

A Conversation with Dani Shapiro

Dani Shapiro is the bestselling author of the memoirs *Devotion* (2010) and *Slow Motion* (1998), and five novels, including *Black & White* (2007) and *Family History* (2003). Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, *One Story*, *Elle*, *The New York Times Book Review* and *The Los Angeles Times*, and has been widely anthologized. She is a contributing editor for *Travel & Leisure*. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, where she also received her MFA degree, Dani has taught in the writing programs at Columbia, NYU, The New School, and Wesleyan University. In 2007, she and her husband founded the Sirenland Writers' Conference in Positano, Italy, in conjunction with *One Story* magazine. She lives in Litchfield County, Connecticut, with her husband, screenwriter and journalist Michael Maren, and their son, Jacob. For more information, visit www.danishapiro.com.

The interview was conducted by telephone from Dani's home on Monday, March 14, 2011.

Vivian Dorsel: What kind of writing discipline do you maintain?

Dani Shapiro: From the beginning of my writing life, I always understood writing to be my job; I wanted to have regular working hours, to work when the rest of the world was working. From the time I was in graduate school, I would wake up in the morning and get to work, five days a week, Monday through Friday, weekends off. Almost no one, unless they're in some state of mania, can write for eight hours a day, but one needs a lot of the hours around the writing time. So, while a full writing day for me is a six- or eight-hour day, probably only three or four hours at most are spent writing. The rest of the time is spent thinking and walking and doing yoga and distracting myself with things I shouldn't be doing.

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In more recent years, as I've gotten busier and busier and also had a young child at home, it's changed a bit. One of the shocks of motherhood was that I couldn't just roll out of bed in the morning and get to work. It was challenging to learn how to stay in a certain kind of mental space while at the same time being present for a young child. I don't like working in the middle of the night. Sometimes I'll work over a weekend, if I'm really on fire, or if I'm on a big deadline. Writing never feels lonely to me, but I feel more connected to the world when I'm working at the same time as the people around me.

Dorsel: Does writing come easily for you?

Shapiro: God, no. There are certain aspects of craft that come more easily to me than others; dialogue, for instance, is something I've never had too much trouble with. But every day I have to surmount my tremendous resistance, and the voices inside my head that tell me I can't do it, in order to approach the page. The page is both my best friend and my biggest adversary. I think that a lot of what made me a writer was and is that tension. I rarely feel, when I'm speaking out loud, that I'm getting it right, so when I have the opportunity to try to get it right on the page, it comes out of a tremendous pressure to express, and that isn't an easy or comfortable feeling.

Dorsel: Do you keep a journal or notebook of ideas and observations?

Shapiro: I used to keep a journal, but it wasn't about ideas and observations; it was more like a dumping ground for everything that didn't belong in my work. For many years I would start the morning by writing in my journal, but I would never look at it again. I've stopped doing that.

I rarely will write an observation or idea down because I fear that it loses its power when I do. I feel that the ideas that have staying power and that really are trenchant will stay with me, and that's

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tended to be the case. Michael gave me a Nietzsche quote on an index card that I keep above my desk: “That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking.” I would extend that to the idea of making notes about something. I feel that I need to be in a sort of amorphous state when I approach the page with the intention of really writing, rather than looking in a notebook for ideas.

I will sometimes clip a piece from the paper if a story engages me in some way. One of my favorite quotes about writing is from Joan Didion’s essay, “Why I Write.” She described the images she wanted to write about as having a shimmer around the edges. You can’t manufacture that shimmer. Sometimes when I’m reading a piece there will be something about it that has that shimmer, and I’ll clip it. But that’s as far as I go.

Dorsel: What books and authors have been the most influential for you?

Shapiro: It was reading 19th-century fiction, maybe in part because the professor I had at the time really taught me how to read as a writer. So, Flaubert and Dostoyevsky, and most of all George Eliot—*Middlemarch* and *The Mill on the Floss* and *Daniel Deronda*. I don’t think you would see those influences in my work, but they were very important to me in learning how to be a writer. Later on, and still to this day, pretty much all of Virginia Woolf. I keep *A Writer’s Diary* on my desk and refer to it regularly.

