

*Ana Maria Spagna*

364: How Writing Is Like Walking a Tightrope

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at diymfa.com/364 because it's Episode 364. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on Apple, Google, or, you know, all the usual places where you might listen to a podcast, and please leave us a review. This will help other Word Nerds out there discover the show as well.

Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Ana Maria Spagna.

Ana Maria is the author of *Uplake: Restless Essays of Coming and Going*; as well as several previous nonfiction books on nature, work, civil, indigenous, and LGBTQ rights. Her previous books include: *Reclaimers*, which are stories of elder women reclaiming sacred land and water; and it was a finalist for the 2016 Rachel Carson Book Award from the Society of Environmental Journalists.

Also, the memoir/history *Test Ride on the Sunnyland Bus: A Daughter's Civil Rights Journey*, winner of the 2010 River Teeth literary nonfiction prize. And *100 Skills You'll Need for the End of the World (as We Know It)* which is a humor-infused exploration of how to live more lightly on the planet. Plus, she has two essay collections in addition to *Uplake*; and they're titled *Potluck* and *Now Go Home*.

Her first novel for young people, *The Luckiest Scar on Earth* is about a 14-year-old snowboarder and her activist father; and it released in 2017. And her first chapbook of poetry is coming up this fall; and it's titled *Mile Marker Six*.

Ana Maria's work has been recognized by the Nautilus Book Awards, the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Awards, and as a four-time finalist for the Washington State Book Award. Her essays have appeared in *Orion*, *Ecotone*, *Fourth Genre*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Brevity*, *The Normal School*, and regularly in *High Country News*.

After working fifteen years on backcountry trail crews for the National Park Service, she turned to teaching and is currently on the faculty of the low-residency MFA programs at Antioch University, Los Angeles and Western Colorado University.

Welcome Ana Maria, it is so great to have you here today.

Ana Maria Spagna: It is such a delight to be with you. Thank you for having me. There's nothing better than spending a morning with fellow word nerds.

GP: Yes, absolutely. So, I always like to start by asking about the story behind the story. Now, we've got two books that we're going to be discussing today; your essay collection, *Uplake* – and at *Mile*



Marker Six, which is your upcoming poetry collection. So, my question is, tell us about the story behind the collections. What inspired you to write each of these books, and why?

Ana Maria Spagna: *Uplake* is a collection of essays, much like I've been writing for several years that are place-based, that are driven by my relationship with nature and also the small community I live in. It's a relationship that sometimes fraught, sometimes I love living here; sometimes I want to get the heck out, and fly away and be in a big city.

And I think most people can relate to that tension, and it examines it from many different angles in terms of ideas. But like I said, I've been doing that for a very long time, writing essays like that – they get at an idea or a feeling or a relationship, particularly with place.

And in order to kind of, I don't know, kind of juke my writing a little bit, I started going at it from a different perspective with poetry – was starting from, let's say, images or things that strike me to try to get at something new or different about similar themes. So, I was writing them both at the same time, and I found that so exciting and so rejuvenating that I'm excited to talk to you about that.

GP: Yeah. So, tell us a little bit about what that process looked like. You were writing both things at the same time, so I'm guessing that there was sort of an interplay between the work you were doing in one, sort of, seeping into the other. Can you tell us what that process looked like?

AMS: Again, what I was trying to do with the poetry was maybe trigger my subconscious to go a different direction or to do something else. So, I'll tell you physically what it looked like.

When I work on essays, I sit at a computer; I type very, very fast – and I type, sort of, chunks of prose that I later put together. I think of it like the bark of a ponderosa pine tree, if people know what that's like. It's like a puzzle, like a jigsaw puzzle.

Working on the poetry, in the evening, was something entirely different. I would sit in a chair, I wrote long-hand, I didn't jump around; I just followed the stream of my thoughts. And in doing that I would find little gems that would then, I don't know, leave me in new directions the next day when I sat at my computer. So, it was an interesting back and forth.

GP: So, first off, I just love that both when you were talking about the essays and the poetry, you used nature as like a touchstone, you know, like you mentioned the ponderosa pine; and then with the poetry, it was like a stream, and we could almost--

I could almost picture water flowing as you described your process, which to me is fascinating given your, you know, close contact with nature, and how it influences your writing. I just love how it even seeps into how you talk about the writing, which I think is so cool.

