. It's not like I work nine hours a day or something. It's really not like that.

**In addition to writing and teaching, you've had nearly 20 of your plays produced in theaters in NYC and beyond. Is there anything about writing for the theater that's different from writing a book for you?**

I think that is a little bit different. I come from what we'd call the downtown scene, more process-oriented theater, and from around 1979 to 1994, putting up a show was a whole different experience. It was a different kind of economy. Then I became more of an uptown playwright. I had my first uptown-playwright production in 2002 and I've had three productions on that level since then. Getting a play produced at that level is extremely difficult because the theater is very, very conservative. It's really the most conservative art form. And it's a form that can be easily slammed with irrelevance. A lot of things I write tend to be ahead of their time, often by decades, because I write about things that I'm experiencing or the people around me are experiencing, not what is being recorded in the media. The people around me usually don't have their experiences reflected in the media until decades later. So, the theater is often far behind in terms of its representation.

**Is there a difference between how the theater world operates and, say, things that are more performance art or cross-genre performance work?**

It's hard to say. Live theater is an elite one. And the number of humans that you need to come see the work is much smaller. Maybe you'll have a subscription audience, let's say, and maybe you have a 99-seat theater, or a 199-seat theater. All they have to do is fill those seats. So they sell to the same demographics over and over again. There's not a sense of wanting to create works for broader audiences, so there's no sense of responsibility to allow the whole community—all of the communities that need to be represented—on the stage. They're very happy keeping it with a tiny little demographic. So that's one of the reasons for the differences.

**You've worked for many different activist organizations—CARASA, the abortion rights group, Act Up, and a Jewish Voice for Peace. You recently joined the board of Claudia Rankine's Racial Imaginary Institute. I'm curious in what way your writing work and activism work interact with each other?**

I think they're quite separate. Often the writing deals with the same subjects that I'm active with, but writing is an individual endeavor. All of us, no matter who we are, have a responsibility to work collectively with other people to create environments in which individuals can be heard. I have no illusion that anything I've written has actually had influence beyond people reading it in time, but some of the activism work that I've done with other people has had or has contributed to change. So in a way, that work is more important. Right now my primary involvement is with Palestine. I'm on the advisory board of Jewish Voice for Peace, which is the largest Jewish pro-Palestine organization in the world. 13,000 members at this point. I feel like it's one of the moral issues of our time, and I'm very proud that I'm engaged in it.

**Is there anything you're still itching to do? Any projects that you'd really like to try that you haven't gotten around to yet?**

No, I have projects that I would like other people to take on, like how a lot of my novels would make great movies. *Shimmer*, published in 1998, which was about McCarthyism. *The Cosmopolitans*, which was published in 2015, I think would make an incredible movie. And I'd love to see *Maggie Terry* on television.

**Do you ever feel like you've been working on so many different projects that you just need a break?**

I do take breaks—I just took a two-week vacation. I don't work that hard, you know?

**That's not what it looks like from the outside.**

For some reason, for me, it is easy. I don't know how to disclaim that, but it's not like working in a factory, let me tell you.

**Sarah Schulman recommends:**

[\*Sketchtasy\*](#) by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore.

[\*Negative Capability\*](#), the new CD from Marianne Faithfull.

"[\*The Faghag and Her Friends\*](#)" by Penny Arcade at Joe's Pub

[\*An American Marriage\*](#) by Tayari Jones.

[\*Citizen: An American Lyric\*](#) by Claudia Rankine

**Name**

Sarah Schulman

**Vocation**

Novelist, Playwright, Non-Fiction Writer, Screenwriter, Activist

