An Author's Voice and the "Wounds That Speak": Creative Writing as Emotional Processing and Public Communication

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Introduction

"Writing is the transformation from raw material of one's own life.
It is the traumatic wound that speaks" (GH, M61).

These words come from a 61-year-old survivor of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and two types of cancer. Like many who have endured trauma or deeply emotional experiences, he turned to writing. For him, the page became a place not only to tell a story, but to process pain and make sense of suffering through narrative. His reflection speaks to something profoundly human: the need to shape our experiences into something meaningful and to give voice to the wounds we carry.

Creative writing is often more than a craft, and rather, is an inherently personal process shaped by memory, emotion, and experience. For many writers, it serves as a cathartic outlet, allowing them to navigate and make sense of complicated emotions and experiences. A creative writer myself, I find that sometimes the only way to heal is to write. Through storytelling, writers transform pain, joy, grief, and uncertainty into something tangible and meaningful, not just for themselves but for others. In this way, the published writer takes on a dual role: one who heals through words, and one who communicates that healing to others.

This study examines creative writing as both a means of emotional processing and a mode of communication, particularly for published authors. By examining the transition of deeply personal work from private spaces, such as journals, to the public domain, it investigates

how personal experiences evolve into shared narratives that foster connection and understanding with audiences. Drawing on the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 2004), this study extends the framework beyond academic contexts to the domain of creative writing. Using a qualitative approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm, it addresses a critical research gap by illuminating the emotional and cognitive dimensions of the craft that are often overlooked in composition studies. Building on these insights, I propose an emergent theoretical model of the emotional dynamics of creative writing that traces how experiences become activated, transformed through narrative structure, and ultimately exposed through public acts of storytelling, expanding existing cognitive frameworks of writing.

To further emphasize the need for this study, I will next provide an overview of the related literature, much of which is grouped under the broader disciplines of English studies and composition studies. This categorization presents a crucial gap in research, as it overlooks the distinct processes, purposes, and emotional dimensions that differentiate creative writing from other types of writing. This includes scholarship on cognitive writing theory, the therapeutic value of expressive writing, the relationship between writing and identity, and the evolving role of writers as public communicators.

Craft, Catharsis, and Communication

While creative writing has been the subject of numerous handbooks and guides, from Stephen King's *On Writing* to Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, these works largely focus on technique and practical advice for aspiring writers. Scholarly publications such as Neale's (2020) also address literary craft, emphasizing elements like character, plot, and dialogue. Though

composition studies offer some theoretical frameworks for understanding writing processes, few works specifically explore the emotional and psychological reasons writers write. Creative writing is often overshadowed or absorbed into broader academic categories that fail to capture its emotional weight. As Bailey and Bizzaro (2017) observe, much of the scholarship generates data more relevant to composition than to the experience of creative writing itself.

The Cognitive Process of Writing Theory

Since this inquiry centers on individualized emotional expression, aligning it with a single overarching theory proves difficult. Writers' motivations are highly subjective, shaped by diverse identities, backgrounds, and creative practices. Nevertheless, I draw on the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 2004), which frames writing as a cognitively guided activity rooted in personal experience and long-term memory. This theory acknowledges writing as shaped by the environment "outside the writer's skin" (Flower & Hayes, 2004, p. 369), and that physical or emotional cues can "let a writer tap a stored representation" (Flower & Hayes, 2004, p. 371) as inspiration for their writing. Although originally developed for academic writing, this flexible framework offers a useful foundation for exploring how memory, reflection, and emotional truth shape creative work.

Creative Writing as Emotional Processing

Creative writing has long been recognized for its therapeutic potential. Research shows it can aid the rehabilitation of individuals facing serious or chronic illness by helping them process their experiences and emotions (Laursen et al., 2021). Expressive writing, defined as a

"non-facilitated, individual therapeutic method of writing" focused on traumatic or emotionally demanding experiences (Pennebaker, 1997), has proven effective across health, clinical, and social psychology in promoting mental and physical well-being (Pennebaker, 2020). When instructed to write their deepest thoughts and feelings for four days confidentially, without regard for grammar, participants experienced benefits such as decreased anxiety, improved memory and sleep quality, and increased school or work performance (Pennebaker, 1997). This type of writing is also associated with physiological benefits, including improved immune function, lung capacity, psychological health, interpersonal relationships, and social role functioning (Lepore & Smyth, 2002). Given the link between expressive writing and well-being, it is worth exploring the processing of those most often engaged in expressive forms of writing, such as published authors.