AMS: Isn't that interesting? I don't even notice that. Right? I think those are just the building blocks of my world; and so, they naturally make way into my conversation. So, as always, that's the great thing about having a conversation like that is to have you echo it back to me; and I think, 'Oh, you're right, look at that.' It's part of how I communicate every day.

GP: Yeah. So, let's talk a little bit-- Let's like unpack that process a little bit more. You talked about the essays being kind of like a puzzle, they don't feel like a puzzle when I was reading them.

So, how do you go from having these chunks of prose that you then move around and sort of fit together – to something that does have a sense of flow? Maybe it's not like, you know, a rippling stream – but it still has that sense of like, it moves in a direction.



AMS: What a great question? I think the answer is twofold. Part of the work is the thinking, right? Is the think, the work that happens off the page, which we often don't give ourselves credit for as writers, right?

Like, I need to go walking; and I need to be mulling, 'How does this piece that I'm writing about this boyfriend I went to the prom with, how does that fit with how I think about memoir-writing or singer-songwriters in an essay like confessional roots in Up lake?'

Like I have to mullet first, then I have to go back and I have to start working on, 'I think writers will be familiar with like a term like connective tissue, like I'm trying to find a way to bring them together to massage those seams.'

And a lot of times, it's basic story; it's narrative tricks. You're going to keep one story going; and then just when that one gets going, go into the next one. Just like watching an HBO Miniseries, you know, where you go from one plot line to the next.

So, sometimes that's a way to put them together; and another way is to, you know, find images that you return to, just keep going back to that particular image. And that's, again, where the practice of poetry was helping me to find other ways of creating connective tissue in essays.

GP: Yeah. So, did you find that when you were writing a poem that then, like a similar image would appear in your essay-writing the next day? Did you notice any instances of that happening?

AMS: You would think so; and I sort of expected it, but at the same time, I was on guard against it because the whole idea was to keep things new. So, instead of a particular image; let's say, I was writing a poem about building a rock wall, rock foundation at my house.

The rocks don't make it into the essays, but the way that the rocks are woven together – sort of, the flow of it... again, going back to my 'ethereal stream' metaphor – would come into the essay in exciting ways. I think, 'Oh, this is a way that I can put these pieces together that I had never thought of before.'

GP: I love it. So, you mentioned how, like, your process looked physically different. Can you talk a little bit more about the sort of process, the actual writing of the thing? Like, were there certain elements of the craft that you were focusing on with either the poetry or with the essays – things in terms of like form and structure, stuff like that?

AMS: Absolutely. I was with-- Again, with the poetry, I was working really, really hard to stay with an image. Like I said, when I work on an essay, I'm jumping around; I'm trying to catch the ideas almost like catching something flying through the air.

And in poetry, I was really trying to stay, 'Okay, so you've described these swallows flying over the lake, what else can you say about it? What else? Stay in that moment. We're not going to jump to the next thing. We're going to stay with it, we're going to stay with it. We're going to stay with it, and see where it goes.'

And that practice of patience – which had a lot to do, I think with sitting, writing longhand – that informed the essay so that I could stay with an idea, stay in a scene, think of details, which always is the seedwork for meaning too, right? To stay with that image, to stay with details long enough that they lead you to meaning. So, does that make sense to you?

GP: Yeah, yeah. You know, it's interesting also the idea of writing longhand. Oftentimes, people assume that that takes longer – but in a way, depending on your writing style, it can actually be more efficient.



I remember a professor in college; and he was actually a physics professor, but he was teaching a writing workshop, and he was a brilliant writer – and he would talk about how he wrote his papers, you know, like research by hand.

And he would describe how, you know, when you're typing your ideas just sort of like fall on the page. It's like, sort of, 'word vomit' on the page. Whereas like when you're writing by hand, the idea has to sort of travel all the way down through the muscles until it finally reaches your pen; and you've got all these opportunities to like fix things and improve it, and make it better before it even gets on the page.

And I think there's something to that. I've noticed writing by hand, my thought process is not more careful, but more, I don't know, the patience, I think is a good word for it. Like it's a more patient process, but it's rewarded.

Ana Maria Spagna: I think you're exactly right. And you know, I'd read about these things, I've read about-- There are things about how you're a better listener if you're knitting, for example, because your hands are busy.

I think that there's something about that, that my hand is moving across the page – and that allows my brain to sort of move, and to think at a certain pace... that doesn't happen when I'm clattering at the keyboard.

