

How I Write

Dani Shapiro

Lithe, graceful, Dani Shapiro has an air of glamour. Perhaps a stint as an actress in her 20s gave her the grace that now permeates her writing. At a recent bookstore appearance, she looked eternally young with long blond hair and faded blue jeans. She is soft-spoken, yet strong in her confidence about her craft. Her bestselling memoirs, *Slow Motion* and last year's *Devotion*, show off the talent of a clear, powerful writer who believes that inspiration stems from hard work. "... A writer at work reminds me of nothing so much as a terrier with a bone: gnawing, biting, chewing, until finally there is nothing left to do but fall away," she wrote this February in a *Los Angeles Times* essay. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College's MFA program, she has taught writing at several universities. She lives in Bethlehem, Conn., with her husband, author/screenwriter Michael Maren, and their 11-year-old son.

Credits: In addition to her memoirs she has written five novels: *Black & White*, *Family History*, *Picturing the Wreck*, *Fugitive Blue* and *Playing with Fire*.

Why: It's a way of making sense of the world, of my history, and of my inner life. I never seriously considered doing anything else. If I had, perhaps being a psychoanalyst would have been the only other thing that engaged me in similar ways. It's the study of character.

Routine: It's about entirely getting to the page as early in the day as I can. Before children, that was pretty much rolling out of bed, making a pot of coffee, and sitting down. Motherhood certainly changed that. What I try to do is stay very calm through the morning routine, all through the "Do you have your socks on? Do you have your homework?" The worst thing for me as a writer is that overstimulation. Checking e-mail maniacally can do it. Getting on the phone really can do it. I have learned that I must try to protect myself from that overstimulation and get to the page before that happens.

Ideas: Grace Paley was my teacher in college. Grace used to tell us she wrote in the bathtub. I used to imagine she was in the bathtub actually writing with a pad

and pen. Years later, I realized, "Oh, she just meant she took a bath." My husband constantly gets out of the shower and says, "I got to write something down." We get our ideas when we take walks. When I'm driving in the car, I almost never turn on the radio. I often have the idea when I'm in motion.

Sometimes, I'll have just an image. I will know when I see something or hear something or someone tells me an anecdote. I will know somewhere in my gut that I will eventually write about that.

Getting started: In recent years, I have started writing longhand when I'm embarking on something. There's something about writing longhand in spiral-bound notebooks where you have to allow it to be messy. You have to cross something out as opposed to cut and paste it. There's something about writing on the computer that can make something look neat when it has no business being neat. I like the process of writing longhand. There's a freedom to it. ...

Recently, I've started a novel that I'm excited about. There's always a superstitious thing about the beginning of a

novel. I feel like I have a foothold in it and of it occupying my inner life.

Revision: What I do is I write. Then I print out. I usually begin my day of revisions of the previous day's work, then I move forward. It's two steps forward, one step back, till I have a [complete] draft.

Influences: Virginia Woolf is probably the most steady influence. In terms of her prose, it's beautiful, deceptively simple language that does not get in the way of what it's describing. It's almost like looking through a very still body of water and you can see to the bottom of whatever you're looking at. The prose itself is the water. There's this incredible clarity. ...

Advice: In terms of writing serious literary work, don't try to write for a marketplace. First, you can't possibly know the marketplace. Secondly, it's like a prescription for bad writing to think about an audience or what publishers are looking for. Be true to yourself in the writing.

Interview by Linda K. Wertheimer, a writer in Lexington, Mass.



Lorin Kleins