Identity and Creative Writing

Beyond its therapeutic benefits, creative writing is closely tied to questions of identity. Research indicates that individuals who emphasize personal identity often demonstrate greater creative accomplishments, particularly early in life (Dollinger et al., 2005). Autobiographical elements further complicate the boundary between personal truth and fiction; as Green et al. (2002) note, "emotion is to fiction what empirical truth is to science." Fiction, while not always factual, conveys deep personal truths. Writers often draw on cultural moments, lived experiences, research, and imaginative exploration to create work that reconciles past and present, conscious and unconscious knowledge (Neale, 2020). This connection between fictional

narratives and lived experience warrants an examination of how writers express and interpret the personal influences behind their work.

Creative Writing as Public Communication

Writers transition from personal reflection to public communication as their work is shared through publication, interviews, social media, and literary events. Fletcher (1997) describes the writer's notebook as a private space nurturing full ownership of the self, an intimacy that must later adjust to public exposure. Little scholarship addresses how writers navigate the move from private creation to public discourse. Today's writers engage directly with readers, raising important ethical questions. Gutkind (2019) stresses that writers bear responsibility for harm caused by their portrayals, asserting that fictionalizing real experiences does not erase the emotional stakes for those who recognize themselves. Despite these discussions, significant gaps remain. Most scholarship continues to focus on academic, therapeutic, or autobiographical writing, often overlooking the emotional, ethical, and public-facing dimensions of creative writing as both a personal and public act.

In this study, I ask:

RQ1: How do authors describe the writing process as a form of emotional processing?

RQ2: What are the motivations behind why authors write, and how do they articulate these motivations?

RQ3: How do published authors understand themselves as public communicators?

Methods

This study is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, focusing on how writers process and articulate their unique emotional experiences. Due to the deeply subjective nature of writers' emotions, I have opted to use phronetic iterative qualitative data analysis (PIQDA) because it supports an abductive method that moves fluidly between theoretical frameworks and insights that arise directly from the data (Tracy, 2024). I aim to understand authors rather than make predictions about them. The findings demand articulation from the powerful voices of those behind the words on the page, and while common themes may emerge, each individual's story is distinct. As I complete this work, I acknowledge my identity as an aspiring creative writer, drawing on personal emotional experiences in my own pieces, though I am not yet a published author.

Furthermore, I recognize my limited experience in Northern Ireland, where some participant observation was conducted. Data were collected via participant observation techniques and semi-structured mediated interviews with two published authors. Following data collection, I analyzed the data using Tracy's (2024) thematic analysis. In the following sections, I will overview these methodological procedures.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants in this study included five authors, aged 37 to 65 (M = 50), each with at least one published work, averaging three published works per participant. Regarding gender identity, 40% (n = 2) identified as female and 60% (n = 3) identified as male. Participants were recruited through known contacts or speakers at public author events held at a mid-sized eastern university in an affluent U.S. suburb and a large university in Belfast, Northern Ireland. While most

participants have received public recognition or accolades for their work, two are self-published and less widely known, offering a diverse range of perspectives.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was conducted in three distinct locations. The first was a public event held as part of a literary festival at a mid-sized eastern U.S. university. The event featured a formal introduction, live reading, Q&A, and book signing. This site, where I was a student, was hosted in an informal space on the first floor of the university's undergraduate library. Separated from the study area by a folding wall, it included a podium, folding chairs, and refreshments, but lacked a clear distinction from the surrounding casual study environment. Despite its informal setting, the event's purpose was to provide a space for reflection and community-building, bringing together students, faculty, and the public for a shared literary experience.

