

THE INTUITIVE WRITER:

SOMATICS

– WITH ANNIE BRAY –

As writers, we tend to think of imagination as something that happens in the mind. And yet, you can't enter a scene without a body. Somatic coach Annie Bray helps people orient themselves in their bodies and spaces in a way that feels very akin to the way Sarah Selecky advises writers to orient back to the scene.

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Sarah Selecky 00:05

Annie Bray is a trauma-informed somatic coach, registered massage therapist, and movement and meditation educator. Her work is offered through the lens of intersectional feminism, anti-racism, and body liberation with a focus on embodied resilience using movement, touch, somatic exploration, and supportive presence. With the body as a portal, we move at the speed of trust, connecting the dots between challenge, change, and meaning. Annie Bray has also created special somatic practices just for writers in the Story Course and the Story Intensive, which some of you may already know about. And she happens to be one of my dearest friends. Hello, Annie, and welcome.

Annie Bray 00:45

Hi Sarah.

Sarah Selecky 00:47



Thank you so much for meeting us here and talking to me. I thought maybe before we start talking, for anyone who doesn't know you and your work, or hasn't experienced what you do in the [Story Course](#), you could start us off by explaining what you do by showing us. What does a somatic practice look and feel like? Could you lead us in something small just to get us grounded to start?

Annie Bray 01:15

Yes, I can definitely do that. So yeah, why don't we just start, and then I can lead us through like a few minutes?

Sarah Selecky 01:24

Okay.

Annie Bray 01:24

And then maybe I'll just explain a little bit about the practice that we've just done.

Sarah Selecky 01:30

That would be wonderful.

Annie Bray 01:32

Okay, so, you know, one of the really basic things that is always included in my approach to somatics is a fairly radical approach to consent, which means I will always, and sometimes it might seem almost excessive how often I'll remind that what I'm suggesting are suggestions, and not orders or commands. And just that it's really important, like, as you're settling in to do any sort of body practice for your own well being to know that you're your own guide first.

So, with that in mind, I'm gonna suggest that wherever you're sitting, or standing, or laying down, that you just take a moment and actually find some sensory awareness of the places that your body is supported. And this can be with your eyes open or closed. If your eyes are open, it can feel really nice to create a non-receptive gaze, meaning just soften and draw down your eyes a little bit. So that we can come inward. Take your awareness into whether it's your feet, or you know, where you're sitting, the backs of your legs, or if there's other parts of your body that are resting into gravity. Notice that



pressure and support. And then, if it feels okay to do this, what we're going to do is start to take in the space that's in front of you. So your eyes right now — they might be closed, they might just be softly open. And then we're just going to start to orient ourselves to the space that we're in. So just noticing whatever your eyes are resting on, and then beginning with your body staying relatively still and stable, to turn just your eyes to the right. And so if you're sitting this might feel a little more natural. If you're lying down, it might just be that your eyes are moving over to the right and then your head a little bit. But if you're sitting up, you can actually start to look over your shoulder a bit and just take in whatever is there to the right. And looking back over your shoulder, up and down. Maybe noticing doors or windows or anything that has to do with leaving the room if you would need to. And also noticing if there's anything appealing, comforting, or beautiful.

And slowly starting to bring your gaze back. Again leading with your eyes and letting your head and neck just follow until you come back to the midline again, and then starting the same process over to your left. Just look up and down a bit as you go. Noticing things that are familiar. And just feeling that little bit of movement and stretch in your neck and your upper body as you look back without straining, and then gradually bringing your body back. Your head and your eyes back.

And you can keep your eyes open here, like just do whatever feels comfortable about that. Just pause, come back to that feeling of connection, sensory connection to the support that your body has right now. And we'll just take a moment and also orient ourselves in time and space. So just quietly, well, if you're by yourself you can do this out loud, it's fine, but just saying, you know, "I'm Annie. I'm in Ottawa. It's Saturday morning. I just walked the dog. Now I'm here talking to Sarah. This is where I am right now." So just take a moment for yourself and locate yourself in your own life. And then when you're ready, let yourself come back.

