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The Shadow Side of Success

**BY HEIDI REIMER WITH SUZANNE ALYSSA ANDREW, MARIA MEINDL, AND
CARRIE SNYDER**

As writers we're all familiar with aspects of the writing life that come with emotional struggle: the years of unpaid labour with little to show for it, the demoralizing submission process, the repeated rejections. Any of these can and do generate anxiety, depression, discouragement—but also a hope that all will be happier, and way more celebratory once we finally achieve what it is we're working toward. Once we have, so to speak, arrived.

But what happens if you do arrive—you finish your novel, publish your memoir, win a prize—and instead of the euphoria and satisfaction you've anticipated, you find yourself mired in a murkier experience?

Over the past year, as I've attained some of my goals as an emerging writer, I've suspected that there can be a hefty helping of darkness waiting on the other side of what we define as success. I've found myself blindsided—not by joy, though there was joy, but by fear, depression, and shame.

My first experience of the shadow side of realizing a creative dream came with the achievement of a private but substantial goal: finishing a novel I'd worked on for years.

There was, initially, elation. A celebratory dinner with drinks. And a couple of days after finishing the book, I found myself deeply despondent. The driving goal that had anchored my days was gone. In its place was a debilitating loss. I suffered for weeks.

My husband is an actor with decades of experience saying goodbye to characters, plays, companies, and creative devotion to all-consuming production for an intense period of time. He immediately recognized my despair as depression triggered by the loss of my creative purpose. Post-Show Blues is a phenomenon openly acknowledged with actors, but nothing of my years in the writing community had prepared me for the possibility that finishing my book would make me want to stop living.

Why did actors know this was a thing that could happen, and writers (or at least I) did not?

Visit from the shadow side #2: I won the *Chatelaine* creative nonfiction competition. *Chatelaine* has a circulation of three million. I Googled that number and was horrified, especially as publication drew near and I confronted the reality that this deeply personal story I'd written in the privacy of my shady back garden would soon be available at grocery store check-outs around the country.

I was about to achieve what I thought was my goal: to have my words read by a large audience. But what I felt was dread. When I received the proofs for my final read, I opened the PDF and recoiled, physically pushing myself away from my own words.

I felt vulnerable and exposed. I felt, also, shame.

The big headline with the title I hadn't chosen. The photo shoot that had surely been expensive. The models who were evidently meant to illustrate my best friend and me but were just a little too done-up. The brash in-your-faceness of being big and glossy and available to strangers, to tuck in with their groceries.

I was embarrassed, and I wanted to hide.

Years earlier, with a kind of horrified curiosity, I had read Stacey May Fowles' essay, "The First Time," in *Finding the Words: Writers on Inspiration, Desire, War, Celebrity, Exile, and Breaking the Rules*. Fowles chronicles the incapacitating anxiety and panic that stifled her ability to grocery shop or walk down the street—diagnosed as generalized anxiety disorder caused by the publication of her first novel. The therapist claimed this phenomenon was common to writers, and recognized the cause almost at once.

My interest in Fowles' essay was less personal than anthropological—*so this is a thing that can happen*—as well as perhaps a little morbid, in the way that you might indulge in staring at someone else's catastrophe as a means of staving off your own. But the essay stuck with me. I revisited it regularly, and shared it with friends.

Now I recognized that Fowles was voicing a truth that could in fact have quite a lot to do with me. And with more writers than I had ever imagined.

I began to ask friends, writers who were further along on the journey, writers who had launched and promoted books: is this a thing? Is there a shadow side to achieving a creative dream, and is it getting buried under the expectation that success equals celebration, that if you've achieved a thing you've dreamed of, you're one of the lucky ones and there's no space for anything but happiness? And if there isn't happiness, you'd better shut up about it because no one wants to hear whining over good fortune?

Their answer: Yes.

Carrie Snyder, Suzanne Alyssa Andrew, Maria Meindl, and I have explored this topic together, in person and in writing, over several

months. We brought our discussion to a panel at the Canadian Writers' Summit in Toronto in June 2016, the four of us, with Sarah Henstra as moderator. We'd worried about drawing an audience. We had a standing-room only crowd. The topic clearly has resonance, and, judging by the passion of those who lined up afterward to thank us, to share their experiences, to say "no one is talking about this," this is a conversation that needs to be opened.