As I said, I type really fast, I make a lot of mistakes; I'm excited for the next idea, for the next scene, for the next sentence. And I don't feel that when I'm writing longhand; I feel like I'm in the sentence, I'm in the moment that I happen to be in. And I spend a lot of time staring at the wall when I'm writing longhand, which I also think is probably productive.

GP: Yeah. So, as writers, often-- You've hinted at this before, that we don't give ourselves enough credit for that non-writing work; and yet, you know, this is a theme I've heard many authors on this show talk about how like there's still work to be done when we're not at the page.

So, can you talk a little bit about, kind of, like the emotional side of that – like dealing with that? Because I think as writers, we often beat ourselves up for not making the word count or not working hard enough – you know, blood, sweat and tears – and yet, there is this sort of downtime that's very valuable.

AMS: So, so true. And maybe, maybe the hardest lesson for me to learn as a writer has been this, because I am a workhorse; I believe in work, you know, I worked on a back country trail crew – I believe in just plotting through, you know?

And so, very often, especially with essays, I get to a point where it's that 'almost' – you know, it's 95% there. I know it says most of what I want it to say. And so, I keep beating myself up like, 'Well, maybe the extra thing it needs is this – maybe the extra thing it needs is that.'

And I write a paragraph or I add an idea; and I'm just pushing, pushing, pushing. And I've learned to stop, just stop – put that away, go work on a poem, go for a walk, let your brain mow.

And inevitably, when I least expect it, when I'm out for my run in the morning or while I'm fixing dinner, something will occur to me or something will come into my mind, and I'll think, 'That's the missing piece, that's exactly what this essay has needed.'

And if I had sat in my chair for 8 or 10 or 16 more hours, it never would've come to me. So, it's really been hard for me to learn to stop, let go – we're not getting anywhere here, let our brain do its work.



GP: Yeah. And I bet having the poetry to go to as like something else to occupy your mind and your hand, probably helped. Yeah?

AMS: Absolutely. And also, that it's language, right? I think that was a big missing piece because before I had learned this lesson about, go take a walk, take a break... but to have something when you take a break where you're still living in the world of words, you're playing with words, you're sort of massaging not part of your brain – boy, I think that that was great.

It might not mean that the answer came to me while I was sitting there writing poetry, but it means I was still – that part of my brain was working along, it was still busy; and at some point, the answer would come to me. But yeah, what a wonderful practice? The newness of it was huge.

GP: Do you think that this will become a long-term part of your process? Like having your one hand in poetry while you're working in prose alongside it?

AMS: I absolutely do, and I'm excited about it; and that's the first reason to know to keep doing it, right? Anything you're excited about is useful. You know, if you're bored with your writing, readers are going to be bored with your writing.

And so, doing the poetry adds that excitement, adds that other outlet for creativity. And it's a strange analogy, but I think this outlet can be almost anything I did for years, I was working on rock facing the foundation of our house. It was literally taking rocks and putting mortar on them, and making them fit.

But it was using a creative part of my brain, it was using my hands; I would do it as a break from writing, and I think it served a similar purpose. So, I guess, I'm comparing poetry to rock work, which might for other people be knitting or painting or you know, windsurfing, whatever it may be that you're doing with your body that you're doing that's different, I think can be the perfect piece for a writing process.

GP: Yeah. You know, it's interesting too what you said earlier though, about how with the poetry, it was still word-related work. And I find, for me, especially, I'm a designer by trade; and so, I often will go into and like it's not word-related – but there are words when you're, graphic design.

So, like there's that element of being like around words even if you're not like messing with them, that just-- I don't know, there's something about it that kind of just makes my brain-- It feels like my brain is still in it, even if I'm doing something that's completely unrelated like designing a logo or something.

AMS: Yes, exactly. And I should say that one huge difference is that when I'm making a poem – slowly but surely, making a poem – it's also bringing me to that deep spirit place, that place of a new insight or a surprise, right? A surprise way of looking at the world, which is what I have always loved about writing essays; and to find another way to do that on the page with words, wonderful.

GP: Yeah. So, let's talk a little bit about assembling a collection, because this is something that has often fascinated me. You know, sort of, there's both the creative side of creating the essays or the poems.

But then there's also the curating side of it where you are selecting, and you're presenting them and deciding like, what order will you put things in – and how do these pieces all sort of amplify each other, and creating that cadence across the work. Can you talk a little bit about what that process looked like for curating the essay collection versus the poetry collection?