Dorsel: What did you like to read as a child or young adult?

Shapiro: Absolutely everything I could get my hands on. As a child, I read the forbidden books my parents didn’t want me to read, under the covers with a flashlight. I read all the Nancy Drew mysteries; I read the backs of cereal boxes; it didn’t matter. It was the only way I had of learning how to understand the world around me.

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Dorsel: Has your taste changed over time?

Shapiro: Quite a bit, I think. When I was a young writer, I gravitated toward books that were very lush in their language. There's a writer I still admire greatly, Carole Maso, who wrote a novel called *Ghost Dance*. I was really focused on the poetry of her language, the lushness; I was influenced by that kind of writing. Over the years, in book after book after book, my language has become more pared down, and that also reflects my reading sensibility of being much more interested in concision, in getting the exactly perfect image, rather than stringing three similes together. One of my graduate school mentors, and a very dear friend, was a professor named Jerome Badanes. He once said to me, and I've never forgotten it: "You know how to write a really good sentence; you'd better make sure that it means something." I had been a classically trained pianist, and the musicality of language was initially what took me in, the idea that you could make these sounds that sort of built up to a crescendo. I still care very much about musicality, but now it's much more about concision, and this is true of my work, too.

Dorsel: When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

Shapiro: I think there are different levels of knowing. If I had known that one could be a writer, I would have known at a very young age that I wanted to be one. But I grew up in a suburb in New Jersey, and my parents weren't friends with any writers. I didn't know any writers. Even though I was a voracious reader, the idea that a writer made her life of this was something that never occurred to me. Nor did I feel that I had anything to say. It's a very complicated thing to get to the page with this combination of profound insecurity and self-doubt that I think any writer worth his or her salt feels, and at the same time, a sense of having a voice worth listening to. There's something aggressive in the act of writing: "I want to be read. Read me."

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As a kid, and even as a young woman, I didn't have any sense of that at all. It was a combination of things. Part one was going to Sarah Lawrence, which was the perfect school for me, and where there were suddenly all these writers. Grace Paley was teaching there, Russell Banks was there, E.L. Doctorow had recently been there, and Jerome Badanes was my mentor. They lived in the city, most of them, and they came up on the train and taught, and they had writing lives. I started to see what the life of a writer can look like in practical, very human terms. Part two was that I left Sarah Lawrence—I was a big and very well-documented mess in my early twenties—and by the time I went back, for better and for worse, I had a story to tell, something propelling me, that I needed to write, and that enabled me to write my first book.

Dorsel: Wally Lamb told me that he writes the kind of story he likes to read. Do you think that's what you do?

Shapiro: I think that is increasingly something that I have in my head. I never used to have anything like that in my head at all, but the other day I was working on my new novel, struggling with a moment in it, and I said, well, what do I want to read here? It was a different lens, a different way of looking at it. What would it be satisfying to read here? It turned it around and actually seemed liberating. I wouldn't want to think that way all the time, but it was helpful to see it in a more prismatic way.

Dorsel: What do you think is the key to being a good storyteller?

Shapiro: It's funny, I don't think of myself as a storyteller. I've never focused on plot. I used to be sort of insulted when people told me, "I read your book in one sitting," or "I flew through it." I've come to recognize that as a real compliment because I know how hard it is to feel that way about a book, but I don't sit down with any notion of plot or story. What I sit down with is character. Another of my favorite quotes about writing is from the *Poetics*, where Aristotle

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wrote: “Action is not plot, but merely the result of pathos.” If you have characters and you put them in a situation—in conflict with each other, in opposition to each other, in love with each other—there will be pathos. That is to me the most perfect description of what a character-driven story is. I allow my stories to evolve out of character; I’m drawn to stories driven by the why and how, and not necessarily the what.

Dorsel: What kind of writing instruction have you had, and what do you think you got out of it?