Here we go.



Heidi Reimer: I want to start by asking how and why this topic resonates with you. What in your experience or thought process made you feel that the darker side of creative success was something you needed to talk about?

Carrie Snyder: I wanted to be a writer—an author—almost as soon as I understood that these books I loved reading were written by someone. I was seven. My existence revolved around play and imagination. The idea that I could write my imaginary worlds into being was utterly beguiling.

As a teen, I began to frame my ambitions more practically: I didn't just want to write, I wanted to publish. How exactly would I convince others that my work was worthy of publication? I understood instinctively that this would not be a short-term process. I knew I couldn't write as well as I intended to; I knew my work did not compare with those authors whose books I adored and devoured, whose grammar I picked apart in an attempt to understand the technique underpinning the magic.

I was twenty-nine when my first book was published.

Eight years, and many rejected manuscripts later, my second book was published. This one was a finalist for the Governor General's award for fiction. But the book earned nothing; I was broke, my husband's business was struggling, we had four children and two damn dogs. I needed to make money, or I needed to change careers. I was thirty-seven.

I poured myself into writing a book that might sell: I wrote with hope and desperation. When the book sold in the US, the UK, and elsewhere, it was a life-altering shock. Suddenly, I was earning a living as an author.

I said to myself one night, when I'd been lying awake for hours, unable to sleep: You might not feel successful, but to everyone else this looks like success.

It was a revelation, if not a relief.

I didn't feel successful. I was fraught with anxiety, my nights disturbed, dragging and dazed during the day, mind racing, body spent. But no one would guess, or understand—wouldn't it be foolish to try to explain that I feel like a massive failure, when I'm off to Spain to promote my book? Who would believe I have any right to feel inadequate when I'm speaking here, reading there? How could I admit to being exhausted, drained by my schedule, and most frightening—unable to write my next book?

I go back to being seven years old. I wanted to be an author so I could live inside my imagination. On the other side of success, I'm bewildered to find that being an author is filled with so much reality. I'm bewildered to see myself changed by this experience, the dream ostensibly achieved even while I come undone. Am I a writer if I'm not writing? (But this is a lie: through all of these experiences, I'm still writing; it's just that I'm not writing another book.)

Isn't my question, really: am I a writer if I'm not publishing?

Suzanne Alyssa Andrew: I think this topic resonates with every writer, musician, artist, and anyone who works in a creative medium. We live in a time where we celebrate all our successes out loud on social media, and the struggles, disappointments, and effort it takes to get to those flashpoints are too easily swept away, dismissed, or left unmentioned. Nothing in this realm is ever as easy as it may seem.

Writing my first novel, *Circle of Stones*, was a long, lonely road—a passion project I undertook by myself, with only myself to be accountable to. No one was waiting for it, nobody expected it, I didn't have much support from those closest to me, and it was difficult to explain what I was doing. But I finished it, and learned a great deal about publishing while my book was on submission. My agent secured a deal in 2014 and *Circle of Stones* launched a year later to terrific reviews and enthusiasm from readers. Many complimented me on my marketing efforts, which is nice to hear, but today's expectation for authors to undertake their own marketing efforts proved to be exhausting, time-consuming, and expensive work.

Time spent on marketing wasn't paying work time and it wasn't writing time. But I was determined to do everything I could to help promote my book. I ended up paying for a lot of things that people who aren't in the industry assume are covered. Everything from my cover design to my book launch party to the cost of a modest four-city tour. I kept thinking, "I'll worry about it later." Now it's later, and I'm dealing with the financial fallout, hustling for as much freelance paying work as possible, which of course dramatically cuts down on the time and energy I have to work on my next book. At the same time, it feels a little crazy to do it again now that I know how hard it's going to be. I sacrificed so much to follow this dream.

Maria Meindl: There is nothing to compare with the thrill of a first book. It is just a little less than when the nurse says “here is your son” and you look upon the face of your child for the first time...

My grandmother, the poet and broadcaster Mona Gould, addressed these words to the ladies’ Lyceum Club of Owen Sound in 1946. And to me—again and again—for as long as she lived.