Sarah Selecky 06:02

Thank you.

Annie Bray 06:03

Yeah.



Sarah Selecky 06:05

So many things popped up for me, it always surprises me that first time that I look over my shoulder. When I do this with you, or do one of your recordings, there's this awareness of like, "Oh, I have not been consciously aware of the room that I'm in" until I do that consciously. And then I feel like, it's like, you're kind of teaching us how to be an animal, the animal that we are.

Annie Bray 06:33

Yeah, I mean, that's a beautiful, beautiful entry point into — even just a brief, I won't talk for long about that specific practice, but... it is about finding our animal body. It is. It's about letting it be important and okay, that we need to feel safe. And that part of our sense of safety has to do with orienting and really paying attention, you know? And so if we've like, for all kinds of reasons, closed off our sense of capacity or need to do that, we're often overriding that need that we would have if we were in the wild to both, you know, relax as much as possible whenever we can, but to always be tracking our environment.

Sarah Selecky 07:21

Yeah. Yeah, obviously, one of the things that I want to ask you about and, and talk about, is why you think this body awareness — that piece of it — is so important for writers and creatives of all kinds, but writers obviously, because that's who we're speaking to, that's who I'm sending this out to, in particular. And I also just feel like saying how it feels very contrary, or very counter to so many of the places where our information is flowing right now, to start with an exercise like that. And Annie, you and I have met on Instagram Live a few times, and I've just been doing some Instagram Live, some meetings with some of my Intensive teachers and graduates. And in that environment, I especially like to start with one of these practices, something that just like, it's very brief, I mean, even just like a third of the time that we just spent. So just a small amount. And I'm aware, on Instagram, in social media, that starting with something where people are quiet is an invitation to scroll past. And I feel like this is exactly what we're talking about: the need to slow down just shows up in such contrast, in such great relief, when I'm on Instagram or on social media. I feel like this is what we all need when we're like sitting up on a screen and people's names are floating by, and



little heart emojis are floating by, and I'm looking at my own face as well as your face. And I don't know where I am in time or space, I don't know. It's the exact moment that we need to sink into our bodies, and it feels so revolutionary or counter or, you know, a questionable practice to the algorithm.

Annie Bray 09:23

Yes, I mean, immediately I'm sitting here and I'm kind of like, the part of me that is disruptive— like that has a disruptive, rebellious approach to things, which is, I wouldn't qualify myself as being like really far down that path. But you know, yes, it is a disruptive thing to do —You're literally disrupting the status quo of Instagram, of social media, of the algorithm by saying, hey, like, what if instead of just blowing past this, you know, moment, what if we stopped and actually experienced it, and then see what happens, right. And it's like you've taken a fork in the road at that point, like you've literally said, like, "we're going down a different path and, want to come?" And you might have fewer people come with you.

Sarah Selecky 10:11

Yeah. Yeah. I feel like we're talking to the right people right now about this. Writers get it. I mean, that's what they're inviting. Every time they're putting some words down on a page, they're inviting people to join them instead of doing whatever else that they were doing. So they get it, they get the power. I mean, you know, writers, you live with writers. You're a writer. Why in particular, is what you teach so important for us writers?

Annie Bray 10:43

Hmm. I'm so curious. I feel like, you know, we've talked... we've circled around this and I'm always like, oh, am I gonna give a totally different answer than I did last time?

Sarah Selecky 10:51

Probably!

Annie Bray 10:52

But this feels like... I feel passionate about this. Every time we talk about it, I notice something really bubbles up for me. Like when you ask me, why is this so important for



writers? I feel it might correlate a little bit with my experience of mothering. I feel very protective. Being a writer is not easy. And any resources that we can add to that life, I'm like, so in for that. Well, you know, specifically why is this somatic awareness, a body based awareness, and also some skills for how to be with our experience, why is this so important for writers? So you know, there's one thing about learning how to arrive and come back to the body. But that's actually a tall order, if you're not also including skills for writing out whatever you find there.