Shapiro: Well, I got an MFA, and I got a few things out of it. I got the very valuable feeling of having time and space for a couple of years to grow and think of myself as a writer, without worrying about what it was going to mean or whether it was going to be possible. As I tell students who are thinking of an MFA program, if you’re in a program for two years and have four workshop teachers, and you have one who really gets you and who you really respond to, you’re probably in pretty good shape. If you have two, you’re extremely lucky. Anything more than that is statistically improbable. I had a couple of extraordinary teachers from whom I learned what there is to learn about craft, and who exposed me to works and writers that I hadn’t been familiar with—Ray Carver, Stuart Dybek. I’ll always remember what I read and when I read it. So much about that stage is about inhaling influences, other writers, seeing how they do it, and being in an environment that fosters that and is about the creative act.

What saddens me about a lot of MFA programs today is that, first of all, there are many more of them, for reasons that don’t benefit writers, and they are expensive, and in the minds of those who go to them, they’ve become more of a professional degree. Consequently, there’s a strong sense of competitiveness and needing to get it right, which is completely antithetical to the creative process. The last time I taught in an MFA program I could feel that, and it

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was very disheartening. I thought: How can any great work happen here? That is certainly not true of all MFA programs; the best ones are still fantastically good, but I don't always counsel people to take that road.

Dorsel: Was there a particular writing teacher or teachers who were important to you?

Shapiro: Jerome Badanes was very important to me, and so was Grace Paley. I think that one of the marks of a great teacher is that years later you wake up one day and say, Oh, that's what she meant. Grace used to tell us that she wrote in the bathtub, and I used to think she actually climbed into the sudsy water with a pad and a pen. Years later I woke up one day and thought, oh, she took baths; she gave herself space and time. You have to know when to get up and walk away, when gnashing your teeth and doggedly trying to get it right is not really going to get it right. That was one piece of wisdom, and the other was that if she loved a sentence she'd just written so much that she wanted to get up and go across the room and read it to her husband, she knew she should cut it. That stayed with me, too.

Dorsel: What do you emphasize in your teaching of writing?

Shapiro: I emphasize process a lot; we spend a lot of time in my classes talking about process, and about the emotional and psychological pitfalls, and ways to get to the page. There are certainly things that you can teach writers early in their writing life. You can expose them to elements of craft; you can teach them to be close readers. It can be useful and interesting to break a workshop story down into all of its elements, but the danger is that beginning writers will then approach their stories with that in mind: do this here, create a sense of place there, heighten the character's senses here. What I try to do is create an environment where there is

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permission to risk failure, to risk making a fool out of themselves. I attempt to help people find their own voices.

Dorsel: Are there any writing craft books you would recommend?

Shapiro: There are certainly books I like a lot. One is called *The Courage to Write*, by Ralph Keyes. I like Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*; I think she's charming and funny, and makes it all very accessible. The only book that I tend to pick up these days is a terrific one that both Michael and I keep very close—*The War of Art*, by Steven Pressfield. I'm drawn to it because it's very process oriented. I also recommend often to students, and go back to them myself again and again, the *Paris Review* interviews. They've been compiled in two sets of volumes called *Writers at Work* and *The Paris Review Interviews*, and they can also be read online free [www.theparisreview.org/interviews]. It's a treasure trove that's just right there.

Dorsel: I think everyone would agree that a writing teacher's objective should **not** be to make the student write like him/her. Consciously or not, some teachers do this. How do you overcome the tendency to want your students to take your work as a model?

Shapiro: Because I had some experiences myself with that as a student early on, I don't even feel that I have to be careful about it or keep myself in check. When my students turn in work, I want it to be the best that it can be on their terms, not on mine. Of course there's taste involved; I'm a better reader for some kinds of books than others, but that's true of all writers and all writing teachers.

Dorsel: Do you think writing teachers, generally speaking, are aware of how much influence they have on their students?