Mona was best known for a poem called “This Was My Brother,” which she wrote after the Canadian raid on Dieppe in 1942. The piece was published in newspapers and magazines and in her first book, and still appears in anthologies. In the 1950s she became a successful broadcaster and freelance journalist, so successful that she was the main breadwinner for the family at that time!

But my early memories of my grandmother are of a woman who dwelled in the past. By the 1960s, her work had dried up. Literary fashions had changed, and television had sidelined her radio career. I remember listening to her idealized stories of being catapulted to success by a powerful editor, all on the basis of one poem.

She drank heavily, was obviously depressed and anxious. As a kid I concluded that success made you sick; it caused you to detach from reality and become destructive to yourself and the people around you.

When Mona died in 1999, and her papers were donated to the University of Toronto, I ended up sorting them, and I found a reality very different from the stories I had grown up with. Mona, it turned out, built her career systematically and diligently, from the age of eleven. She published poems in the *Globe and Mail*. And, with her contemporaries, she spent time and money getting her books off the ground, just as we do today.

And I started to think about “This Was My Brother.” Mona was an introvert. What must it have felt like, having her private grief plastered

all over the newspapers? She was also a pacifist. Many wondered then, as they have since, whether the raid had been a waste of Canadian lives. Yet one of the publications was sponsored by General Motors, to advertise Victory Bonds.

This was a peak career moment for a poet; her words being used to express the feelings of a nation. Yet the experience must have been so mixed for her. I started to feel that success itself was not the harmful factor; it was not being able to talk about the dark side. Mona somehow got stuck in her own performance.

I came to understand her even better when my own book came out, a biography of Mona. Life was “all about me.” Getting attention was the goal. I did pretty well. Yet on some level I felt more starved with every passing day. Whether the results were happy or disappointing, I still felt depleted.

Publishing a book is a life event, like having a baby. How do we mark it—in all its complexity—in ways that don’t involve salesmanship? How and when do we get to set aside the mask?

HR: Maria, I really like what you’re saying about publishing a book as a rite of passage similar to other life passages that we celebrate—getting married, having a baby. Those transitions can also have a much more nuanced and—on the surface—inexplicable dark side. When I got married and again when I became a mother I felt a real grief alongside the joy, grief that I didn’t feel our culture had a place for. I was sad and fearful when everybody said I should be happy. (Even though of course I also felt happy...see, I have to hasten to add that!) Eventually, I did make space for that darkness, in quite a determined way, and I think that permission allowed me to process and release that darkness, and move onto a new stage.

Have any of you felt that the unwillingness of society at large or of

you yourself to allow or acknowledge a dark side of so-called success has negatively affected your ability to be creative, to work, to be a writer? Can you pinpoint ways that this has held you back?

CS: I'm a relentlessly positive person in some ways. I pride myself on bouncing back quickly after rejection or disappointment (a useful trait for anyone involved in a subjective discipline). Unexpectedly, it wasn't until I had some success as a writer that I felt really buried by anxiety. I knew how to cope with failure, but it never occurred to me that success would be something a person would need to cope with. This is a phenomenon not exclusive to artists or writers: when you've spent many years devoted to a goal, achieving the goal leaves a strange hole. Where to turn the focus? Is it only to more, more, more, better, better, better? Or does the focus change, widen, broaden, deepen? There's an aimlessness, and a lot of fear. It's a problem that is difficult to confess. If I were to admit to being scared, depressed, buried by expectations (my own, really), wouldn't I sound horribly ungrateful? Wouldn't I, in fact, be horribly ungrateful?

Don't get me wrong: I celebrate every success. I make a point of marking occasions. This might sound like I'm going in the opposite direction of your question, Heidi, but I've begun to wonder whether the anxiety is a necessity, ultimately, that keeps me going. If I felt satisfied, what would cause me to create? I write because I need to. It's compulsive, almost. An obsession. I often write from a place of deep discomfort; writing heals my discomfort, my anxiety, my fears. Would I be a writer without my shadow side? Would any of us?