The second location was a larger venue within a creative writing center at a large university in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The space was more formal than the first, featuring a microphone podium, rows of folding chairs, and a projector, providing an environment suited for larger audiences and more structured activities. This venue was part of a week-long study-abroad program I participated in, allowing me to engage with a different cultural and literary context. Writers were brought together to discuss their craft, share insights on writing, and reflect on the emotional and cultural impacts of their works, particularly in a city with a rich history of conflict. The space acted as a bridge between the writers' personal stories and a public audience, inviting a deeper dialogue on themes of memory, identity, and reconciliation. The event was as much about the writers' expressions as it was about how those expressions resonated with a broader audience, sparking reflection on the intersection of art, history, and society.

The third location was a smaller, more intimate seminar-style classroom within the same creative writing center in Belfast, with limited seating for only my immediate class and the speaker. This space was designed for more focused discussions, encouraging a direct exchange between the author and a small, engaged group of listeners. Unlike the larger venue, which invited broader public participation, this seminar-style setting allowed for deeper, more intimate conversations. Writers were invited to share the personal challenges and emotional processes behind their works, fostering a sense of vulnerability and connection among the participants.

In all three settings, I adopted the role of a complete observer (Tracy, 2024), taking a passive role within the audience without influencing the environment. To respect the speakers, I took raw notes by hand and later converted them to formal field notes via laptop. These locations were carefully chosen for their role in facilitating author discussions about personal writing experiences, offering perspectives from Singapore and Northern Ireland, thus providing a broader range of views than those from the Philadelphia suburb where my interviews took place.

I observed how authors communicated publicly, the questions they received, and how audiences responded. While ethnographic work at events offers insight into people's feelings and ideas in eventful settings, it also presents the challenge of timing (VanDooremalen, 2017). Fortunately, scheduled events at all my field sites ensured that I would witness relevant activities during my visits. It was crucial to remember that events often involve a "break with normal life," where participants express emotions and ideas they wouldn't in everyday situations (VanDooremalen, 2017). This insight helped contextualize how authors articulate their experiences in public-facing settings.

Interviews

After completing participant observation, I conducted two interviews, each approximately fifty minutes long, resulting in a total of 100 minutes of recorded audio, later transcribed into written form. While both interviewees reside in a Philadelphia suburb, one interview was conducted in person and the other via Zoom. The participants were authors personally known to me – one with global experience promoting their work and a publishing deal with a Big Five publisher, and the other a self-published author working in a university communications department. I employed purposeful sampling, selecting participants whose insights aligned with the study's research objectives (Tracy, 2024). These individuals were chosen for their distinct perspectives on authorship and public relations, offering valuable insight into the intersection of creative writing and public-facing communication.

Both interviews followed a guide, beginning with informed consent and a brief overview of the research and my role as a researcher. The interview questions were designed to encourage personal reflection and storytelling, exploring themes such as the evolution of a writer's identity, the relationship between emotion and craft, the balance between privacy and exposure, the author's connection to their work, the public nature of authorship, and writing as a form of communication. Given the semi-structured, narrative approach, I did not adhere rigidly to the full set of questions, allowing space for participants to share their experiences organically.

With the interviewees' consent, I recorded the interviews using an iPhone and uploaded the audio to an online transcription program. To ensure accuracy, I manually reviewed and corrected the transcripts within 24 hours of conducting the interviews. In this transcript, I removed identifying details and assigned pseudonyms to each interviewee to protect their privacy.

Data Analysis

The final data set consisted of 8 typed pages of field diary entries and two audio interviews totaling 103 minutes, transcribed into 21 pages. Given the similarity between my field notes and interview content, both containing key speaker quotes, I opted to analyze them together using thematic analysis, following Tracy's (2024) phronetic iterative approach.

I began with a data immersion phase, thoroughly rereading my notes and discussing insights with other scholars conversationally. Next, I conducted primary-cycle coding, in which I printed physical copies of my data and used color-coded highlighting for different overlaps in language, concept, and emotion across data sets. I began to identify general codes, such as 'catharsis' and 'hometown'. These initial codes aligned with my three research questions (RQs), allowing me to organize findings into three overarching categories: emotional processing, motivation, and public communication. At this stage, both individual sentences and full narratives served as units of analysis.

Following this, I conducted secondary-cycle coding, refining the initial categories by incorporating numerous *in vivo* codes, terms, and phrases frequently used by participants themselves (Tracy, 2024). During this phase, I annotated more specific themes found through interpretation in the margins, drawing deeper meaning from the emerging patterns. I developed a coding system of 13 codes and grouped overlapping codes to create 3 subthemes per overarching theme. For instance, codes 'trauma', 'reframing', and 'carrying stories' formed one subtheme.