Shapiro: Oh, probably not. When students repeat back something I said a long time before that meant something to them, I'm made aware of how important it is to be kind, to be careful, to be incisive and clear. As a teacher I am not of the tough-love variety; there's

enough heartbreak and unhappiness and difficulty in being a writer that there's no place for a teacher to provide any more. At the same time, I don't tell people that something's good or ready when it's not. It's not unlike the influence of the psychoanalyst. The writing workshop is a sacred space, and there's a tremendous amount of trust that goes on in there. One of the only things that I will not brook at all—I'll become a total hard-ass in a second—is if a student is somehow abusing that trust. It is intolerable to me. In that sense, I'm aware that what I say matters, that the person who's being workshoped is in a very vulnerable place.

Dorsel: You're probably aware of the post-MFA slump phenomenon. Why do you think that happens?

Shapiro: The MFA environment is not real; it's kind of time out of time, even if it's a low-residency MFA. There's a struggle with solitude vs. community, and with the idea of having deadlines. I have a private workshop that's been ongoing for about 15 years, and some of the same people are still in it as in the beginning. Whole novels have been written in this class. People have gotten MFAs, and stayed in the class afterward. Aside from community, and aside from the teaching, I think it's because of the deadlines. Recently they wanted to postpone a scheduled class because a couple of people weren't going to be able to make it, and I said no because it would have eliminated a deadline. I had a self-imposed deadline this week; I wanted to get to a certain point in my new novel before we left for Italy, to leave the material in a place that wasn't going to be terrifying to come back to. You learn how to trick yourself into feeling you have a real deadline, even if you're making it yourself. In an MFA program, other people are making the deadlines for you. It's also a time when you have a community. It may not be the community of writers that you end up with. I have many writer friends, but I developed them over the years, and they've become my community of writers—people that I can share work with, people

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that I can talk shop with. Graduate schools give people a feeling that they're in a community, and leaving it probably contributes to that slump.

Dorsel: Have you ever experienced “writer’s block” yourself?

Shapiro: John Gregory Dunne said that the best definition of writer’s block is failure of nerve. I don’t even like saying the word, I’m so superstitious. If you define writer’s block as a long period of being completely unable to write, no, I’ve never been blocked. I have long periods of time between books when I’m waiting for something to emerge; that feels like writer’s block because I live in fear that this time nothing will happen. But that’s different from block. The closest I ever came was when Jacob was a baby and he was sick. I felt the futility that one feels when someone you love is sick and there’s nothing you can do to fix it. I felt that writing fiction was completely frivolous. I wasn’t going to save my baby’s life by writing, I wasn’t contributing anything to the world, and I should go to medical school. That was the closest I’ve ever come to feeling that I don’t want to do this. It probably lasted a few months, and then I started writing *Family History*, a novel that came out of all those feelings of terrible parental anxiety.

Dorsel: You and your husband founded the Sirenland Writers’ Conference in Positano, Italy, which is now in its fifth year. What effect has this conference had on your life?

Shapiro: It’s had a very salutary effect on the shape of our year, returning to this incredible place year after year, and continuing to foster a sense of community. Often people coming to Sirenland don’t have communities of writers, and quite a lot of them have developed communities of writers out of having been there. That really feels like a terrific thing to me, an accomplishment of the conference and the environment we try to create there. Sirenland is also a time completely away from life as I know it in any other

regard. I'm in this totally other place, consumed with teaching and in the total immersion environment of the conference. Even last year, when *Devotion* had just come out and we were at Siremland, I wasn't thinking about my publication, and that's a miracle. It was as if all that was happening in another universe, back in the States. I think for some people the finding of a really good peer group, and also the finding of an occasionally really good workshop, can take the place of the community. It's not easy to find.

Dorsel: One of my teachers—actually, it was Jim Shepard, at Siremland—said that the story you find hardest to tell, the one you resist telling, is the one you *must* tell, or you'll never succeed in telling any other. Has there been a story like this for you?

Shapiro: My parents' accident and everything surrounding it was a story I needed to tell so much that I told it in my first novel [*Playing with Fire*] and then, feeling like I didn't succeed in telling it the way I wanted to, three books later revisited it as a memoir in *Slow Motion*. I feel that telling that story in *Slow Motion* allowed me to move on to fully tell other stories.