SAA: I agree with the fact that everything is more nuanced than people like to believe, including happy occasions like launching a book. I think as a reader, people perceive the end-product of years of relentless work as a simple success. From the author's perspective, it's a

much bigger story. My novel didn't follow a straightforward path to publication, and will always be associated with a myriad of struggles and disappointments I experienced along the way, as well as the triumphs of seeing the work in print and receiving good reviews.

I now understand one of the reasons it's so daunting to produce a second book is that you've lost beginner's naiveté. Second time around I'm aware of how hard it's going to be. The mental game involved in being an author is constant and exhausting. Sometimes it makes me just want to hide. Or do something else. In fact, I've become a bass player and am now part of the equally lucrative (!) world of music. Though it's just as tough, being in a band provides built-in support, the feeling that we're in this together. I also find the satisfaction I get from playing music is immediate, whereas writing is a slow burn. I seem to need both.

HR: I recently heard back from someone to whom I had sent my work, and in the instant I realized it was a rejection, I caught my first response: relief. Lurking just below the surface of my professed desire to bring more of my work into the world and to achieve “success” was real antipathy toward what that combination might mean. I knew how to deal with rejection. I knew how to pick myself up and send the book out again. I've been there, done that many, many times now. Getting a rejection keeps me in my comfort zone. But a yes? Scary. A yes means change, a brand-new set of challenges, circumstances, relationships.

Does that sound familiar to anyone?

MM: Absolutely familiar. When my novel was rejected recently, I was blindsided by relief. This didn't prevent the tears and self-doubt that came afterwards, but the initial response was so visceral that it became a turning point. I'm still trying to process it, actually.

Publishing my first book was—I'll add to the chorus—wonderful, but so much of the experience was downright aversive. My whole system

rejects feeling that way again. It's hard to distinguish what came from the outside from what came from the inside. The tricky thing is that one can masquerade as the other.

Seemingly from the inside, the psychological level...there was the exposure, the shame—perhaps as a woman—in letting my voice be heard. The shame of sharing family secrets. I had sleepless nights. Anxiety attacks.

The requirement to promote made me feel at once helpless and utterly responsible. I was putting in hours, weeks, months of work, feeling blessed if someone let me write a blog post or do a reading for free. If a friend felt that undervalued in a job or a relationship, I'd say: "Get out! This is toxic!"

I have done so much work to empower myself over the years in an interpersonal sense—yet publishing my book seemed to place control for my well-being outside of myself. Regression. Not progress.

SAA: For some reason people assume that when you have a book out you're making money from it. In the real world of Canadian arts and letters, this seems to be quite rare, and in many cases the opposite is true. I recently read Meghan Daum's brilliant *My Misspent Youth*, in which she dissects the romantic notion of being an artist in a big city, in her case New York City, in a business-like cost-benefits analysis style that's refreshingly honest. The truth is, following your dreams and finding a measure of success can also lead to financial hardship and debt. "I suppose that part of the city's magical beastliness is the fact that you can show up with the best of intentions, do what's considered to be all the right things, actually achieve some measure of success and still find yourself caught inside a financial emergency," she writes. She describes her essay on the topic as an elegy, "a lament for all those fantasies that had the audacity to fade into tedious, heartbreaking realities."

HR: I guess the assumption of financial sufficiency is part of the glamorous image of the artist that is more convenient to perpetuate than to expose. We want to hear about the creative parts of a writer's life, not the pesky necessities involved in funding that life. I am sometimes frustrated, when listening to interviews with writers, at the way the artist's (probable) daily reality of trying to create while paying the bills is rarely acknowledged. The work is lauded, parsed, valued, but that writer is very possibly working an exhausting day job or cobbling together time-consuming freelance work, or is lucky enough to have a patron-spouse, because this valued, lauded work is not (often) very well compensated.

I'm curious, Suzanne (or others): would you launch your first novel differently if you had to do it over? What could you do differently? Because you would still want your book to have the best shot it can have.