Verification

After concluding my analysis and drafting my findings, I engaged in a collaborative verification strategy, a data conference, with another communication scholar to assess my

research process, confirm the validity of my codes, and discuss my findings (Braithwaite, Allen, & Moore, 2017).

Results

Across all participants, creative writing emerged as both a personal and public act of transformation: an emotional, intellectual, and cultural labor through which authors process past experiences, articulate identity, and foster connection. The writing process is at once healing and vulnerable, offering a space to confront trauma, assert voice in the face of sociocultural barriers, and navigate the tension between private creation and public communication. While motivations and emotional outcomes varied, one truth remained consistent: writing is an act of meaning-making that carries profound personal and social significance.

To capture this complexity, I present three overarching themes, each with three subthemes. Consistent with the interpretive paradigm guiding this study, this structure reflects the flexible nature of my analysis, one that prioritizes understanding how writers make sense of their experiences over generating predictive or generalizable claims.

Writing as Emotional Processing

For many participants, creative writing was not simply an artistic or professional endeavor, it was a vital tool for emotional survival and meaning-making. Across interviews and observations, participants described writing as a deeply embodied process for releasing, reframing, and wrestling with difficult emotions and traumatic experiences. Some writers experienced creative work as a cathartic release during periods of turmoil. Others used writing to process and reinterpret past traumas. However, participants also acknowledged that writing can

reexpose old injuries, leading to anxiety, guilt, or even serious mental health crises. Together, their accounts reveal the complex emotional terrain of creative writing.

"I had to write the thing": Cathartic Release

Participants described creative writing as a crucial means of emotional release and self-preservation. For many, writing served not simply as a hobby or professional pursuit but as a necessary outlet for handling complex emotions and experiences. One participant reflected that her "first novel [was] a thinly veiled account of [her] childhood," describing the act of writing it as profoundly "cathartic." Another spoke about the role of writing in navigating family trauma and lingering anger, explaining that "writing allowed me to restore humanity to my mother. Hating her, I was just hurting myself." Through writing, he was able to reframe painful memories and foster a sense of emotional healing.

Several participants emphasized the almost physical need to write, especially during emotionally taxing periods. One recalled how she coped with a corporate job she despised by stealing away office notebooks and filling pages in hidden corners of the workplace, eventually producing her first full novel through this daily ritual. Others likened the act of writing to a form of emotional maintenance, describing it in urgent, bodily terms:

> If you're doing [creative writing], and you don't do it for a day or two, I would think that you would go through some kind of withdrawal, which doesn't feel good. It's almost like, 'I need to do this'... if you take it away, you're gonna crash (VC, M48).

These accounts illustrate how, for many participants, creative writing offered a vital, almost involuntary form of catharsis: a necessary process for managing internal emotional landscapes.

"The wound began to speak": Processing and Reframing Trauma

For many participants, writing served as a medium for digesting traumatic experiences, particularly those they had previously set aside. Participants shared writing about experiences such as losing their hearing, enduring physically and sexually abusive childhoods, surviving natural disasters, battling cancer, facing false arrests, and living through political violence. One participant shared hesitantly, "I'd suppressed what happened, but as I started writing, the wound began to speak." Authors frequently described their creative work as a channel for giving voice to pain and understanding it differently. For some, the act of writing fostered objectivity, enabling authors to see their experiences from new angles and allowing suppressed feelings to surface in constructive ways. This suggests that emotional processing through writing is both introspective and transformative, offering a sense of control and clarity over one's life story. Swallowing deeply, and with a slight waver in his voice, one participant said, "I realized that while writing, I learned that the abused child is never guilty, and I spent so much of my childhood feeling guilt and shame."

> Through writing, I was able to transform traumatic childhood memories and memories from growing up in Northern Ireland. I was imposing order on the chaos of my life, and the chaos on the streets in Northern Ireland (GH, M61).

