

# INTERVIEW WITH MARY CAPPELLO

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**AMANDA DAMBRINK:** Is your book a culmination of pieces already written, or did you set out with the goal of writing a book about awkwardness? Or maybe something in between?

**MARY CAPPELLO:** I began actually not with the idea of awkwardness at all, but with the fact that I had been living in Russia and Italy in the years 2001 and 2002. I was on a Fulbright lectureship in Russia teaching at the Gorky Literary Institute. Following that, I was in Italy, where I was working on a project with a photographer to document the lives of new immigrants to Italy. I had so many experiences as a result of living abroad for those two semesters. I was abroad at the time of 9/11, so you can imagine that had a real specific sort of influence on my living there at the time. When I came back home, I wanted to write some kind of book that could bring together this diverse set of experiences that I'd had living abroad—some sort of conceptual center like a string upon which one might thread pearls. I just didn't know what that would be. In a course on documentary discourse and immigrant subjectivity, I was teaching a film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder,

*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul.* That's the film that's sort of at the center of the book. Some of my students and I started to become aware of the awkwardness of the characters in that film, one of whom is an older German cleaning woman who has a love affair with a young Moroccan man, who's an immigrant to Germany.

Coincidental with teaching that film and becoming more or less aware of the awkwardness in it, I found a letter that my grandfather had written to me as a child that I wanted to share with my class, because I wanted to expose them to what I called immigrant traces, or the kinds of documents that immigrants produce by and about themselves, rather than the documents that are foisted upon them in an attempt to track them down or police them. Here I make a distinction between being found and being found out. So I was fishing through these letters that my grandfather had written but that he had never sent to me, and I found, on the back of one, words that he was teaching himself from the English dictionary. The first word was "awkward," accompanied by "awe," and "awhile," and it occurred to me, "Awkwardness is the thread that I need. Maybe I should follow awkwardness and see where it takes me."

It turned out that the book did not then revolve around the experiences in Italy and Russia, or become reduced to those experiences. Instead, awkwardness took center stage and the aim was to follow it, not just as a concept, but as a language. I borrowed this idea from a psychoanalytic writer named J. B. Pontalis, who's written a book called *Windows* that the University of Nebraska Press has published in translation. He says that if you enter something as a language, you find it wants and needs to travel. It won't allow you to come to the point, but to wander toward multiple points, to be arrived at from multiple directions. So, I think if you've read *Awkward*, you have a sense of what I mean by that—that I was following “awkward” as a language, rather than as a concept.



**KAYLA QUINNEY:** Is there a reason why most of your characters have names, but your relations don't? Like your father, mother, or grandparents?

**MC:** I have never really thought about this until you asked it, and I'm afraid I don't have a very interesting answer to the question. I think I was just following a convention where this is concerned, because we usually address and know members of our family of origin this way, which, in itself, is maybe something worth investigating. Why is it that one's mother gets called *Mother* or *Mom* all of her life, rather than by her name? Her name is replaced with her role in relation to her child. That's sort of something interesting to think about.

I guess figures, like your family, sometimes enjoy a pride of place when you're writing something memoiristic because they served or figured more intensively than other people did. That's the only reason that I can really surmise for why I wouldn't name

them. Did you feel like there was something missing by not having their names? How did that function for you?

**KQ:** You named Sid at the very beginning, but then he just kind of slips into *father*.

**MC:** That's interesting because Sid was not my biological father, so I guess that's why I named him. He was my mother's partner after she had divorced my father. She didn't marry Sid, but he was such a father figure. He was a tremendously loving person, a really important figure in my life, and kind of served as a father in a lot of ways.



**ALMA JEAN:** I have a question about your paraphrase of Gertrude Stein: “I do not write in order to be right.” Has there been a time when you wrote in order to be right? Is there a time when you're justified to write to be right?

**MC:** I want to answer this question in a few different ways. First of all, I want to backpedal to the category of “right.” Then I want to try to explain what Gertrude Stein might have been suggesting by saying this, and then I'll answer whether I write in order to be right...when I have, if I do.