SAA: Well, I would have put in the same amount of effort but less of my own money. And one thing being in a band taught me is to keep my expectations much lower. I think you're right in saying there's a certain glamorous image that still exists in literary circles. It's the one of fancy awards ceremonies on TV and runaway bestsellers. For the majority of us, though, all of that is a mirage. Even when you think you're keeping your expectations modest, literary circles are so tight-lipped about the realities of publishing, when you do start to experience the harshness of it, it feels like you're the only one. Or, you have to read between the lines and recognize that everyone shortlisted for the Giller last year said they'd pay bills if they won and realize that's not authors being hilariously responsible, but a grim reality (we're all struggling to pay bills). What's refreshing about playing in an indie band in Toronto today is that the music industry is transparently in utter shambles. Musicians

don't have the same expectations and illusions anymore. They're independent, vocal, open, and honest about the lack of remuneration, bad deals, instances of pay-to-play, day jobs, and other issues.

MM: I would not have done anything differently. Certain things were out of my control. The book did win a prize, but not a "big" literary one. I had to strive for whatever sales I made, whatever readings I did, whatever reviews I got. I did take on personal debt to launch it.

But I learned from the experience. I remember standing at the cash desk of a bookstore. I had just bought a book, and began to propose an event that I would finance and promote, myself. The young woman behind the desk, who was also in charge of events, turned her back on me... while I was speaking. I went into: How dare I?... I'm too old... She must know something terrible about me that I don't know...etc. And then I thought: I can't afford these thoughts. This is my book. She needs to turn around and talk to me. I can't remember what I said, but we had a successful event, and all I bought was a bag of gluten-free cookies!

I'm not saying the current conditions are good, but I did learn not to let those feelings of shame stop me. I don't want to repeat the experience, though! And I hate to think a prize will be the only thing that saves me from it.

CS: This doesn't exactly answer your question, Heidi, but it's related to the discussion of publicity, and the effort an author pours into supporting her work. Canadian writers are pressured to hand-sell our own books, tiny appearance by tiny appearance.

Promoting a book in Canada seems to follow a fairly predictable set of possibilities. The best possibility (IMO) is that an author may be invited to festivals for which expenses for travel and accommodation are covered—which has the added bonus of giving writers the rare opportunity to hang out with other writers (rare for me anyway!). Other

promotional possibilities include interviews with or reviews in the media outlets that still cover books. Being reviewed is better than not being reviewed, but can be extremely painful; even the best reviews usually include a caveat. Then there is a book launch, a party usually planned and funded by the author herself (shhh, don't tell), and invitations to readings at libraries or smaller festivals, which may or may not be paid appearances, and may require travel. There are invitations to write blog posts, and visit book clubs, almost never paid. It's incredibly hard to say no! Turning down an opportunity feels sinful, like you're betraying your book or being ungrateful. Finally, for introverts, these appearances can be draining, exhausting, but nevertheless one must keep a brave smile, good humour, and answer all questions thoughtfully, even the ones that are cluelessly hurtful (I'm no longer surprised by these). I haven't even mentioned prize lists, which are the most coveted of promotional possibilities in Canada, and utterly out of our control.

What I'm saying is that promotion is a grind. (I'm nervous saying it's a grind. Jessica Crispin talks about being "in job-interview mode all of the time, just in case somebody wants to hire us." What if nobody invites me back? Isn't it safer to smile, be friendly, express gratitude, do the job that needs doing without fuss?)

But let's get beyond the grind. The truth is that no matter what we do to promote our work, we are ultimately unable to control what happens to it—how it is received. Maybe it's why I feel compelled to say yes to any opportunity: because it gives me the illusion that I'm in control, I'm doing something. I think this illusion creates anxiety. And shame. I don't know quite how to burrow into this feeling of shame and analyze it. I have a long list of things that have shamed me, as a writer: not earning money; earning money; being thanked by a reader; reading

to an empty room; not winning a prize; saying too much on stage or in a blog; not saying enough and being boring; the list goes on. I'm deeply uncomfortable taking credit for anything I've done as a writer. Any success I've had doesn't feel like it's mine; it was luck, grace, a gift, nothing to do with me directly. I think this is the magical thinking that allows me to continue writing: if it's nothing to do with me then I don't need to worry so much about the failure either. So why the shame? If it's nothing to do with me? I don't know. Anyone else out there feeling unexplained shame?

HR: Maria, you wondered if the shame you felt around letting your voice be heard had to do with being a woman. Do we want to tease that out more?