I do think it's important for everyone. I do think that an experience of being a whole person needs to include some kind of healthy relationship with our own body and our embodied experience. But I think for writers, and we've talked about this, like, there's, I feel like I want to name two important things. One is that writing requires you to be translating sensory experience into language, you know, you talk about bringing the ineffable into language, which is kind of a process. It's like alchemical. It's magic. If you have some kind of regular supportive way of landing back in your body, and experiencing, and then maybe even starting to be able to name the experiences that you're having, that's just going to be like a tool in your toolkit. I think you'll just be a better writer. So that's kind of more in the realm of skill.

Sarah Selecky 12:37

Yeah. It's a technique.

Annie Bray 12:39

Support and skill. And then the other part relates more to the trauma-informed aspect of my work. And the fact that when we're writing, we're exploring memory and consciousness. And we're also sometimes exploring out into our experience of what's happening in the world. And trying to go really, to the heart of it. And so that's risky. It's risky work.

Sarah Selecky 13:06

I was speaking to a writer yesterday, who was sharing that she had a story that she'd been wanting to tell, she'd been wanting to write it for years. And this year, she started writing it, and working on it gently. It was a difficult, challenging, emotional story. And she was given a deadline. An editor requested a piece from her, which when that



happens, and you're a short story writer, you're a fiction writer, you're like, okay! Take it. So she was like, I'll take the deadline, and she wrote it to the deadline, and successfully finished the piece. The editor really liked it. It's coming out soon. It's really a great story. And the story was traumatic, it was about a character who was experiencing, or had experienced sexual abuse. And I don't want to talk too much about her experience and where she is right now. But when she was talking to me, it was like, this is what your work is for. This is what you do. This is what you help us with, because it wasn't a story. It wasn't a personal story. It was fiction. And it was a truth. She was writing a true experience. So her body felt it. Her physiology, her body, mind, and spirit felt it. Because she's a good writer. And she is transmitting all of that. So the reader is feeling it and it's still in her, you know, she felt heavy. She kept saying it was a heavy story. It was a heavy experience. And this, I feel, is the trauma aware piece that we don't... I mean, maybe in writing education, and in creative education there's a little bit more conversation about this happening now, thankfully. But in my education in creative writing, that was kind of a no-go zone. You couldn't really talk about the emotional ramifications and physiological ramifications. If you were having an emotional and physiological experience that was difficult and challenging that would kind of leak over into the writing-is-therapy zone. It's just like, you can't...writing is not therapy. And I think what we're seeing is that we can't separate that. That is a false and damaging separation.

Annie Bray 15:18

Yeah.

Sarah Selecky 15:19

And so given the fact that we see that maybe not all writing is therapy, but writing is definitely therapeutic for the person writing and the readers reading. And given that, what do we do then? Because we need a new set of tools if that's the case. If writers aren't going to break their spirits in and through writing, what needs to be written and sharing what needs to be shared, then how do we resource ourselves so we do that and honour it, and honour the experience?

Annie Bray 15:50



Sarah Selecky
WRITING SCHOOL

Yeah. Oh, my goodness. So many thoughts, Sarah, this is such a rich conversation. So what's really coming up for me, there's a bit of a sea-change happening also in the world of trauma resolution. You know, there's been, I mean, the turbo timeline is, you know, we used to talk about shellshock or PTSD that kind of emerged after the Vietnam War. Shellshock was sort of [experienced for] First and Second World War, and Vietnam vets, then it started to be more like, oh, well, that diagnosis applies to other people: it applies to women who've had sexual violence. And then it sort of just started to spread. And now we've reached where we are now, where we have this unbelievable capacity to do brain research and imaging. And we know a lot of what's actually happening in the brain when trauma is occurring. And it's kind of been like, it's emerged all very fast. And all of a sudden, there's this sort of world of people who are fascinated with, and at times possibly fetishizing trauma. Or it's like this whole idea of trauma is so huge. And I think one of the things that is really amazing to me these days is working with and learning from people who are moving past this kind of monolithic idea of trauma as this thing that like happens, and then you're in big trouble. And then like, you've been changed forever, or you're, you know, it's more like, granular than that. And there's a real beauty in understanding that we're very resilient, and we have so much capacity to adapt.

