



# Dani Shapiro

**The Perils and Pleasures  
of a Creative Life**

# Still Writing



## Praise for *Still Writing*

‘Dani Shapiro crystallises more than twenty years’ worth of lessons learned from teaching and writing into the instructive and inspiring *Still Writing*’ *Vanity Fair*

‘A practical, wise and inviting guide’ *Elle*

‘Her guidance is sound, and her imagery can be transporting’  
*New York Times Book Review*

‘Writing is a tough game. Those of us who rely on it for our livelihood deal with a ratio of sweet to sour that changes on an hourly basis (not frequently for the better), and sometimes we just want to walk away. Few authors have more wisdom to impart about this profession than Dani Shapiro, who’s spent over twenty years as a writer and teacher. Full of little meditations on the craft, this book takes on the highs and lows of the writing life – and deserves a spot on any writer’s desk’ *Flavorwire*,  
‘One of the 10 best non-fiction books of 2013’

‘Part passionate primer, part benediction, this is Shapiro’s love letter to a discipline, and to the colleagues, students and readers who share its rigours and rewards’ *More Magazine*

‘[A] magnificent memoir of the writing life, at once disarmingly personal and brimming with widely resonant wisdom on the most universal challenges and joys of writing’ *Brain Pickings*

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‘A lovely little book that contains gems about the writing process . . . A fine addition to the pantheon of writing life guides that includes Brenda Ueland’s *If You Want to Write*, Annie Dillard’s *The Writing Life* and Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*’ *Library Journal* (starred review)

‘Honest and conversational, Shapiro provides an introspective look into the creative process and the value of persistence, offering insight to writers at any level’ *Booklist*

‘A bestselling author’s thoughtful examination. Intimate, honest, clear-eyed, and grounded’ *Kirkus Reviews*

‘*Still Writing* offers up a cornucopia of wisdom, insights and practical lessons gleaned from Dani Shapiro’s long experience as a celebrated writer and teacher of writing. The beneficiaries are beginner writers, veteran writers and everyone in between’ Jennifer Egan

‘Writers need hope. Writers need help. Thank you, Dani Shapiro’  
*Michael Cunningham*

‘One of those rare books that is both beautiful and useful. *Still Writing* is an exploration of the writing life, lit up by Shapiro’s luminous voice’ *Susan Orlean*

‘Dani Shapiro has written a wise, pragmatic and soulful field guide to the writing life. *Still Writing* is filled with honest words, not only to live by but also to write toward. Shapiro has created a well-drawn map for the lost, the weary and the found. I loved it’ Terry Tempest Williams

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## DANI SHAPIRO

Dani Shapiro is the author of the instant *New York Times* bestselling memoir, *Inheritance*. Her other books include the memoirs *Hourglass*, *Still Writing*, *Devotion* and *Slow Motion*, and five novels including *Black & White* and *Family History*. In February of 2019, Shapiro launched an original podcast, *Family Secrets*, in collaboration with iHeartMedia. An iTunes Top 10 podcast, the series features stories from guests who – like Shapiro – have uncovered life-altering and long-hidden secrets from their past. Along with teaching writing workshops around the world, Shapiro has taught at Columbia and New York University, and is the cofounder of Sireland Writers Conference in Positano, Italy. Find her at [danishapiro.com](http://danishapiro.com).

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ALSO BY DANI SHAPIRO

NOVELS

*Signal Fires*

*Black & White*

*Family History*

*Picturing the Wreck*

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DANI SHAPIRO

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*In Memory of Grace Paley*

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*“I have to get lost so I can invent some way out.”*

—David Salle

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## FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

It's rare and unnerving for a writer to revisit her own work after a long time away from it. The self who wrote the story has been subject to revision. Old ideas have been replaced by new ones, interests and priorities have shifted, dreams have been both realized and dashed. Life has happened.

More than a decade has passed since I wrote the book you now hold in your hands. My middle-schooler is a college graduate. My in-laws both died in the same year. My husband was diagnosed with cancer and underwent grueling treatment and surgery. A global pandemic and societal reckoning with inequity upended the world as we knew it. These events changed and shaped me. As I often tell my students, as writers, we are our own instruments. The sum total of our experiences forms the landscape of our imagination and our memory. No matter how experimental or inventive or dystopian or autobiographical or metafictional or fantastical our work might be, we

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begin with a lens that is ours and only ours; what we glimpse through that lens becomes our thematic material, our subject matter, the fertile ground for our own singular voice.