The metaphor of "the wound that speaks" underscores the idea that trauma, while painful, can be narrativized and externalized. This transformation is not always easy or immediate; it often involves gradual excavation, likened to geological layers by a fellow writer and audience member, "I've found that the wound will speak, but it won't do a soliloquy. It comes in layers. I think of it like geology." Nevertheless, participants were able to organize and make sense of

messy, traumatic experiences by articulating them through writing. As one participant expressed before a large audience, “Do you use hurt and trauma to make things worse, or do you use words to make things better?” For many authors, writing became a way to choose the latter.

“I was hospitalized in a psychiatric ward…because it brought me back”: Mental Health Costs and Emotional Labor

While many participants framed writing as emotionally beneficial, others highlighted its significant psychological costs. Several participants described significant anxiety, guilt, or even hospitalization as a result of writing about deeply painful material. This duality highlights writing as a process capable of healing but equally capable of inflicting fresh harm.

One participant detailed the extreme toll writing took on his mental well-being. He explained, “People told me, ‘You’re gonna re-traumatize yourself writing it,’ and I was hospitalized in a psychiatric ward for 12 weeks because it brought me back there”, and after a long pause, he continued, “I was warned, but I had to write the thing. It didn’t matter.” Despite the severe personal consequences, the need to tell the story overrode concerns for self-preservation. This participant also reflected, nodding slowly, “I don’t know if writing it was worth what it did to my mental health, but it’s over. I don’t regret it, but I don’t think I’d do it again. I am proud of it.”

> I don't sleep much when I'm working on a novel. I'm thinking about it all the time. I'm sort of abstracted with people in my life…I might be having dinner with family, and I'm in my head thinking about a scene. My wife can notice it immediately…she can see just looking at my eyes that I’m like half there. So that's always been something to negotiate (TR, M54).

Beyond trauma-centered projects, even the ongoing demands of writing weighed heavily on participants. One writer noted, repeatedly tapping his glasses on the table, “Mostly I feel racked by anxiety, racked by my own limitations, plagued by my sense of laziness,” pointing to the persistent self-doubt intertwined with creative labor. For those balancing writing with personal responsibilities, guilt and emotional strain were recurring themes. “I felt kind of guilty about the time I've spent away [from my kids] and when I'm locked in a room and they’re downstairs.”

Together, these narratives reveal that for many writers, the emotional labor of writing extends beyond the page. It demands a continuous negotiation between creativity and self-preservation, between storytelling and personal cost.

Sources of Creative Inspiration and Motivation

This theme explores the origins and intentions behind why authors write, revealing writing as both autobiographical and ideologically driven. Many participants traced their creative roots to early life, childhood stories, family dynamics, and their hometowns, highlighting the enduring influence of formative environments. Others expressed a belief that storytelling is something inherent, a compulsion tied to personal history and identity. Simultaneously, sociocultural barriers, especially those rooted in gender and ethnicity, shaped the authors’ paths to publication, making writing not only a personal act but also a means of cultural negotiation and resistance. Across all subthemes, the motivation to write is inextricably linked to identity, memory, and the desire to assert voice.

“It always comes back to where I’m from”: Early Influences and Life Narratives

Childhood memories and hometown experiences emerged as foundational sources of creative inspiration. Participants frequently referred to early exposure to storytelling, whether through family members, local culture, or childhood reading habits, as shaping their desire to write. These formative environments provided both narrative material and emotional landscapes that authors continue to revisit in their work, even as adults. Writing, in this way, becomes a means of returning to and reinterpreting one's roots.

Many participants spoke of the omnipresence of storytelling in their early lives. One recalled, “I always liked storytelling. I could listen to my grandfather tell the same story over and over hundreds of times when I was a kid,” and emphasized how books and newspapers were ever-present in their home: “My mother would always buy me books. That was like a big thing, when we go out shopping, I could get a book.” Storytelling was also deeply tied to community life. A participant described growing up surrounded by colorful personalities: “You go to your friends [and] you had a whole book full of characters,” highlighting how local life provided endless material to fictionalize and adapt.

For others, returning to their roots through writing felt inevitable, even unconscious. When asked if she usually writes about her home country, one participant smiled and shared, “I think I’m always writing about Singapore, even if I don’t realize it. It always comes back to where I’m from.” Another reflected on how writing became a form of emotional return: “It helps in a way that discursive writing cannot; the theoretical and physical apparatus of returning to Belfast.” This sense of place was not merely nostalgic but charged with personal and political weight. As one writer explained, their work sought to surface the overlooked stories of their

hometown: “I have an obsession with telling untold stories…stories that get ignored and are on the periphery.”