MM: I'll never forget this passage from *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich: "As soon as I was visibly and clearly pregnant, I felt, for the first time in my adult life, not guilty." The book came out in the seventies, but I believe it still holds true. There is still a fundamental shame in being a woman—mitigated, perhaps, by pregnancy. Maybe, for some, not even then. I have done a lot to combat this, but in the vulnerability of sharing my work, or in the low moments when something I've created is rejected or overlooked, I go straight to that place. Do not pass Go. DO NOT collect two hundred dollars.

In the throes of anxiety about my first book, I had a miraculous couple of conversations with Elizabeth Ruth. She was like a fairy-godmother to me! I went on and on trying to pinpoint the source of my anxieties. She finally said: "Maybe you just feel uncomfortable taking charge of the narrative." This was so apt. I do believe my fundamental shame as a woman makes taking the role of author feel like treading on forbidden ground. (I looked up "author" just now in the online Etymological dictionary: "from Latin *auctorem* enlarger, founder,

master, leader, literally, ‘one who causes to grow.’”)

I’m really glad, Suzanne and Carrie, that you spelled out the financial burden of putting a book out into the world. My experience was similar. Reading your words, what crosses my mind is that relief at having my novel rejected may have been financially based: I actually couldn’t afford to launch another book at that time! But I have never articulated that, even to myself.

Yes, I felt ashamed of taking on promotional costs for my first book. And I include the price of my time in the tally. I don’t know if it’s different for men, but I know I battle the expectation that my literary life should be a version of the Cinderella story. Mona’s story. Powerful publisher falls in love with me at first sight. From then on he does the pursuing. Working for attention of any sort means I must be lacking something. Must be worth less. There’s a link, as far as I’m concerned, with taboos around sexual desire for women. Strong desire for anything is punishable. Desire for attention? Yipes!

I am nothing short of horrified, Suzanne, to think that after the artistic, critical, and promotional success of your first book, you find yourself with less time and fewer resources to work on your second. What is that? Not to be conspiracy theorist, but you are being penalized.

SAA: I think some of the shame I felt upon finally getting my book out into the world had to do with not feeling fully entitled to raise my voice and tell my story. There’s this sense you have to have a formally printed ticket to the party (preferably embossed with shiny lettering) and then when you finally get one, you wonder if it’s the right ticket, the right party, and will I make a fool of myself? Or, worse, will anyone remember I was even there? There’s still too much stigma around admitting you did your own book marketing, or saying anything

negative about your experience at all ever, because you don't want to seem ungrateful for the measures of support and recognition you did receive. I am extraordinarily grateful for the support and recognition. Without it I wouldn't be working on a second book, or even talking about any of this. I would have been silenced and crushed. It was the readers I talked to, the other authors I met and got to know, my agent's amazing energy, and the rapport I had with my editor that gave all of this a sense of meaning and purpose. That's what's kept me buoyant enough to keep going.

HR: We've touched on this already, but I'm going to bring it out into the open: if we were a group of men, would we be having this discussion? Are these feelings unique to or compounded in women? Do men have them in equal measure but feel less free to vocalize them?

MM: Well, lots of successful male writers have had troubled lives. That tells us something. But as far as I'm concerned, success is fraught in a particular way for women. For one thing, it's simply harder to achieve. The CWILA statistics for 2014 show that women are still under-represented in literary media. In her commentary on the statistics, Isabelle Boisclair (trans. Bronwyn Haslam) writes: "...if the image of the glass ceiling is essential to illustrate the impossibility of reaching a certain hierarchy in the economic sphere, the essential image here is that of the treadmill... women walk, yes, as much as they can, and they write, as much as they can, but the machine that's been slid under their feet has them stay in the same place."

Suzanne, your description of your current writing conditions screams "treadmill." This is not okay. Yet we're conditioned (or maybe just bullied) into blaming ourselves for conditions which are externally based. We normalize hostile conditions—perhaps in order to feel safe enough to keep going day to day. Narratives imbed themselves deeply in

our psyches. Who would admit to being the ugly stepsister who takes herself to the ball?