Dorsel: How was writing the memoir different from writing the novel?

Shapiro: When I was writing *Playing with Fire*, I was very close to the events I was trying to write about, only a couple of years away, and not even remotely in control of my material. Also, I was learning how to write; there was a lot I was trying to figure out about craft. By the time I wrote *Slow Motion*, I had a better grip on storytelling, on how to unpack a narrative, on language. My prose style had already become much leaner. Also, there's the profound difference between telling a story that's fiction and one that's nonfiction. An interesting thing about *Playing with Fire* is that the relationship between Lucy and Carolyn was invented, but for many readers it felt like the realest, truest part of the book. That was the

beginning of my understanding that our imaginations can have more power and coherence on the page, and can feel realer and truer than what might be “true.” I needed to write the story of my parents’ accident and its aftermath, which takes place in the last fourth of that book, but ultimately that story didn’t belong in that book. It would have been a better book without it. I didn’t know that, and I didn’t have an editor that was focused on that. I learned an awful lot about wrestling with one’s own material writing that book, which is why I came back to it, because I had a desire to get it right.

Dorsel: How has writing your two memoirs changed your life?

Shapiro: Each of my memoirs has changed my life in different ways, and both of them have changed my writing life. I think I became a better writer with each of them. If somebody looks back at my work someday, they will see my memoirs as dividing lines in terms of the level of maturity of the fiction. I can feel that the new novel I’m writing now is a more mature novel than anything I’ve written before, because it’s a book that followed a memoir. In the case of *Slow Motion*, it was the book that put me more under public scrutiny than I’d been before, as memoirs tend to do.

And you can do an infinite number of memoirs. Often, I tell students who have the most dramatic material that they don’t have to write it all in one book. It might be two books, or three. To think that this is your one chance to write a memoir is a very paralyzing and wrongheaded way of thinking about it. It’s a story like any other, except that it relies on memory rather than imagination. I think the journey I undertook as I wrote *Devotion* was life-altering. I always tell my students, when they’re writing memoir, to have a tremendous amount of distance, for the capacity to be ironic about oneself, and for the clarity of retrospect. I didn’t have any of that, nor did I want any of that; I wanted to write from within it. I hope never to do that again. It was so intense because I really didn’t know how the story was going to unfold; I was living it.

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Dorsel: Six of your seven books are told in the first person, including *Picturing the Wreck*, which is narrated in a man's voice. The exception is your most recent novel, *Black & White*, which breaks the pattern by using third-person narration. Do you find it easier to write in the first person? Was there a particular reason why you chose to write *Black & White* in the third person?

Shapiro: I used to find it easier to write in the first person; maybe another way of saying that is that I'm intimidated by the third person, and the first person felt more accessible to me. I had a wonderful piano teacher named Alexander Lipsky, who talked about the piano as the greatest instrument because you could be both soloist and accompanist at the same time. I always had this feeling that the third person was more like the piano and the first person was more like a viola or a cello, an instrument that plays one note at a time. When pieces of *Black & White* started cohering in my mind, and I started to understand what I wanted to write, it was clearly a third-person story. If I had written *Black & White* from the daughter's point of view, the mother would have been completely monstrous, which would not have made for a very interesting story. I had sympathy for the mother; I thought that her acts were incredibly selfish and ill advised—and, yes, monstrous—but I wanted the possibility for the reader to have sympathy for her, too. Even though it's from Clara's point of view in the third person, still we can see her mother as a three-dimensional character. The novel I'm writing now is in the third person. I try not to be competitive in my mind with other writers, but I'm very competitive with myself. I want to continue to evolve with each book, and to take new risks.

Dorsel: There are two ideas that keep showing up in your novels. One of them is the repeated use of photographs and visual images as elements of setting, characterization and plot. Has this always been intentional, or did it begin without your being aware of it?