Even when early environments were restrictive, they sparked a rebellious creative spirit. One participant shared, with laughter:

> I always asked a lot of questions as a child, and was tightly controlled. Creative thought was frowned upon. But my parents made one huge mistake with me. They underestimated the danger of the library. There, I realized words do something to you (JA, F45).

Ultimately, participants portrayed writing as a lifelong conversation with their origins: sometimes joyful or painful, but always deeply formative. As one participant put it, revisiting childhood through writing “was a real feeder for that book…there’s an honesty in it that makes the book.”

“We all have personal stories that we carry and need to write”: Storytelling as Inherent, Personal, and Political

Several authors articulated the belief that writing is an innate act, something one carries rather than chooses. This internalized sense of narrative responsibility positions authors as vessels for stories that must be told. Whether rooted in memory, moral conviction, or humor, participants emphasized that storytelling arises from a deeply personal place. Writing is not only an act of expression, but a form of testimony, grounded in personal experience and propelled by the belief that their distinct voice matters.

One participant captured this feeling succinctly, speaking with conviction: “I think this is why we write. We all have personal stories that we carry.” Later, when asked about her role as a professor of creative writing, she emphasized the lesson she hopes to impart to her students: “A sense that you have stories to tell and only *you* can tell them. Have trust and confidence in your

own voice." Personal memory and emotional experience were described as inseparable from the creative act. As one participant reflected, "We are made of memories. We aren't really alone," suggesting that our lives are inseparable from the memories we carry. Rather, they are constant companions that provide the raw material for storytelling.

Many participants stressed that personal experience inevitably bleeds into fiction. One writer explained, "When I would write things, people would say, 'Is that you?' 'Who's that?' And I would say, 'Well, they're all me, because I invented them.'…How is that person's self not intertwining with everything?" Even when writing appeared fictional or distanced, the emotional truth of the author remained embedded within the work.

In some cases, writing functioned as an act of political witness and a means of honoring deeply held convictions. One participant described writing driven by anger over historical and contemporary injustices:

> I fell in love with Turkey and was teaching Muslim kids there. I happened to read the Quran, and I started to get this real respect for Islam, and so part of that novel was trying to negotiate my anger about American foreign policy in the Middle East. It was a way of being like [firmly puts fist on table] I'm thinking about my mother and father and like [firmly puts fist on table] I want you to read this (TR, M54).

"Asian people don't just go be writers. I didn't grow up with this presented as a possibility": Sociocultural Barriers and Identity Negotiation

For some participants, particularly female and non-Western-identifying writers, becoming a writer was not initially seen as an accessible or realistic path. Their experiences highlighted how sociocultural norms often dictate who is permitted to pursue creative careers and who is discouraged or excluded from doing so. For these writers, the act of writing becomes empowering, a way to assert presence in spaces that historically excluded them. Writing is not

merely creative labor but cultural resistance, reframing identity through voice and authorship. One participant reflected on how deeply these barriers shaped her early perception of writing:

> I came to writing in a roundabout way…I was miserable doing finance. I felt trapped, so I started to write fiction on my lunch breaks, and my boyfriend told me to be a writer. I said, 'That's very idealistic and Western of you, Asian people don't just go be writers.' I didn't grow up with this presented as a possibility for me (RA, F37).

The gendered nature of these barriers was particularly stark. As one participant observed, "In the world I came from, women were not meant to have voices and write books about politics and sex and gender…they were just expected to become teachers and plant a garden at their parents' house." Notably, only female participants in the study referenced such systemic obstacles; male participants did not mention encountering similar barriers to entering the literary world. However, they acknowledged such privilege, with one male participant noting, "I wanna preface this by saying that I think if you're a published author…you're in a really privileged position."

