

My Writing Process

Chitra Ramaswamy

This is a question writers get asked these days. Do you have a writing routine? When do you write? What conditions must be in place? Such questions bother me for, like so many capitalist probes disguised as lifestyle queries, they miss the point entirely. We write, so many of us, in spite of the conditions. The conditions, in fact, work against us. The conditions are a constant threat to this compulsion we share to put one word next to another, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, until we arrive at something we can live with. Or better still, something that's real, true to what we intended, perhaps even beautiful, and – crucial, this – someone is willing to publish it. We do this when we can, for as long as we can. We have no rooms of our own. We have no use for sea-scented candles, cabins in the woods, or inspirational quotes to get the juices flowing. You cannot see us but here we are, trying to carve time out of nothing.

I'm writing this standing at my kitchen worktop, my laptop balanced on a quartet of cookery books (Yotam Ottolenghi, Nigella Lawson, Gurdeep Loyal, and Maunika Gowardhan, if you must know). I like to write here, in the heart of things, or rather this is what I know and so I have got used to it. I did have a desk once but the only place we could find for it was in a corner of my daughter's bedroom and within moments it was obscured by a mountain of laundry. A metaphor too obvious for any 'woman writer' to take seriously, but still I got the message.

I write in the mornings; often, like many mothers of young children, between the hours of 5 and 7am. This is not about being a night owl or early bird, or about the inspiration that can be rinsed from a celestial sunrise. It's about what's possible. As I write, my eyes flicker back and forth to the top righthand corner of my laptop, a habit developed during the past decade in which I have simultaneously become a writer and a mother. Up there is where my one true editor, the clock, resides. And he is merciless.

I've been a writer for twenty years. For the first ten I was a staff journalist at two newspapers and in the last ten I became a writer of books, finally, after a lifetime of trying. That it happened at the same time that I became a

mother goes against the oppressive pram-in-the-hall decree about children being the enemy of good art. Which is really a way of saying that women, who have done the vast majority of childrearing throughout history, are doomed.

And yet. I was not doomed. I birthed two babies and two books. Somehow, the limits on my time opened the tiniest window of possibility. I crawled through that space and the words began to follow. Becoming a mother brought clarity, intensity, focus and restrictions so mammoth, ancient and unsurpassable, they radicalised and pushed me further. The limits on my time, energy, body and mind seeded themselves. Over time, they grew into a forest feeding the loam of the work.

So this is my writing process. Do it now, for there is never any time to lose. Don't wait for the right conditions to present themselves. They never do. If there is no space for you in this brutally unequal world, make your own clearing out of words. Carve time out of nothing. Take yourself seriously. Resist the narratives that bind you by refusing to let them resist you. For though it is true that the conditions have worked against me in more ways than I have time or space to recount here, they have worked for me too.

I have made them.

Chitra Ramaswamy

Chitra Ramaswamy is a journalist and author. Her latest book, *Homelands: The History of a Friendship* (Canongate, 2022) is a work of creative non-fiction exploring her friendship with the 99-year-old German Jewish refugee Henry Wuga. It won the Saltire Non-Fiction Book of the Year and was included in The Guardian's top memoirs and biographies of 2022. Her first book, *Expecting: The Inner Life of Pregnancy* (Saraband, 2016) won the Saltire First Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the Polari Prize. She has contributed essays to *Antlers of Water*, *Nasty Women*, *The Freedom Papers*, *The Bi-ble* and *Message from the Skies* and recently completed a commission from the Alasdair Gray Archive. She writes for *The Guardian*, is the restaurant critic for *The Times Scotland*, and broadcasts for BBC radio.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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