I'm just thinking of a writer, how wonderful it would be to just acquire a set of tools, so that you can gradually feel a little bit more in the right relationship with your own traumatic past or whatever that might be. And also to feel like you have a skill set for when you choose and want to go into the heavy and dark material, because you feel called to bring it up and put language to it and transmute it.

Sarah Selecky 17:56

This is exciting to me, when you're talking about transmuting it. I feel like that is what storytelling does. Like I think that something happened over the past couple hundred years, that storytelling became writing. Something was gained, and something was lost. And I think the connection to our bodies, and the connection to our dreams, the connection to the mystery and the symbolic, perhaps was like so many things from the receptive, nonproductive side of our awareness and consciousness. The subconscious became a little bit lessened in the service of mass producing novels that are page turners. But what the writers know who are creating the stories is there's always conflict.



There's always a shadow. There's always an unresolvable dilemma. And for there to be any kind of transformation in a character's world or life, whatever the story may be, or however subtle that transformation may be, there's a reckoning. And in that reckoning, comes the desperation of not knowing what to do. The desperation of like, this is impossible, and quite possibly also, all those experiences, those emotional experiences that we try in our waking life, to keep out of our lives. That's where the writer has to delve. In our normal waking lives, we don't want a story to break out. We don't want to have anything to reckon with. Please, let's not! So every day a writer somehow goes into that place.

I know that that's a bit of a ramble and I started this talking about the difference between the writing and the storytelling. And I think that's a false separation. It's just that in our bodies, and at our desks, and in the academy with all of the MFA programs it's harder to talk about bringing our body into that relationship with story, with conflict, with shadow, and with that reckoning. And if you take your body out of it, what happens Annie?! Like, is this what happened to Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway? Like, is this what happened to Sylvia Plath? Why does writing have to be so hard? And, ellipsis... Does it?

Annie Bray 20:27

Yeah, I know. Well, I just think because we do culturally, I would say for some time, I mean, this isn't my area of knowledge. But for a very long time I believe there's been a sense that making art has to be this kind of, I don't know, it's like a trip to hell and back. But then at the same time, there really isn't a lot of support and appreciation for, maybe it is, maybe sometimes it really is kind of a trip to hell and back. Maybe that's true, you know? But I also think that whether you're writing or making art, or generally speaking, engaging in your life in a way that centres meaning, then you're going to be periodically making trips to the underworld. You're going to be course correcting, seeing things aren't right, making big changes going through the painful process — like you and I've talked about this — like draft as book, draft as life. It's not a well supported process. And so I think if there's a way for writers to begin to learn some of this language, not to have to become neuroscientists and know the depth of this, but to have some literacy in the goings on of their body. So if you are trying to keep a writing practice alive, and



you're grappling regularly either with feeling blocked, or you're feeling super resistant, that's where I think a body practice can be incredibly game changing.

Sarah Selecky 21:58

Can you tell us more about this? Because that's at the heart of something. Like what's something practical? If a writer knows she loves what she's doing, she's drafted the book, it's great. She's got her outline out and she has all the scenes and...

Annie Bray 22:12

Just can't.

Sarah Selecky 22:12

She's like, why is it so hard? What can she do?

Annie Bray 22:15

That's like a, that's kind of a big, you know, that's cognitive. Generally speaking, that's kind of like a brain, it's like, I can tell you this is this, it's too hard, blah, blah, blah. And we're having a whole bunch of thoughts. And I mean, I'm just going to fully own that I still feel green. Even though I've been doing somatic-based work for 20 years, I still feel taking that process of cognitively naming and swirling about something and shifting, I'm going like, how does it feel in my body right now? Like when I'm walking into my room, and I see my desk, when I see that pile of paper, when I opened my computer, and I just want to turn away, or throw it out the window. Like, what is that? And if we can sort of reduce judgment not be attached to a specific outcome on that given day, but just put the focus on curiosity. What is alive in me right now? What part of me is not okay? Do I feel safe? Do I have the resources I need to go and do the thing that I'm trying to do? Like, am I literally trying to set off on an underworld journey and I don't even have like, a snack with me? You know, like, we're so hard on ourselves. We're so hard on ourselves. And I just think like, how would it feel to have a compassionate approach to this experience? And to maybe play around with like, letting go of the idea of writer's block and think like, there's actually a really, really legitimate, and fair, and good reason that some part of your being is not up for this task just now. But it's not that you're not up for it forever. You just need to draw in some allies, and resources, and