SAA: When I see literary panels, juries, award lists, and power positions still stacked with white men these days, particularly straight, white, middle-aged men, I roll my eyes and think, “way to be irrelevant.” I do feel some of my male peers have a sense of entitlement I don’t experience, but who knows if that’s all for show. This is anecdotal, but the only people I’ve ever met who complain about secretly feeling like a fraud as writers also happen to be men. It’s difficult to parse the situation. I think we all struggle in our own ways; what disappoints me the most is when talented women writers are dismissed, ignored, or not celebrated enough, which I think still happens too often.

HR: So why don’t we talk more about the shadow side of creative success? What would a more open conversation mean to new writers who feel isolated and broken if their every emotion upon reaching their goal is not pure delight? And how do we talk about this without—as some of you have mentioned—coming across as whiny or ungrateful?

SAA: One reason we don’t talk about the shadow side of writing is because, as fiction writers who create imaginary worlds, we’re either afraid or unwilling to talk about reality. It’s easier to spin imaginary gloss about what the literary world is like, and an informal rule-of-thumb on social media is to stay chipper and positive even when that smile is really a grimace.

CS: I think that’s why we don’t talk about it—because we know we’re fortunate to have creative success. How to criticize a gift, a blessing? Also, how dare I be critical of this wonderful luck? New mothers feel the same pressure (interior and exterior) to pretend all is wonderful, and couples in struggling marriages stay silent and put on a brave face because what they’re trying to sustain is so fragile. Maybe

fragility is at the core of why we don't talk much about this. Because we know that our luck is a fragile, breakable thread connecting us to this dream we've pursued and managed to achieve, and if we dare cry for help, the thread will break, fortune will desert us, the dream will crash and burn, and we won't even have our illusions to sustain us.

Whoa. That went to a dark place.

MM: There's a quote by Dorothy Parker: "I've never been a millionaire but I know I'd be darling at it." Is there a sublime success out there that would make all these issues we're talking about go away? If success is dark, in other words, is it because I'm not successful enough? I often change what counts as success. "So what if I published a book? It has XYZ wrong with it..." I've been thinking about what's at stake in success. Success and failure are intimately entwined, at least in our society. The zero-sum game is ingrained from a very early age and reinforced everywhere we turn. These days, literary prizes seem to be the gateway to so much of what we want (time, readers). (I'm saying time as opposed to money because that's what the money buys.) For every person on a short-list, there are—more and more every year, it seems—many who are passed over. And only one person can win. But does anyone really win?

That zero-sum game comes out in another way for me. I have a deeply ingrained belief (probably neurotic) that my success will take a toll on my personal relationships. That I won't be the partner or friend that I want to be. Even—okay I really am neurotic—that it will actually hurt the people I'm close to, or—to flip it—cause them to abandon me. I've had experiences along those lines. Success has come at a price. Yet the narrative of success-at-terrible-cost goes beyond just those personal experiences. It's around somehow, and it's powerful. Does that resonate for anyone?

CS: Yes, yes, yes! Has anyone seen that video floating around YouTube from a Simon Cowell talent show in which a twelve-year-old girl with a ukulele plays a song she wrote? It broke my heart—"You'll be the next Taylor Swift," she is told—because I was thinking of the narrative you're talking about, Maria: success-at-terrible-cost. And the cost, I think, is innocence. It's the joyful innocence of making something just to make it. She wrote her song and practiced it with no one watching. How will she write another song with the spotlight on her? How will she keep herself whole when her talent is being used (by others) to make money? I saw a child whose gift needs protection, not exposure. Am I projecting? These are my own fears. Attention and expectation are debilitating aspects of success, in my experience; the problem (or my fear) is that attention gets internalized and changes a person, no matter how she may wish otherwise. Personally, I have a terror, during any prolonged exposure to publicity, of becoming a narcissist, an attention addict, a cynic, of losing my ability to create purely because I want to make something: if this is what success means, I don't want it.

Is this what success means?

