

7-25-2014

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Recommended Citation

Petry, Ashley (2014) "A Conversation with Cheryl Strayed," *Booth*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 7 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol6/iss7/4>

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Abstract

Cheryl Strayed is a household name these days because of the success of her memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. A *New York Times* bestseller and an Oprah's Book Club selection, the book has also been adapted into a movie starring Reese Witherspoon. (It comes out in December.) But Strayed—whose self-chosen last name makes her name into a complete sentence—is also known for her novel, *Torch*, and for her tender, honest, and sometimes heartbreaking Dear Sugar essays. Originally published on *The Rumpus*, they have since been collected in the book *Tiny Beautiful Things*. Here, we talk with Strayed about telling hard truths, making pacts with your readers, and—of course—writing like a motherfucker.

(Editor's note: This is an excerpt of the full interview, which will appear in our next print issue, Booth 7.)

Keywords

interview, Cheryl Strayed, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, *Torch*, *The Rumpus*, *Tiny Beautiful Things*

Cover Page Footnote

"A Conversation with Cheryl Strayed" was originally published at [Booth](#).



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A JOURNAL

July 25, 2014

A Conversation with Cheryl Strayed

by Ashley Petry

Cheryl Strayed is a household name these days because of the success of her memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. A *New York Times* bestseller and an Oprah's Book Club selection, the book has also been adapted into a movie starring Reese Witherspoon. (It comes out in December.) But Strayed—whose self-chosen last name makes her name into a complete sentence—is also known for her novel, *Torch*, and for her tender, honest, and sometimes heartbreaking Dear Sugar essays. Originally published on *The Rumpus*, they have since been collected in the book *Tiny Beautiful Things*. Here, we talk with Strayed about telling hard truths, making pacts with your readers, and—of course—writing like a motherfucker.

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Ashley Petry: *When people ask you how to get started as a writer, you tell them to find the work that moves them deeply and read it over and over again. When you got started as a writer, what were those works for you?*

Cheryl Strayed: So many works were important to me, even ones that didn't necessarily go on to become my favorites. Just reading a lot, every year reading *Best American Essays* and *Best American Short Stories* and *Best American Poetry*—even though I'm a prose writer, I've always read poetry, too—and just absorbing what the culture has to offer, by writers who are contemporary to us and by writers who came before us. Swimming through this vast sea of language and seeing what people were doing and how they were doing it was a big inspiration to me.

Early on, when I was an undergraduate, writers like Alice Munro, Richard Ford, Raymond Carver, Edna O'Brien, Mary Gaitskill—these were writers who just rocketed my world, and I read their stories over and over again. What all of those writers have in common is that they were writing stories about people I didn't know you could write about, and stories I didn't know you could tell. They were people I recognized. It gave me permission to write about things I knew, which were basically very ordinary country people in Northern Minnesota, and myself.

And a lot of it was just the craft. How did they make that magic happen? My first stories were essentially emulating those writers. I would look at a paragraph and say, "What were they achieving here, and how did they achieve it?" And then I would write my own version of that thing. And it was derivative and nowhere near as good, but I was trying to learn: How does Raymond Carver make his move? How does Mary Gaitskill describe this interaction? How does Alice Munro make you laugh in this place? When you learn how to dance, that's what you do. There's someone at the front of the room, and you kick your leg up when they kick their leg up.

AP: *You served as editor for Best American Essays in 2013. What do you think is the key to a successful essay?*

CS: I think the thing we come to writing for, the reason we love literature, is that the writer has paid a great amount of attention to language—they haven't just dashed off the easiest way to say something. I don't mean it has to be complicated in order to be good; in fact I think the opposite. I'm a real fan of plainspoken, direct, straightforward language that's done with a great amount of care, sensibility, and poetry. I love a writer who writes a sentence that only that writer could write, and each of the essays I chose for that collection had that.

It was a really fascinating experience, because right off the bat I knew I couldn't say, "These are the best essays." Okay, there's no such thing. The idea of "best" is perfectly subjective. So once I let that fall away and didn't try to deliver on that grandiose authoritarian position, it became, "Which essays do I love the most? Which gave me the most pleasure or challenged me or moved me or changed me?" Some of them were fun and light and kind of wacky, and some of them were deep and dark and sad, and some were just interesting. When you go to pick out a flavor of ice cream and they put the sample on the little spoon, you don't choose the "best" ice cream. You choose the one that appeals to you the most.