some goodness, so that you're bolstered enough to turn back towards what's important to you.

Sarah Selecky 24:08

You know, what I love about what you're describing is, in some classic story structures, what the hero or heroine needs before going. Like, it's just so meta. What the heroine needs, there's an invitation and they always say no first. And then they need another invitation. And then a meeting with some allies, a meeting with a mentor, a teacher to come and guide them. Something makes the invitation more sweet, so that then they can have the courage to go with curiosity. And then they're rewarded with some kind of wonder or an experience of surprise or something they didn't expect. It's that trip to hell and back that you were describing.

Annie Bray 24:55

Yeah!

Sarah Selecky 24:55

It's baked in. It's built into our growth and transformation. So what you're saying is why would a writer have to go into that journey? Even if she's writing about the journey, knowing the structure herself requires more resources, not giving them to herself before she goes in. So aside from just like snacking, which I do like to do when writing literally.

Annie Bray 25:20

Oh yeah. It was a metaphorical snack.

Sarah Selecky 25:22

Something crunchy or sweet is great.

Annie Bray 25:24

Yeah. Real and metaphorical snack.

Sarah Selecky 25:27

But what are some metaphorical snacks? Like, what are some of the things, and maybe you can share a little bit about some of the stuff that's in the [Story Course](#)? Because



that's what you created for us, is like stuff for our backpack when we go in. What can some of those be? Like for someone who's listening now who maybe doesn't have the Story Course. What could they do today if they're looking at their desk, and they're feeling that dread?

Annie Bray 25:51

Yeah, so I mean, first I just want to say, one of the sort of basic principles of somatic practice, from my perspective, and others, is, this is work that needs to be done on repeat. We need to enter into some kind of experience with our body, like a ritual or practice, and then preferably do it on some sort of regular basis before we're really going to start to get the nourishment from it. So you know, I would be cautious to say, like, "oh, do this today and then you're just going to be like, on fire with your writing later in the afternoon". But having said that, you know, circling back to just that, that switch from trying to articulate something cognitively. So if you are having an experience of dread, or sometimes it's not even so clear as a negative feeling, it's just like a no. So if that's happening, making a conscious choice to switch into, just even for a short time, it might be kind of hard or uncomfortable to switch into noticing what's happening in the body. But just taking a brief pause and, you know, try just noticing. Where are you tight? What parts of you have tightened up? What sort of needs might be presenting in the body? And I really am talking about the most basic needs, like, "am I thirsty? Do I need to actually, you know, prepare something for myself, that's like grounding and nourishing?" You know, those kinds of things are really easily blown past.

And then, you know, the other thing that I just generally like to start talking about with people really early, if they are in this process of turning towards their felt sense, and their embodied experience, is understanding what sort of resources might be available. So before you go too much further with picking apart like, what is this? What does it mean? It's figuring out like, what do I need right now to feel maybe even, like five or ten percent more resourced? And so I mean, obviously the practices that are in the school really orient towards this quickly, you know, there's a whole practice about connecting with an ally. You know, but that's something, even if you don't want to get into a whole guided practice about it, just really actually recognizing how supportive it could be to connect with an element. Or, I'm just literally meaning light a candle, and be present with the flame. Or open the window and pay attention to the air flowing through —



connect with the wind or the flow of the movement. Or go and pour a little bowl of water and sprinkle a little salt into... I mean, I know I'm veering over into the sort of ritualistic...

Sarah Selecky 28:46

I'm into it.