AMS: Well, it was in essay collections because I've done two previously. I'm a little accustomed to the process, which is not terribly scientific. I write a few essays; see where my mind is taking me – and I literally print them and throw them on the carpet and see... 'How might these fit together, do these fit together?'



Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. Do I see themes that are coming up? And then once I have a theme, I work that theme. So, I do that in two ways. I do it within essays. So, let's say in Uplake, I have this restlessness – maybe not every essay had that theme in it, so I find a way to work it into the essays.

And then, also, I see where there are holes in sort of the overall narrative trajectory. Is there a change? Is there an actual sort of plotline of these essays, and how could I buffet that? How can I add to that? What can I write?

So, some of the essays are written to fill those holes written toward the theme, while some were just sort of the germinative ones. With the poems, I didn't do that. The poems, I had--

I just was writing the poems – and this may be being new to the practice, but I wrote the poems; and then just had the delight of seeing how they fit together. And in that case, many more of them were left off the table – were on the cutting floor to see what felt whole – but there wasn't that element for me of writing toward the theme of trying to fill the holes, of changing the poems to fit the trajectory of the book.

GP: Yeah. Let's focus on Uplake for a second, because I recently finished reading the whole collection; and for me, one of the things that I thought was really fascinating is how even though, like you said, there's that restlessness across all of the essays – but the essays aren't all the same, they're not all, in the woods, kind of, essays.

Like I'm thinking, for instance, the last essay, Pierce, that is almost like a history; whereas, you know, the other one other essay at the airport and there's that scene at the airport, and it is very much more like an image that drives the story.

So, can you talk a little bit also about like balancing out different types of essays? Because I would imagine that, you know, if I were trying to write a collection of essays toward a certain theme, they might all start to sound very similar and that wouldn't make a very interesting collection. So, how does one balance it while still having them all hang together?

AMS: That is such a great question. You know, for me, the crucial word is movement. I need to feel some movement. And I don't mean that necessarily in the plotline way of a mystery novel, where they're all heading the same direction, but there should be some variety and some back and forth.

Again, I'm going to use nature; but like a river going around rocks, you want to go different directions. And so, sometimes when I'm in that curating phase, like Pierce, the essay, that's history-based.

I purposely wrote that essay toward this collection thinking, 'Wow, wouldn't it be interesting?' I started to think, 'Well, I am not the only person to have felt this restlessness – I am not the only person to have felt closeness to a place, and then moved on.' And I thought, 'My goodness, why don't we try history for that?'

So, that one, had that kind of attention to it. Whereas, for instance, the 'airport essay' was an essay that I had written for High Country News – for the back page of High Country News – thinking of it as just a standalone piece.

And then I looked at it, and I thought, 'Look at how that sort of resonates with these ideas of going places when you've got the body of a soldier going home, that's a whole different version of movement that you can bring into this.'

So, it's also maybe, yet another, we're always looking for antidotes to solipsism in personal essay collections. It can't all be, 'Me, me, me' – no one's that interested in 'Me, me, me'.

And so, looking for these other dimensions to get at that theme that are, sometimes I also think of it like a backboard. You throw the basketball against it to get it into the hoops.

So, these other ideas and other ways of making essays, to me, are important to have in there. And I learned it from my very favorite essayists – you know, Joan Didion or Zadie Smith or Camille Dungy – they’re all doing these interesting things of bringing in essays you think, ‘How does that fit, how did she do that? How did she make that fit?’ I aspire to that.

GP: Yeah, it’s interesting also that you referenced movement; and then with the airport essay, there’s also a stillness in that. Like in one way, there is the whole travel bringing the soldier’s body home. But the whole scene that, sort of, anchors the essay is just still.

And I don’t know, it’s interesting that we often think of something as the thing – but often, it’s also defined by the absence of the absence. Like, you know, darkness is the absence of light. Like movement isn’t just movement, it’s also the absence of stillness.

AMS: You’re so so, right. You can’t write a book about light without having darkness in it. And, I guess, I-- Or you can’t write a book about movement without having an essay that’s called, *Together We Pause*. Right? That pause in the middle gives it the necessary dimension.

GP: Exactly. So, let’s talk a little bit about the process – and, sort of, how you think poetry and reading and writing poetry, sort of, amplifies your prose writing. So, like I know some writers of prose, can sometimes resist poetry; I know I was one of those writers for a long time, I was a little scared of poetry because I didn’t understand it.