The more intimate our relationship with our lens, the greater our ability to focus in, to whittle and hone the stories we tell. For writers—for anyone making something out of nothing, really—this is the work of a lifetime. At times, we become aware that the lens had been smudged. Or cracked. Clarity is our aim: clarity of thought, of instinct, of heart. A great piece of Buddhist wisdom is that, when it comes to dharma—a life's calling—if you're off by a centimeter, you might as well be off by a mile.

If you had asked me, a decade ago, that question all writers are asked and most of us dread—*what do you write about?*—I would have answered that I write about the complexities of family, and the corrosive power of secrets. From the time I scribbled short stories alone in my childhood bedroom until the time I became a published novelist and memoirist, I wrote about identity and how family shapes it. Over the years, I began to formulate a personal philosophy as to why these were my subjects. This book is full of that philosophy. I was an only child. I had older parents. Each of them had been through hardships long before I was born. They were tight-lipped about the sources of their pain, as are many parents, but there seemed to be a deeper mystery surrounding mine. I

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wanted to know, to understand. I strained to hear their whispers behind closed doors. I wrote through it, not knowing, until recently, the extent of those mysteries and secrets. You will read, in these pages, passages that, with knowledge and hindsight, now take my breath away.

*Secrets floated through our home like dust motes in the air.*

*What was I hoping to find? A clue. A reason.*

Even in this—my one book expressly about the creative process—I was like an arctic explorer, chipping away at the blindingly shiny surfaces of my own family history, searching for something I intuited but could not grasp.

I was off by a centimeter. And that centimeter formed an entire body of work—five novels and three memoirs. In the last decade, I've come to realize that we writers are *all* off by a centimeter. The process of writing itself is what closes that tiny gap. The obsession with getting it right is why we sit down at our desks each day. In fact, that disquiet, that discomfort, is precisely where our deepest material is buried, waiting to be unearthed.

As I wrote about parents, children, secrets, identity, and otherness, I had an almost physical sense that something was at my back, pushing me. It had no voice; there was no language to it. Rather, it felt like an imperative. If I had to put it into words (which I guess I now do) it felt as if there were a shadow story, and if only I kept at it, I would be able to follow

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the line of words as they formed a crooked path toward a place where it would all make sense. Where *I* would make sense.

It was quite by accident and through no great intuition or gumshoe detective work that I discovered, in the spring of 2016—three or four years after I had written this book—that my late, beloved father—he who I sought to unravel and understand more than any other—was not, in fact, my biological father. A secret had been kept from me all my life. I hadn't suspected. I hadn't considered it. Never once did I privately turn the possibility over in my mind.

And yet the proof is on the page. From those first early stories, through each novel, and then the surprising turn to memoir, what is clearly legible, there in black and white, captured in a shelf full of books, is the deepest kind of knowledge. I knew in my sinew and bone. As Carl Jung once wrote, “Until we make the unconscious conscious, it will direct our lives, and we will call it fate.”

Writing is an act of discovery. We aren't *supposed* to know what we're doing when we first set out, when we're laying down the fragile, terrifying first sentences that may lead to something great, or at least good, or to nothing at all. We're not meant to know precisely what drives us, because if we possess that knowledge, why on earth do it? What would be the point of all those solitary hours spent sitting alone in a room,

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out of step with the rest of humanity, if we were simply coloring by numbers, like a bore at a cocktail party telling a story he's obviously told by rote, hundreds of times before?

When I first made my discovery about my father, I wondered if this meant that all my previous books would now be somehow nullified by the fact that I had been so wrong, so blind, so misguided in my personal philosophy. But instead, quite the opposite happened. I feel a great tenderness for the younger woman who was struggling to make sense of herself and the world around her. That sense-making formed a body of work. When I re-read the oeuvres of my favorite writers, from Virginia Woolf to Toni Morrison, I am able to trace their journeys, their own sense-making in book after book. This is what we do, whether we are poets, novelists, memoirists, journalists—hell, if we aren't writers at all, this is still what we do. It's the human imperative, this piecing together of a life. And so, word by word, we lay down our tracks. It doesn't matter if we're getting it right. In fact, let's just agree that getting it right is not the goal. Or perhaps we might even go so far as to say that getting it right does not exist. The dignity and nobility of practice, of the very attempt itself, allows for the possibility that one day we will deepen our understanding of what it is to be alive, here and now. Perhaps we will even make something beautiful and meaningful out of all that we don't yet know.