Annie Bray 28:47

Yeah, I mean...

Sarah Selecky 28:50

Writers have more advanced ritualistic practices to get... Like there are whole books written about writers and their rituals. Yeah.

Annie Bray 28:58

Yeah. But also not, you know, noticing if some of your rituals have become stale, and if they're not serving you. Allowing a bit of spontaneity into the practice of identifying, what do I need right now to feel bolstered as I move towards this meaningful work that I want to do?

Sarah Selecky 29:17

Yeah, yeah.

Annie Bray 29:19

We could say a lot more about that. But I feel like that's probably just a simple little...

Sarah Selecky 29:23

That's beautiful. And I think you've explained it really well. And I do think that, again, the writers listening already understand, I mean, we do the work of this deep noticing for our characters and scene. We keep reorienting ourselves to scene, to scene, to scene. So what you're actually asking us again, it's this bigger perspective, which is to orient ourselves in our own scene first.

Annie Bray 29:46



Yes! Literally put that in...

Sarah Selecky 29:49

Yeah.

Annie Bray 29:50

Yeah. Orient yourself to your own scene. The scene that you are in right now is the most important scene. It needs to be tended, and it needs to be as just right as possible, and it can't be perfect. If you try to make it perfect, you're never going to get down to your work. There's some kind of flip where the striving for perfection is an avoidance tactic. But the turning towards and noticing, what is a doable thing that I can actually bring in right now to make this just more workable? That is a very transformative thing. It's a way of tending to ourselves in a really deep way.

I also would like to just share that if we start doing that in small ways, it can be quite emotional. Because if we've really come through life in a way where we've tended to push our needs aside, and most of us have in certain ways, when we are really compassionate and look after ourselves, and these kind of simple, almost childlike types of caretaking ways, it can actually be a little... Can take a bit of getting used to.

Sarah Selecky 30:59

Annie, we're coming to the end of our time here. We will continue our conversations again, I'm certain, but can you help writers? What do you do? Like if people want some of this, how do they find you, and is there a place... I know, go to anniebray.com? Is there any other way people...Can we call you?

Annie Bray 31:27

Yes, please do. Yeah, so I would say, if a person is trying to write and is starting to recognize through some of their body awareness, that they may be grappling with — like, bigger stuff than just like sort of a five minute ritual before writing is gonna help with that one part — you can book a discovery call with me. And I offer one-on-one coaching. And we can do a much more bespoke approach to supporting you through a journey from feeling stuck or afraid, or, you know, all the different kinds of stuff that can come up around the creative life. You know, that's one piece. And then, by the time



this comes out, I'll be already into the summer program that I'm running. But it's basically a beta program where I'm orienting towards working with caregivers, and creatives. I mean, those are my people. And I don't even really fully distinguish the two as separate.

Sarah Selecky 32:36

Love that.

Annie Bray 32:37

I feel like whether we're caregiving humans, or we're a garden, or like our creative dreams, you know, it's a lot of the same principles apply. So yeah, there'll be group offerings coming in the fall of this year.

Sarah Selecky 32:52

Wonderful. Thank you. And anyone else who's listening, definitely, if you have the [Story Course](#), or if you haven't yet upgraded to the new edition of the Story Course, do so now, so you can get in on some of these rituals and practices. There's one for every lesson. And I highly recommend them, they have definitely changed my writing life. But also I know a lot of writers who have told me that they're also using these practices every day, which is what you were inviting us to do, right? With the practice, with the long game, with the repetitions. You know, when you start your day, when there's a phone call and you don't know who's on the other end. Before you show up for a Zoom meeting that has a lot of people in it. They're incredible ways to orient yourself in your own scene. Yeah.

Thank you so much, Annie, for everything that you're doing, and for bringing it to our community. I'm really, really grateful. Love working with you.

Annie Bray 33:54

It's magical for me to be working with your school and with you. Thank you, Sarah.

Sarah Selecky 33:59

All right.



Annie Bray 34:00

Bye.

Sarah Selecky 34:02

Bye.