So, what can writers of prose – non-fiction or fiction – learn from this practice? And you used the word ‘practice’ many times of writing poetry. What can we learn from that practice of reading and writing poetry, in particular?

AMS: Well, I think we learn; and I never thought that I would say something that sounds this woo-woo, but we learn to trust our unconscious a little bit more. I was like you; I was like, ‘I don’t understand poetry.’

And then I started a practice of just reading poetry in the morning, whether I understood it or not, almost as, you know, just a spiritual practice; just read it and see what seeps in – and there was a depth to it, and it accessed a depth in me that was entirely different than reading or writing prose.

So, I sort of just let it seep in, let it seep in; and found that it took me to a different depth in my prose and in my poetry writing. And that is especially important if you’ve been writing for a long time. I think that we learn kind of stock habits or stock ways of going about writing; and also, kind of, the solutions that we come to.

Over and over, I would come to; home is important to me, home is important to me, home is important. Well, who isn’t home important to; and why do you need to keep telling this to yourself?

Maybe it’s because being away from home is important to you. You know, I needed poetry – and to trust what my subconscious or unconscious was telling me about this repetition of the theme of home; and poetry took me there, and I just can’t urge people enough to let go of the needing to understand the meaning... and let the words, and where they take you direct you.

GP: You know, it’s interesting also because I find that nonfiction – particularly, personal essay – it has almost that same ‘trust feeling’ to it that poetry has... not every essay, but many essays have that.



It's almost like it's suspended in mid-air; and it's only when you get to the end, like as a reader, gets to the end of it, that it sort of clicks together, and you're like, 'Oh, that's what the author was saying.'

Whereas I think with fiction, especially, because there's that very strong story throughline – oftentimes, we sort of, I guess we don't feel that same level of suspension because we kind of follow the story where it's going.

I don't know if I'm making sense, but like, I don't know, there's something about non-fiction, particularly Creative Non-Fiction, that I think has more similarity to poetry in that way.

AMS: I think you're absolutely right. The word I often think of is digression that I encourage myself, in my non-fiction writing, to digress to tell more than one story at once – to follow, go down. If you're going down a rabbit hole, follow it; don't close that door. You're not heading for a specific destination, you're seeing where it takes you.

And poetry certainly does that same thing. The thing that I was finding was happening occasionally with my non-fiction writing was that when I saw the digression I'd think, 'Mm, yummy, there's a digression, that's what I want.'

I would start forcing it because I had done it so many times before; and so, I needed the poetry to teach me how to let that digression be a little less prescriptive or forced or predictable.

I mean, aren't we always trying to get away from what's predictable and to live in that suspension – I love your word 'suspension' – to live in that suspension just a little longer to get that little version of surprise at the end?

GP: Yeah. You know it's interesting when-- This also goes back to like my memories of college. I remember like there were basically two types of essays that I would write. One of them was the suspension essay, where I would not really know where it was going until I finished it.

And there was always that like miraculous moment, where it literally felt like the skies would part and angel choirs would go, ah, and I would suddenly feel like, 'I got it,' right?

AMS: Yes.

GP: And like, yes, I did it. And then there was the brute force, I'll say, and that's where I would just beat the essay onto the page.

AMS: Oh yeah.

GP: And it wasn't pretty but I got the job done.

AMS: Right. I hear you. I have written those kinds of essays as well. Yes, both.

GP: You know, while the suspension essay feels so amazing, you could also-- I totally know what you're saying; you could beat yourself into sort of start almost trying to beat it out of you like beat the suspension into being – and the whole point is that, it doesn't work that way. It has to have that sort of magical feeling to it.

AMS: Yeah, and you know, my great mentoress Carol Anne Davis always says simply, "You can't fake a faker." And you know, I think what she means by that is, you know, people can tell when you're suspending but it's not really suspension for you.



You're doing the balancing trick that you've done a hundred times before; and yet, when you go 100 feet or 200 feet further on that tight wire and you're starting to get nervous – that's what readers love, that's what writers write for. We have to push ourselves past that predictable place, that comfortable place to make what comes close to being art.

GP: Yeah. And I think like it's both terrifying as a writer because you have no idea if it's going to work, right? Like you could fall off that tight rope; and it's not going to be pretty, but there's also that like thrill of, 'But what if it does work?'

