

5-MINUTE MEMOIR

Tales From the Writing Life

Starstruck

BY SUSAN SHAPIRO

I landed in New York at 20, looking for love, family, literary fame. Finding only rejections and loneliness, I launched a writing workshop. Three couples in the writing group wed; I remained single. I fixed up 20 marriages over a decade and a half. Unattached, I felt like a shoeless cobbler until, at 35, I found my sardonic screenwriter groom. While my matches spawned two dozen children, my mate and I suffered infertility.

I began teaching feature journalism at a local college. My students were my surrogate children. “What’s your goal?” I’d ask each undergrad, mapping out plans, answering hundreds of calls and emails daily, like a free 24-hour career hotline. Eighty of my pupils wound up publishing books. It was thrilling. I endorsed so many that my nickname became “blurb whore.” But when 23-year-old Aspen signed a deal for the debut I couldn’t manage at 40, I was jealous. Two others secured half-million-dollar advances—10 times my salary. ●

“You’ll take others higher than you can take yourself,” a Jungian astrologer told me upon reading my chart. ● I’d wondered why I was so much more brilliant with other people’s lives than with my own. Now I knew: It was in the stars. I’d rebelled against my Jewish mother, a stay-at-home mom of four, yet here I was, nurturing others’ offspring, throwing parties for students’ books bought by editors who’d rejected mine. Watching everyone else fulfill their fantasies was frustrating. I needed a *me* to help me.

When a top agent said my best asset was my “access to young talent,” I realized I was no longer youthful or promising. Students called me their “rainmaker” or “Sue-ru,” while my own planets were in low places, selfless Neptune in the 10th house limiting me. Still, I continued, delirious to sell my first book at 43. I didn’t rock the sales charts, but somehow I managed to keep writing. I had to relearn the lesson I taught my students: “Don’t compete externally, just compare where you’ve been with how far you’ve come.” Several of my students became bestselling award winners. On my recent half-century birthday, it seemed greedy and myopic to lament what I didn’t have; I’d found lasting work and passion. With

my planetary map, getting this far could be seen as miraculous.

Teaching my evening class remained exciting. Gisselle’s debut publication on sharing a home with 19 Dominican relatives led her to sign her own lease. Alex, a 26-year-old veteran who’d enrolled courtesy of the Montgomery



GI Bill, found a literary agent and a job. After Che became the editor-in-chief of *GQ India*, he wrote to tell me that my insights and generosity still helped him and that I’d always be his guru. They were inspiring me, sharing their good karma. “You’re one of the magic people,” Aspen whispered. I was touched that she dedicated her debut book to me.

If my students had planets ● in higher places, then maybe I could hitch my star to a possible loophole: collaboration. Kenan, a Bosnian Muslim, asked me to help chronicle how he’d survived the ethnic cleansing campaign against his people in the Balkan Wars. Moved by his story, I signed on as co-author. We sold the book to Penguin Random House. I saw that my twin callings were a gift, not a curse. My students weren’t my competition, but my legacy. The hurt I’d felt could just be labor pains, like the Adrienne Rich line: “Her wounds came from the same source as her power.” **WD**

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