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Dani Shapiro

So consider this book your permission to get it wrong, to fail, to learn, to grow as a human and as an artist. Hurl yourself at the page each day with this in mind. You will get banged up, sure, perhaps even bloodied. I'm right there with you. And I promise that there is a world full of pleasures alongside those perils. And we will get there, so long as we're still writing.

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# *STILL WRITING*

THE PERILS AND PLEASURES OF A CREATIVE LIFE

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## INTRODUCTION

I've heard it said that everything you need to know about life can be learned from watching baseball. I'm not what you'd call a sports fan, so I don't know if this is true, but I do believe in a similar philosophy, which is that everything you need to know about life can be learned from a genuine and ongoing attempt to write.

At least this has been the case for me.

I have been writing all my life. Growing up, I wrote in soft-covered journals, in spiral-bound notebooks, in diaries with locks and keys. I wrote love letters and lies, stories and missives. When I wasn't writing, I was reading. And when I wasn't writing or reading, I was staring out the window, lost in thought. Life was elsewhere—I was sure of it—and writing was what took me there. In my notebooks, I escaped an unhappy and lonely childhood. I tried to make sense of myself. I had no intention of becoming a writer. I didn't know that

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becoming a writer was possible. Still, writing was what saved me. It presented me with a window into the infinite. It allowed me to create order out of chaos.

Of course, there's a huge difference between the scribblings of a young girl in her journals—I would never get out from under my bed if anyone were ever to read them—and the sustained, grown-up work of crafting something resonant and lasting, a story that might shed light on our human condition. “The good writer,” Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in his journal, “seems to be writing about himself, but has his eye always on that thread of the universe which runs through himself and all things.”

Sitting down to write isn't easy. A few years ago, a local high school asked me if a student who is interested in becoming a writer might come and observe me. Observe me! I had to decline. I couldn't imagine what the poor student would think, watching me sit, then stand, sit again, decide that I needed more coffee, go downstairs and make the coffee, come back up, sit again, get up, comb my hair, sit again, stare at the screen, check e-mail, stand up, pet the dog, sit again . . .

You get the picture.

The writing life requires courage, patience, persistence, empathy, openness, and the ability to deal with rejection. It requires the willingness to be alone with oneself. To be gentle with oneself. To look at the world without blinders on. To observe and withstand what one sees. To be disciplined, and

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at the same time, take risks. To be willing to fail—not just once, but again and again, over the course of a lifetime. “Ever tried, ever failed,” Samuel Beckett once wrote. “No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” It requires what the great editor Ted Solotoroff once called *endurability*. It is this quality, most of all, that I think of when I look around a classroom at a group of aspiring writers. Some of them will be more gifted than others. Some of them will be driven, ambitious for success or fame, rather than by the determination to do their best possible work. But of the students I have taught, it is not necessarily the most gifted, or the ones most focused on imminent literary fame (I think of these as short sprinters), but the ones who endure, who are still writing, decades later.

It is my hope that—whether you’re a writer or not—this book will help you to discover or rediscover the qualities necessary for a creative life. We are all unsure of ourselves. Every one of us walking the planet wonders, secretly, if we are getting it wrong. We stumble along. We love and we lose. At times, we find unexpected strength, and at other times, we succumb to our fears. We are impatient. We want to know what’s around the corner, and the writing life won’t offer us this. It forces us into the here and now. There is only this moment, when we put pen to page.

Had I not, as a young woman, discovered that I was a writer, had I not met some extraordinarily generous role models and

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teachers and mentors who helped me along the way, had I not begun to forge a path out of my own personal wilderness with words, I might not be here to tell this story. I was spinning, whirling, without any sense of who I was, or what I was made of. I was slowly, quietly killing myself. But after writing saved my life, the practice of it also became my teacher. It is impossible to spend your days writing and not begin to know your own mind.

The page is your mirror. What happens inside you is reflected back. You come face-to-face with your own resistance, lack of balance, self-loathing, and insatiable ego—and also with your singular vision, guts, and fortitude. No matter what you've achieved the day before, you begin each day at the bottom of the mountain. Isn't this true for most of us? A surgeon about to perform a difficult operation is at the bottom of the mountain. A lawyer delivering a closing argument. An actor waiting in the wings. A teacher on the first day of school. Sometimes we may think that we're in charge, or that we have things figured out. Life is usually right there, though, ready to knock us over when we get too sure of ourselves. Fortunately, if we have learned the lessons that years of practice have taught us, when this happens, we endure. We fail better. We sit up, dust ourselves off, and begin again.



“Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but  
worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin!”

—DONALD BARTHELME

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