Shapiro: I think it began without my being aware of it. Certainly in *Black & White* I was very aware of it. In my new novel there are photographs; I suppose I use the photographs to indicate memory or nostalgia in a character. There are certainly reasons in my own history; photographs have been loaded and important in my family while I was growing up, but I think it's more than that. There's something very powerful to me about looking at an image that captures a fraction of a second in time, and that a lot can be read into that can be true or not, but that was certainly true at the moment it was taken. In a piece I wrote for *The New Yorker* about my father's second marriage, I describe a photograph of my father and mother just after they were married. It's a photograph I have in my office and have lived with for many years and have looked at a lot. The way I describe that photograph and the way I think of it brings to bear everything I know about my father's history and my mother's history. The fact that my father's hand is closed into a fist in that photograph could be meaningless in that moment, but to me looking at that photograph, knowing everything that came before and everything that comes after, it's freighted with tremendous meaning. In the end, when it comes to history, all we have are these images and the way we read into them. That preoccupation of mine naturally emerges in my work.

Dorsel: The other recurring idea is the role of spirituality or religion (specifically, Judaism), and its relationship to family life. This is explored more fully in your second memoir, *Devotion*, which is about your search for an approach to believing that you could communicate to your son. Did the act of writing itself play an important role in your search?

Shapiro: That is very much why *Devotion* ends up being structured the way it is, in little pieces, and why I needed to write it in the way I did, as I was experiencing it. I don't think I would have understood what I was experiencing if I hadn't been writing it. To take it further,

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I don't think I would have experienced what I was experiencing without writing it, because the writing of it gave me permission to embark on it, to explore it. I wouldn't have explored it on my own otherwise. Writing has so often been the way in for me, particularly with my creative nonfiction and memoirs, to something that I really want to know about, something that I wanted to explore but didn't have the guts. In the case of "The Secret Wife," the piece I wrote about my father, I never would have explored that. I would have been too frightened.

And very much the same with *Devotion*. When I started writing *Devotion*, I realized that half the books I wanted to read in order to be able to write it, I already owned, sometimes multiple copies. I think four different people over the years have given me Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Sabbath*. I probably should have gotten the hint that I needed to read it, but I didn't until I pushed myself by saying this is what I'm going to do, I'm going to write a book about this. There are journeys that writers go on because they want to write a book about it, and then there are books that writers write because they want to go on a journey. *Devotion* was very much a book that I wrote so I could go on the journey.

Dorsel: Both of these ideas seem to be related to the question of identity, to who you are on the inside as opposed to on the outside. In the four novels in which the protagonist is a woman, she is seen as an aesthetic object who continually feels that the people around her are not seeing her as she really is, as a complete person. Would you say that this is an overarching theme of your work?

Shapiro: The impetus to write for me is the impetus to be understood. In a way it comes from: don't misunderstand me; don't think I'm someone other than I am, and that comes from having been projected onto quite a bit over the course of my life. I was the Beech-Nut baby when I was nine months old, and then I was the Kodak Christmas poster child when I was three—an Orthodox

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Jewish girl wishing the whole world a Merry Christmas. I'm thinking of an Adrienne Rich quote that what is under the pressure of concealment in us explodes in poetry. That's very true for me; there was a lot of concealment. I spent a lot of my earlier life feeling very easily misunderstood, and that has found its way into a lot of my work, probably most notably in *Black & White*. I think I sort of dispensed with that in *Black & White*.

Dorsel: What are you working on now?

Shapiro: I'm working on a new novel. What I can say about it is that it does feel quite different to me from my previous work, and it's very much influenced by the ideas I was grappling with when I was writing *Devotion*. It's more orchestral, more populated. It has, at the moment, six distinct voices, all in the third person. It plays around a lot with time and the passage of time. Since *Devotion*, I've been thinking a lot about the way time operates. From the moment I started it I couldn't help but see that, once again, my nonfiction has become a line of demarcation.

Dorsel: I look forward to reading it. Thank you very much, Dani.

—Reprinted from **upstreet** *number seven*
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