AMS: Right. Yeah. And there's-- As a reader, I love it when I can see the writer is just wobbling all over the place. It's like, 'Whoa, she's really out there on this one. Is she going to make it? Is she going to make it?'

And that's what keeps me turning the page of a personal essay or, in some cases, a poem – to say, "Look at how far out on that tightrope that writer has been willing to go – and to bring me along with them, that's an act of generosity... and I aspire to that as well."

GP: Yeah. At the same time, though, I think for some readers, that can also be terrifying, right? Like a lot of times, I'll hear people say like, "You know, I didn't quite know where the author was going with this, but I knew I was in good hands."

There's that feeling of security that even if you're not sure where the essay or the story or the poem is going, there's that trust that, somehow, it's going to work out okay.

AMS: Right.

GP: So, how do we reconcile that as writers?

AMS: Oh, that is such a wonderful question. I think there is an element of; once you've gone out, you've gone out on that tight wire – and you've wobbled around, and you've wobbled around – and you know you're okay, you need to kind of get that sense of okayness into the piece by just reworking it and reworking it and reworking it, right?

Finding those edges... you want to keep that sense of wobbliness, but you also want the reader to have that sense of being in good hands. And so, to just get down to like nuts and bolts, I mean this literally.

I mean, read the piece aloud, over and over and over. Put it in a drawer for a week or a month or longer before you send it out – so that you know it's everything it's supposed to be, and that it's full for the reader; you know, so that it's ready for the reader.

I love the idea of the wobbly and the scary and the messy at times, but I also know that it's not fair to hand it off to readers in that form because it's not what it is supposed to be yet.

GP: Yeah, I love that you said that because I wanted to also ask you about the revision process; and so, I'm glad that you sort of touched on this idea of reworking and revising. Did you notice any difference in your revision process for prose versus poetry, and did doing these two types of writing in tandem change your revision process in the prose at all?

AMS: I was more willing to be experimental because the poetry was new because I didn't know what I was doing. So, I'd be willing to say, "Take all the lines and turn them upside down – start with the last line, put it first and see what happens when it's upside down."



You know, to move the lines around the page. I guess, the sense of playfulness in revision; I had gotten away from that with essays, and doing it with a poetry absolutely encouraged me to do it more with the essays to try, you know, 'Let's just take this completely apart and put a second narrative in there and zipper it together and see what happens.'

So, that's one part of it, was the experimenting part of it. And the other part is that keen attention to detail with language, no extra words. I know we say that all the time, but in poetry, they really mean no extra words.

And so, taking that attention to language, to using new words... not using the same words I use all the time, watching that overuse of prepositions – or, that, which, we, I – words I use over and over, that fine-tooth combing also helped my prose working on the poetry.

GP: I love that. So, I feel like we could talk about the craft of writing and all these things for another four hours – but in the interest of time, because you've got writing, and our listeners have writing to do and all that good stuff, I love to hear, what's next for you? Do you have any upcoming projects that you'd like to tell our listeners about?

AMS: I have gone all the way back to non-fiction; and I'm writing a book about supposed massacre of Chinese miners on the Columbia River, near where I live in Washington state.

And not to give away too much of the ending, nobody really knows for sure if it happened; it's come down through history that these 300 miners were killed maybe by Indians, maybe by white men, maybe it didn't happen at all.

And I am fascinated with the way that history comes down through time, how we can tell these stories when we don't have those definitive sources. Can we use the skills of poetry or essays, all this sort of digression and suspension? What does that mean when we're trying to give voice to a truth that's been buried? So, I'm very excited about it. It's tentatively called Pushed at this point because the minors were pushed off of a bluff.

GP: Oh, my goodness. That sounds both horrifying and also fascinating at the same time. And I love how, like, it's going to involve so much detective work as well. I mean, can you just give us a hint of, without telling us the ending, but like how are you going about finding all this stuff out if it doesn't have that, sort of, traditional historical source?

AMS: Any way that I possibly can. I've talked to archeologists and the tribal elders. I even had a grave dowser go out and look for graves with a crystal. I mean, any way possible to hear these stories. I also, you know, talk to migrant workers now – apple pickers now who come from another country and make their lives here, much as the Chinese miners did.

So, it's finding anyone and everyone who can get a piece of this story and share it with me. So, as you'll note, I'm much more interested in humans telling stories than I am in archives. So, I've done a fair bit of digging in the archives as well.

