

How to become a writer

Maame Blue

Step 1

Talk to yourself. A LOT. Think up shows in your head with different characters and voices, with varying levels of drama. Play out these scenes by yourself, in the corner at home, to cement your role as the 'weird kid'. This will be your origin story.

Step 2

In Year 2, play the final scene in *Grease* with friends and always end up playing Danny because he has the better part/doesn't really have to do as much. Sing your little heart out in the playground and feel happy that all eyes are on you for a second. Avoid joining any games of kiss chase if you can help it, because you'll end up running in circles for the hell of it. No one is ever chasing you. You'll feel glad about this fact later in life.

Step 3

Always find yourself in friendship groups of three, no matter which new school you're starting. You will go to a handful of schools before you turn 16. You will often have two close girlfriends at once, so that when you are never picked as a partner during PE, you will begin to develop a complex about individual girls not liking you enough/you never being chosen/you never being good enough. Continue to let those same girls boss you around because you don't know yourself that well yet. Wonder often why you can't seem to stay away from these kinds of girls.

Step 4

Read Mills and Boons-like books when you're a teenager. Tell yourself that you love love, even though you salivate over the parts in which the girl doesn't get the guy or vice versa. Fall asleep reading about a girl that falls in love with a boy who recently gained his sight back after a freak accident. Dream about him never gaining his sight back and never falling in love with the girl, so that she remains in unrequited heartbreak. Wake up in the morning and write a story about this in your secret diary. This will also form part of your origin story.

Step 5

Stockpile many secret diaries with a lock that could barely keep a moth out. Tell yourself it's the suggestion of the lock that's important. Hide it under the bed, under your books, under everything that's yours, just in case. Keep strict records of your day, from the penny sweets you bought, to the mystery way you keep finding one-pound coins in your back pocket. Tell no one about how you really came about those coins. Leave your Artful Dodger lifestyle behind after playing the part for a few months.

Step 6

Tell boys that you like them the moment you realise that you do. Harbour long and deep crushes on boys who are time wasters. Wonder out loud to your girlfriends why those same boys don't want to waste their time on you. Begin to craft in your mind the perfect type of boy that is not for now, not for when you are 14, or 16 or 17, but 18. The boy that awaits you at university. Who listens to you when you talk, treats you with care, and buys you books you like without you having to ask. Watch *Beauty and the Beast* for the 25th time, and pause the TV when Belle finally gets her (your) happily ever after and is gifted a library by the Beast. Remember this feeling

is the stuff of your dreams. Make a brief plan to get kidnapped by someone beast-like. Scribble this plan out of your diary the next day.

Step 7

Sit in the back of your GCSE English literature class hoping that the teacher will call on you again. Know what you want to be, who you want to become; and spend the next five years ignoring that. Laugh quietly when that same English teacher notes audibly how much you seem figured out already, and that he suspects you're just waiting out the time until you can be older and finally do what you want. Notice how your friends don't really get it, and you pretend not to, but you know what he means. You often know what adults mean.

Step 8

Avoid home like the plague unless absolutely necessary. Be there physically, but that's it. Hide out of sight whenever you can, trying to revise your way out of an ever-worsening situation. Make stories and plays and dramas and songs up in your head. Write nothing down. Become afraid of the pen. Study until you can see university on the horizon. Find your pre-teen diaries one day and see pages of biro tippexed out. Forget the person who did that. It was and wasn't you. Make a plan to keep moving forward.

Step 9

Take up higher education in a place where mountains can be seen from your windows. Make friends with the only other black girl you've seen there, and drink way too many vodkas for the span of a year. Get serious in the second year, and lost – very, very lost. Name depression as a long-time friend for the first time. Search for help by giving it to others over the phone. Search for purpose. Don't pick up a pen for anything other than coursework and

exams. Keep dreaming in a way that makes you feel only semi-awake during the day. Let your brain continue to rattle around stories that you ignore. Keep moving forward.

Step 10

Make it out of education, and throw yourself back into it. Seek the inner mind as a solace. Become therapy-obsessed and all-knowing, intuitive. Study people as if your life depended on it. Study yourself. Begin to let go the big things, the heavy, traumatic, stabbing things, a little more. Pick up a pen one day. Find poetry coming out of it; and laugh at the relief you feel.