Right presumes its opposite, wrong, and I find that inside the realms of art and literature, right and wrong can trap us inside moral judgments and opinions, rather than the more richly provocative open and dialogical—by which I just mean, making possible dialogues—dialogical modality of ideas. I spend a few classes with my students teasing out the distinction between opinions and ideas. Writing to be right presumes that when we sit down to write, we're reduced to a binary: we could be right or we could be wrong. It seems like something I'm not interested in pursuing. I'm interested in working outside of, or troubling the

stranglehold of this binary opposition: right and wrong. We find ourselves saying, “There are two sides to every story.” And I want to say, “Only two?” We’re supposedly creatures who have infinite capacity to imagine, but we have been bequeathed this way of seeing the world that tends to be binary. I would ask you, as an exercise, to retread the ground of this sentence, for yourself, as writers: “I do not write in order to be \_\_\_\_.” Fill in the blank for yourself. How would you fill it in? Or, “I write in order to be \_\_\_\_.” Fill in the blank. I might answer, “I write in order to be provocative. I write in order to be compassionate.”

This suggests something about one’s writerly aesthetic, how one would fill in the blank of this sentence, and whether one writes to be right. This may have special implications or ramifications for essay writing in particular, or working with nonfiction, because nonfiction is often affiliated with argumentation, persuasion, proof, truths. I would draw your attention to an essay by Cynthia Ozick called “She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body,” in her collection called *Quarrel and Quandary*. In it, she distinguishes the essay from a polemical article—an article that a person might write when they’re trying to argue something; they’re trying to persuade people of something. “A genuine essay,” she writes, “is not a doctrinaire tract or a propaganda effort or a broadside...The essay is not meant for the barricades; it is a stroll through someone’s mazy mind.” She goes on: the essay “co-opts agreement; it courts agreement; it seduces agreement.” I like the way she requires us to draw this fine distinction between persuasion and seduction. I think what I’ve gleaned from her is that essays, from her point of view, work by way of seduction, by way of combined openness and a willfulness that happens at the level of the voice. She also talks about the essay as the product of a free mind at play. You

can see how, if you’re going to work in that mode, that that would go against the grain of needing to be right.

Now, Gertrude Stein—why or how was this idea operating for her? Where did it come from? I just wanted to give you one example from Stein. I’m drawing from a book by Steven Meyer called *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science*. Gertrude Stein made a visit to the University of Chicago. She taught a class there with Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler. These guys had inaugurated the Great Books of the Western World series. And Hutchins noticed that in Stein’s presence the students talked more than ever before. Some of them who had never talked before talked for the first time. They were moved to speak. And Gertrude Stein said, “It is that I am like them. I do not know the answer. You, you say you do not know, but you *do* know. If you did not know the answer, you could not spend your life in teaching. But I really do not know, I really do not, and I do not even know whether there’s a question, let alone having an answer for a question. To me when a thing really is interesting, it’s when there’s no question and no answer; if there is, then already the subject is not interesting.” I don’t have time to go into the fuller exploration of that, but I hope it gives you a little bit of fodder for thought. Meyer goes on to talk about the way in which, for Stein, a genius is a person who can perform a kind of concentration that requires talking and listening at the same time. I guess the only thing I’d add would be to draw your attention to a place in “Patriarchal Poetry” where Gertrude Stein plays on the phrase *aimless/aim less*. She repeats “aim less,” but she means by this both the adjective and the verb phrase. To consider a writing that aims less—that is to say, doesn’t need to be right, doesn’t have a target, and is consequently aimless—you see what happens as a result of that. Of course in my book, I was trying to

invent a genre that I call a detour, and this is relevant for an interest in attempting aimlessness.

Now, have I ever written to be right? Certainly. When I was in grade school, I was trained to write essays that were reflective of dogma that I was being taught. This is a sort of prescriptive writing. On the other hand, does this mean that I don't make judgments when I write? That I don't want to argue a point? Of course not. I *do*. My most recent book is partly driven by a sense that breast cancer discourse is oppressive, and I want to offer an alternative to that. But the bottom line is that writing has to do something more interesting than prove a point.



**JEANNE WILSON:** Typical writing advice is “show, don't tell,” but sometimes it seems that in essays you have to tell, make unproven statements, sum up things. I like the telling statement you make on page 53 of *Awkward*:

“There is no reparation but only rearrangements of parts.” How do you find a balance between this kind of “telling” and the necessary “showing?”

**MC:** This is another great question. I'd like to answer it in terms of a formal choice or repertoire of possibilities inside of sentences that a writer has at her disposal, rather than in terms of the declarative statements that you identify here as being indicative of instances of “telling” over and against “showing.” So I'm going to take a little bit of a different approach to your question. We could have a separate conversation about this old saw, “show, don't tell,” and what to do with imperatives or rules like that.