Writing and Public Identity

The final theme addresses how authors understand themselves once their writing enters the public sphere. Participants reflected on the ethical responsibilities of authorship, the complex nature of truth-telling, and the negotiation of personal identity in public contexts. While some embraced the duty of accurate and meaningful storytelling, others voiced discomfort with the performative demands of publicity. Despite this tension, authors found affirmation in moments of reader connection, where their stories fostered empathy, healing, or recognition. This theme underscores the duality of being a writer: the solitude of creation versus the vulnerability of exposure and the joy of connection versus the burden of performance.

“*It's not yours anymore. Now it's everyone else's”: Authorial Responsibility and Truth*

Participants expressed a range of perspectives on the responsibilities they hold as public communicators. Some emphasized the duty to present the unvarnished truth, even at the risk of personal exposure or familial tension. Others reflected on the obligation to conduct accurate, respectful portrayals of cultures and experiences outside their own. Across these reflections, authors grappled with the tension between authenticity and reception, suggesting that publication transforms writing from a private process to a public ethical act.

Participants revealed complex views on the responsibilities they bear once their work becomes public. For many, writing was not just a personal act but an ethical one, requiring attention to authenticity, cultural respect, and the impact of their narratives on readers.

Several writers spoke about the obligation to portray experiences outside their own backgrounds with care. One participant described an intensive research process when writing from a Kurdish and later a Vietnamese perspective, emphasizing, “I felt a real responsibility…trying as much as I could to be as authentic as possible.” They highlighted how feedback illuminated blind spots, noting, “That was fantastic…that’s when I felt like, ‘I didn't do my job there.’” This shows how responsibility was often framed as an ongoing, imperfect, but necessary pursuit.

Others reflected on the challenge of presenting personal truths, even when they risked exposing uncomfortable realities. As one participant advised, “If you find yourself protecting someone in your work, you’re not doing it right. This is your truth.” Writing about difficult topics such as “murder, abuse, and racism,” they emphasized a commitment to honest, if sometimes painful, storytelling.

> It's not like you can't revise it and do something else with it. It's almost like you pushed it out into the world for better or worse, and it's out there. And now it's its own living thing. It's not yours anymore. Now it's everyone else's. So, you know, that could have a little melancholy to it, but like that's one of those things, again, if you want your stuff to be published, you've got to let go at some point (VC, M48).

Publication was seen as a turning point, where the work no longer solely belonged to the author. This participant captures the emotional complexity of releasing a story to public interpretation. Still, not all participants felt responsible for how readers receive their work. “Do I feel responsibility about somebody I think misreads my book? In my point of view, no, I don't,” one asserted, underscoring that while writers strive for truth and authenticity, they recognize the limits of control once the story is shared.

Finally, many framed responsibility as delivering work that is not only technically polished but also emotionally and thematically resonant. As one participant described, they aim to create writing that readers “can't put down” but also continue to “sit with afterwards and think about…If they can just put the book aside…and not think about it again, then I haven't done my job.”

“I had no clue who Trevor, the public-facing author, was”: Discomfort with Public Persona

Despite their role as storytellers, many authors expressed unease with the performative aspects of literary publicity. Participants described feeling awkward, self-conscious, or unsure of how to present themselves publicly. This discomfort often stemmed from the vulnerability embedded in their work and the expectation to perform a confident "author persona." The divide between the private writer and the public author created a source of anxiety, especially for those unaccustomed to visibility or promotional demands.

Several writers articulated this tension vividly. One participant shared with a deep sigh, "Author events…I mostly hate it. It makes me really self-conscious." Another recounted the intense discomfort of early publicity efforts:

> I went on the U.S. tour, I didn't like that. I was so stressed and didn't know how I was supposed to be. I didn't know who I was in public as a writer. I knew who I was as a high school teacher; I had that persona, but I didn't have an author persona yet. I was like wearing these suit things I hated and was trying to put on a show. I was all over the place. I had no clue who Trevor, the public-facing author, was. I still don't quite know how to be author Trevor, cause in some ways that feels exposing. Like, 'I'm Trevor standing in front of you, and some of the stuff I've written is very personal'(TR, M54).

Over time, he found that adopting a self-deprecating humor helped ease this tension: "I don't feel like I have to be an expert…I can talk about it and sort of express 'I know what I know.'"

The difficulty of summarizing and presenting one's creative work added to this discomfort. As one author joked, "It's been out for 2 years and I still don't know how to explain it." Another participant reflected on the broader challenge of self-promotion in the literary world, stating, "They just want to write, they want to be a writer, not a promoter," and expressing envy toward writers who could avoid the publicity circuit altogether.