GP: Yeah. Oh my gosh. It sounds like an amazing project; and I'm really excited to see how it pans out, and how it enters the world. So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

AMS: My number one tip; and it would be no surprise after our conversation, is to keep stretching and growing – to try not to stagnate, to find another way... whether it's poetry, whether it's researching a maybe massacre, whether it's trying a different form of an essay, but to just push yourself a little bit



outside of the comfort zone. And I think it reaps benefits that far outweigh the discomfort of wobbling off of that high wire and landing on your butt.

GP: Yeah, you know, it's interesting, I often talk about comfort zone with students – particularly, students not just in writing but in any sort of creative field and entrepreneurs, any of those types of people.

And what I realized is that when you push, like if you imagine that like you're at the center of a circle and that circle is your comfort zone – and then you move that center dot closer to the edge, the circle doesn't just stay fixed.

Eventually, it kind of bubbles out because now you're like near the edge so that now the comfort zone gets bigger and expands around the new dot. And so, you kind of have to keep chasing the edge forever or else you're going to be stuck if you don't.

AMS: That's just a wonderful image. I love how the circle expands as you go toward the edge. And I'm going to steal that from you if you don't mind, Gabriela. I'm going to use that with my students as well.

GP: Oh, absolutely. And it's also kind of terrifying, right? Because it means that like we have to be comfortable with being constantly uncomfortable, because we're constantly on the edge of our comfort zone. But the only way to grow and the only way to improve as artists is to push ourselves to that point of discomfort.

AMS: Of discomfort and, like you say, of terror. I mean, I think that genuinely being scared, makes the art better; and also, being willing to not be good at something.

You know, so many people who aspire to write have read so much great literature, and they've been asked to critique great literature; and then they see their own writing and they, 'Sure, as heck, no, it's not Shakespeare.'

And so, they, you know, get frustrated. But it's just we have to risk being really not good at what we're doing to stretch that boundary. And it is scary, but it has such rewards.

GP: And I think also recognizing that the works that we think of as great literature, may not always be that writer's best work. [laughs] Like I know in college, I took a whole course where we read a ton of Shakespeare; and not all of his plays are equally good.

Like you can kind of tell the places where he was trying to figure some-- Like Romeo and Juliet, people talk about it like it's one of his greatest works; and yet, it's kind of not sure whether it's a comedy or a tragedy until about halfway through, and then it's like, 'Oops, I killed off Mercutio, my bad – all right, I guess we're going to fix it by making it a tragedy now.'

It really kind of takes this like left turn. And you can tell, like sometimes you look at different works and you can tell that the author was trying to work something out in there; and then they do another play or another work after that, and you're like, 'Oh, that's where it was going.'

AMS: And it's also--

GP: I think that's the best part.

AMS: So exciting to see that in process, and to see the trying of it. You know, to use another art form, I love pop music; and I almost always love an artist's very first album because it's so rough, and it has the seed of who they're going to become.



It has the sort of the idea or the sensibility, but it sure hasn't figured out exactly what it is. But there's something just so charming and exciting about getting to experience that with the artist, you know, in listening.

GP: Yeah. And also seeing like live albums too are fascinating to me because there's no do-over.

AMS: Right.

GP: You know, like they just have to bring it, and it's going to be what it is; and to me, that's also fascinating.

AMS: Yeah. And fascinating which artists are good live and which turnout that that is not their best venue. You know, some people thrive on that spontaneity, and some don't.

And all of that, to me, is so freeing to know that artists have strengths and weaknesses and we work through them all; and it's all about risking it – risking being out there, and doing what you want to do.

GP: Yeah. Like you said, it's freeing. It's also, I think, sort of encouraging that we don't have to get it perfectly the first time out. Like no artist gets it perfectly right the first time out.

I think that's one of the hardest parts about writing is that, oftentimes, we're comparing our rough drafts with the finished products of bestselling authors that we pull from the bookstore shelf; and that's not a very fair comparison.

AMS: No, it is not at all. Right? We get into that rut of thinking it has to be that when we start, and it's not. And maybe even when we finish, it's not going to be that – but it will be what we need it to be, what we've been making... and hopefully, something that's uniquely our own.

GP: Absolutely. Ana Maria, it has been such a true pleasure having this conversation with you – and getting to hear your insights on the writing process for poetry and prose. Thank you so much for being here today.

AMS: Thank you. I could not have enjoyed it more, and I look forward to hearing more of your podcasts in the future. Take good care now.

GP: Thank you. All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.