Yet there are people who are humble and generous and grounded and not defined by their success (or failure). So maybe the flaw is in me, not in the trappings. After all, I'm not twelve years old. I'm an adult, in control of my choices. My arguments with success make me want to be a better person. People ask me, often, how's the writing going? It's been three years since *Girl Runner* was accepted for publication, and I don't have a follow-up book on the horizon. That's hard to talk about. It feels like failure. Sometimes I wonder whether I will ever publish again. But I don't wonder if I will ever write again. I'm writing. I need to write. It's like love or devotion, it must be expressed. But does it need to be

published? Maybe I'm not writing anything that should be made public. Maybe that's acceptable. Maybe that's not shameful, even for someone who hoped to make her living as a writer. I would like to accept it, because I sense that acceptance is the only way through—to being a better person, a more grounded, humble, generous person. It's hard to set aside ambition, after fighting so many years to get here. But my ambition is a glutton and will never be satisfied. I would like to accept myself as a writer, no matter where my writing takes me, no matter what it gives me.

HR: So in the face of all this, have any of you found a particular practice or ritual to be grounding? Something that has eased the transition from private writer to public author?

SAA: These days when I'm having a bad writing day or week I pick up my bass and play it really loud. Venting is necessary, and will do you a world of good. That's why some writers, like Haruki Murakami, are runners, too. Just find a healthy form for your venting.

CS: The only thing that grounds me when I'm in the publicity phase of publishing is doing the laundry. By which I mean, doing the drudge work of my real life. This isn't always possible, at least for brief delicious spells of time away, when I feel myself seduced and free-floating and in danger of being altogether too pleased with myself (see: fear of becoming a narcissist, above). Regular exercise helps grind me down, no matter what phase I'm in. Grind/ground? Maybe there's a connection. But this too shall pass—the publicity phase ends. And the truth is that the writing phase of my life is not a phase, but a near constant, in one form or another, and is itself an anchor to my real life. Even when I'm not working on a project, I like to write: journal, meditate, pour out, blog, invent, reshape. Like Maria said, writing is therapeutic, and much of it is valuable only to me privately.

I'm thinking about this question of how to stay grounded, which I touched on earlier, and I think there's a balance that can exist between confidence and humility. In order to create and to share your work, you need confidence. You just do. You need to believe that what you are sharing is worthy of being shared. You need to trust in your own capacity for work and devotion, maybe even your own talent. But in order to create and share your work, you also need humility. You need to believe that you always have more to learn, you need stay curious and engaged with the world around you, you need to listen and be open to collaboration. Confidence and humility make for a generous human spirit. I think of Miriam Toews, a writer who seems to embody this balance, and Lynda Barry, a graphic novelist whose class I was fortunate enough to take recently. There are models out there. I have hope!

MM: I spent many years focused on small press publishing. I loved it. I loved every aspect of it. It was empowering. And now, thinking about what you've said, Carrie, I see that it allowed me to maintain the joy of creativity right through the whole process. I made and sold my books by hand, and saw people reading them, and they came back and talked to me right away. The whole experience was immediate and the stakes were low. It felt more like "The Shoemaker and the Elves" than "Cinderella."

In my forties, I started to wonder if I'd been backing down from the challenge of putting my work into a larger context, whether the small press thing had been a hideout, of sorts. I started pitching, braved the slush pile. I made two radio series, then my book came out when I was fifty-two. That was a big change. Ever since I was little, writing had been an act of self-making, for me—in a world which tended to undermine my sense of self. Writing was safe, joyful, therapeutic. When my work went out into the world it had to become something else. I was ready for it. I

wanted it, and I knew what I was getting into. But I had lost my closest and most trusted relationship.

In the height of the promotional phase our Rabbi, Aviva Goldberg, did a blessing for my book during a Shabbat service. We bless new babies, engagements, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and mark death and loss as well. So why not this? It was an expressly non-commercial context. The publication was being celebrated purely as a life event, a rite of passage. Leaving behind the old and embracing the new.

I returned to my promotional efforts refreshed. Here I was spending every day saying: “Notice me!” Yet some part of me desperately needed attention, and was actually being—not just neglected, but depleted. Emotional—not just financial—overdraft.

Publishing a book is all about being special. You have to convince a publisher it’s more worthy than other manuscripts, then tell the world it’s more worthy to be read and reviewed than the other books. Yet what I really needed was ordinary, something that everyone needs, deserves and can have. It was simply a matter of acknowledging a change in life, marking it in a community context. It took all of three minutes, and cost nothing at all.

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