Ultimately, participants revealed that while writing felt authentic and natural, public performance often felt artificial and fraught, underscoring a significant emotional and professional gap between creating art and marketing it.

"*We can forge empathy and connection through writing*": Audience Impact and Connection

In contrast to their uncertainty about public promotion, authors found deep meaning in reader responses. Emotional reactions from readers, especially when readers connected with

difficult themes, validated the purpose of the writing and reinforced the potential of storytelling to build empathy. These moments of connection reveal that while writing is often an act of solitude, it holds great power in its ability to resonate with others and offer communal recognition of individual pain or experience.

Several authors reflected on how their work helped readers articulate difficult feelings. One recalled hearing from readers who "felt a sense of grief they didn't have the words to describe," until her book gave them the vocabulary to do so. Similarly, another participant was surprised by how strongly young Muslim women related to her novel, which drew from her personal experience navigating Presbyterianism and modern womanhood. These moments were not anticipated, but they powerfully validated the personal risks authors took in writing candidly.

Writers saw this resonance as the heart of their work's purpose: "Stories offer compassion for ourselves and for others…We can forge empathy and connection through writing" (GH, M61).

Even years after publication, a lingering sense of connection persisted: "Occasionally, I still get emails from people…that say, 'I read this book and I loved it.' But it doesn't live out there as long as you think." While the impact might fade over time, it was nevertheless real and deeply felt when it occurred.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how creative writers describe the writing process as a form of emotional processing, the motivations behind why they write, and how they understand themselves as public communicators. By examining how personal experiences evolve from private emotional expression into public storytelling, this research sought to offer a deeper

understanding of creative writing not just as a craft, but as an intimate, transformative, and communicative act.

The findings reveal that for many writers, creative writing is inseparable from emotional processing. Participants consistently described writing as a way to reframe and make meaning out of trauma, grief, and memory, often suggesting that storytelling allows the "wounds" of experience to speak and heal. Writers' motivations often stemmed from a desire to honor personal and collective histories, to make sense of internal experiences, and to create resonance with others. However, once their work moves into the public sphere, writers face new challenges: navigating vulnerability, ethical responsibility, and the delicate balance between personal ownership and audience reception.

These insights suggest that scholarly models of writing, particularly those rooted in cognitive theories (Flower & Hayes, 2004), must more fully account for the emotional dimensions of writing and extend beyond academic work into creative projects. As this study demonstrates, writing is an act of emotional labor that requires writers to be more than storytellers, inviting broader awareness of their ethical responsibilities and deeper support from those who engage with their work. Based on the qualitative data collected, I propose a preliminary theoretical model of emotional dynamics in creative writing consisting of three interrelated stages that trace how emotional experience moves from private processing to public communication: (1) emotional activation, which refers to the immediate or retroactive surfacing of emotional experiences, whether prompted by memories, sensory cues, or unresolved events, that initiates writing or shapes the emerging narrative; (2) narrative transformation, in which writers shape emotionally charged material into a coherent narrative, imposing formal elements

such as plot, structure, and thematic meaning; (3) public vulnerability, the stage in which private emotional work becomes exposed to audiences through publication, performance, or public discourse, often requiring writers to negotiate ethical responsibility, audience interpretation, and the risks of self-disclosure. While exploratory, this model offers a foundation for future scholarship seeking to theorize the emotional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions of creative writing.

A notable limitation of this study lies in my positionality as a creative writer and aspiring author, as this background inevitably shaped my interactions with participants, as I approached them with a degree of quiet veneration and admiration that someone outside the writing sphere might not possess. Future research may benefit from the involvement of a researcher without a creative writing background, whose distance from the field could yield alternative insights and interpretations through engagement with similar literary events. Additionally, while this study includes perspectives from writers based in the United States, Singapore, and Northern Ireland, these viewpoints represent only a small portion of the diverse experiences and understandings of writing that exist globally. Moreover, all participants were, to varying extents, loosely connected to the same eastern U.S. university, which may have shaped their views in subtle but significant ways. Future research could broaden the geographical and institutional scope.

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