AP: *You talk a lot in Wild about your mother's death, and of course there are similarities with the plot of Torch. Which was harder to write, the fiction version or the nonfiction version?*

CS: They were both hard to write, but I would say that *Torch* was harder just because it was my first book, and I didn't know whether I could write a book. Writing is always full of self-doubt, but the first book is *really* full of self-doubt, and it was much more of a struggle to keep the faith. By the time I wrote *Wild*, I was familiar with that feeling of doubt and self-loathing, so I just thought, "Okay, this is how it feels to write a book."

AP: *So, what do you gain from writing about these really difficult experiences?*

CS: So much. One of the things I mention a lot when I talk about being Dear Sugar is that I've never been to therapy. I went to a couple of therapy sessions that I wrote about in *Wild*, but that's the extent of my experience in that regard. I was thinking about that recently: Why haven't I gone to therapy, and should I go to therapy? And I realized that writing is my therapy. I don't write for that reason; I really do have artistic intentions. But because of the nature of the writing I do, it's almost exactly like the therapeutic process. What does a therapist do but sit there and say, "Okay, tell me how you feel about that, or what is this feeling linked to in your past, or what was your experience with your father or your mother?" It's all about digging into the psyche, digging into experience, digging into how it is that you've gained certain ideas about things, and questioning them by way of maybe changing them. So I do end up being healed and changed by my writing.

I've been able to forgive and understand and accept many of the hardest things in my life via my writing. The fictional character in *Torch* who is the stepfather, Bruce, is based loosely on my own stepfather. There was no way I could get inside the consciousness of Bruce without loving Bruce, forgiving Bruce, and understanding why he did what he did. Once I did that, I understood why my stepfather did what he did, and it wasn't about not loving me; it was about his own survival. Being able to step back from my own life by going deep into the life of literature has been healing over and over again. There's this strange dichotomy where you have to go deeper into your life while also stepping back from it so that you can craft it into a book or an essay.

AP: Which Dear Sugar columns were the hardest to write?

CS: One that has stuck with me is “The Obliterated Place,” where I’m responding to a man whose only child was killed by a drunk driver at the age of twenty-two, and his grief was so tremendous. He said, “Help me be human again,” and he just broke my heart. I was so afraid to answer him because the stakes were so high, and I also wondered, “Well, who am I to offer this man advice? I haven’t lost a child.” But on the other hand I was afraid not to answer him, because I wanted him to not feel so alone in the world. So that was a very hard one.

A couple of them were hard because of the sense of, what is going to happen when this goes out in the world? One of them is “The Baby Bird,” and in that column I talk about being sexually abused by my grandfather. But the question is not a question about sexual abuse. The question is just a really absurd question that says, “Dear Sugar, WTF, WTF, WTF? I’m asking this question as it applies to everything every day.” And when I got that question, which isn’t a question, I almost deleted it. I remember the moment when my finger was about to hit the delete key. But I thought, no, I’m going to answer this. It was early on in the column, so I was also trying to signal to readers that this wasn’t a joke, that I was going to take this seriously, and you’d better take it seriously too and step up and write to me with your best. And it deepened things for me, and I think it deepened things for the audience. But it was terrifying.

AP: *Obviously the “Write like a Motherfucker” column struck a chord. I mean, it’s on t-shirts and coffee mugs. Were you surprised by how people responded to that?*

CS: Yes. I mean, when you write things, you’re just alone in a room, and you’re full of all those same doubts and fears you have when you write anything. It’s not as if I was sitting there saying, “Now *this* one is going to be a hit.” It’s the same with *Wild*. I always say that it’s easy to forget that *Wild* would be the same book it is if three people read it versus three million. It’s not as if I sat there and tried to concoct a bestseller. What I did was try to write the best book I could write, but a writer isn’t in control of what happens once a book is out in the world. The writer creates it, but the reader defines it.

Ashley Petry is an MFA candidate at Butler University, where she has served as copy editor and nonfiction editor for *Booth* and as a reader for Pressgang. A freelance journalist and copy editor, her work appears regularly in *Midwest Living*, *The Indianapolis Star*, *Indianapolis Monthly*, and many other publications. Visit her at www.ashleypetry.com.