Step 11

Stay anonymous with your work online. Hide behind a new name that will eventually become a source of pride. Tell the very first boy you love, about the thing you love the most. Watch carefully as he reads your poem with delicate eyes and secures your heart with a warm smile afterwards. Get your heart shredded by that same boy many months later, and write the best poetry you've ever written. Find comfort in the pain of living. Remind yourself that you're still alive.

Step 12

Stay alive and write stories about staying alive.

Step 13

Keep writing.

Step 14

Write something and share it.

The Picture

Charlie waited with bated breath for the next vibration. She'd taken to staring at her phone through fogged up glasses, breathing heavily into them every few seconds because of the cloth mask over her mouth. Deep inhale and exhale, glasses fogged, then a few seconds to clear and hope that a new message had popped up whilst she was waiting to regain her vision. It rarely worked, but this was the most excitement she'd had in months, so she continued the cycle. She felt a little silly, sitting on a park bench in the middle of October, bundled up in a quilt-like coat, having a text conversation with a relative stranger, because a little human interaction was better than none at all.

She hadn't planned to swipe on the dating apps, but by July she was all out of energy for any kind of bad news. She was tired of the virus death toll, of seeing black bodies discarded for media consumption, and of her own mounting disdain for the reflection she kept meeting in the bathroom mirror. Besides, boredom and loneliness had become too comfortable, so she swiped anxiously until a friendly face caught her eye. They talked about nothing meaningful and she was ecstatic about it. All her strict intellectual requirements were gone, vanished, just like the city she had once known. Now all she wanted was a simple exchange; an easy back and forth that didn't irk her.

They never spoke on the phone; that would defeat the point of keeping things exactly as she wanted them. Instead they agreed to go to different places local to each of them (she was South London, he was North, it was

perfectly impractical), and then text each other from wherever they were. They would describe their surroundings, the smells, the sounds, the feeling. They fed each other's need to be both inside and outside of the world as they knew it – no Covid anything, no talk of depression or isolation, and both in agreement already that their black lives mattered.

At first she felt ridiculous venturing outside on her own, but her transformation from social butterfly to lone ranger took only a few weeks. Now she strolled confidently with headphones, solo with her head down, laughing at a joke he'd made about a duck that chased him at a pond, or the disappointment he felt at having dropped his ice cream. They exchanged pictures too, a visual storytelling happening between them, as they built their own world, together. Eventually they were talking throughout the day, sharing more than just their recent trips to the supermarket - often quick, efficient and at odd hours to avoid any risk of crowds.

She took comfort in him, in reading his words, in sparring with him, dissecting a gif and stumbling across meaning, even when they were actively trying to avoid it.

There was a nugget of want growing within her, and one morning she awoke to find it had doubled in size. She decided to do something about it. And so she found herself in a park, texting back and forth with him about what she'd eaten for breakfast, and how she had travelled a little further than usual this time, for a prettier view.

She knew the place well from his pictures, and positioned herself by the pond where the infamous duck had claimed its territory. Her phone buzzed again, and he asked for a visual of her surroundings, to tide him over for the remainder of his Zoom meeting - he had told her once that he grew taller in the fresh air. She had sent him a 'lol' in response and actually

chuckled to herself, alone in her studio flat, feeling the warmth of her own smile like a long lost friend. Today she would return the favour, she hoped.

She waited for her glasses to clear and watched the fog melting away, holding her breath at the same time. Then she raised the phone an inch above her head, and took a picture.

Maame Blue

Maame Blue is a Ghanaian writer and co-host of *Headscarves and Carry-ons* – a podcast about black women living abroad – who splits her time between London and Melbourne. Her work has appeared in various places including *Black Ballad*, *The Independent*, *AFREADA*, *Litro Magazine*, *Storm Cellar Quarterly* (USA) and *The Good Journal*; and in 2020 she joined a scriptwriting team to remix a telenovela for African broadcast. Her short story 'Howl' was also published in the *New Australian Fiction 2020* anthology, and her debut novel *Bad Love* was long-listed for the *Guardian* Not The Booker Prize and chosen by Cheltenham Literature Festival as one of their top three debuts of 2020. She has works forthcoming in 2021 and is cautiously working on her second novel.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

©Maame Blue