I'm interested—maybe because I was trained as a poet, and I think of my prose as a form of poetry—I'm very interested in the fundamental distinction that's made at the level of form,

between poetry and prose—just the fundamental notion that prose is made of sentences and poetry is made up of lines. Inside the history of philosophy, and somewhere at a borderline between poetry and prose, enters this animal called the aphorism.

An aphorism is a short, pithy saying, right? I'm fascinated by what's possible inside of the space of aphorisms. The line you drew attention to—“There is no reparation but only rearrangement of parts”—I would consider that an aphorism. I spend a lot of time in my writing classes helping my students to learn about this form, and to experiment with aphorisms for a number of different reasons. Aphorisms, first of all, are affiliated with truth statements because of the kind of sentence that we consider a truism. Most truisms are aphorisms, but not all aphorisms are truisms. A truism is a sentence that exerts itself with a kind of universal authority that is gained by being repeated often enough inside of a particular cultural milieu. I'll read a truism from the visual artist Jenny Holzer: “A man can't know what it's like to be a mother.” That's a truism. This is from Jenny Holzer's *Truism* series. Again, a truism is a sentence that exerts itself with a kind of universal authority, which is gained by being repeated often enough inside the particular cultural milieu. As such, it can come to function as a bearer of the status quo and as a slogan or an advertisement for a particular ideological position.

But in the poet's hands, or in the nonfiction writer's hands—writers who are attentive to form at the level of the sentence—an aphorism can exert a charge, but incite a pause. It can slow us down. Now slogans don't slow us down; slogans are quick. They speed past us. They don't ask us to question. They clobber us with their authority and they make us want to be complacent. But in the hands of a nonfiction writer, the aphorism

can do a very different kind of important work. It can slow us down, require us to think, open us into a grove of contemplation. And it does a lot of other things, too. It troubles the matter of sentences depending on other sentences. When we write prose, we usually presume that one sentence depends upon another sentence. This is how prose moves. That’s how meaning is made. Aphorisms have this funny way of appearing not to depend on other sentences in order to exist. This makes it seem as though the aphorism is less like a sentence and more like a poetic line.

The fact of the matter is the aphorism is somewhere between a poetic line and a prose sentence, and I love it for that. Now, an aphorism can do a lot of work inside of an essay, if you think of your essays as idea mills in which we don’t know what shape the idea will take. I probably have a special fondness for aphorisms because it was one of the main modes of my shoemaker grandfather, John Petracca. He left behind a lot of unpublished writing in his shoe repair shop. He was a writer/philosopher who was sort of in love with the aphorism, and I felt that I was bequeathed these aphorisms after my grandfather died. I’ll just share a few of his aphorisms with you: “Success has been my failure.” “The whole is never whole, as perfection never perfection.” “One can’t give a thing, if he has nothing.”

A nonfiction writer in search of anti-truth, when truth is understood as a dominant fiction serving the status-quo, might need to learn how to re-work the culture’s truisms in the form of

poetic aphorisms.



**PARKER VALORA:** I’ve always been really fascinated with memory and experience, and how it makes us who we are. It was interesting

to look at this theme of awkwardness in light of your memories and experiences. Were you thinking of awkwardness when you lived different events, or did you later reevaluate your experience? If it was reevaluation, how did it affect the re-discovery of those memories and experiences?

**MC:** Parker, this is a wonderfully rich and insightful question; thank you. I’d say I was re-evaluating experience through the lens of awkwardness. And it’s something I like to do as a literary critic, too, to see how an area of a literary text suddenly lights up when we ask a certain question of it. I’m doing the same thing with experience and memory. I think you’re quite right. By turning *awkwardness* in the direction of these memories and experiences, I’m seeing what they become. I really think that by asking this question you might be getting at the very center of the book, and, consequently I’d almost prefer that you re-read *Awkward* with this question in mind. In other words, consider how, by revisiting certain kinds of episodes in terms of awkwardness—your own as well as mine—something specific and new can be understood about them.

If I were to draw attention to an episode with this question in mind, it would be the passage where I described dissecting the frog without supervision as a child. Because that was an extremely disturbing memory, and one that I might want to cut off from my understanding of myself; I might want to repress it. But when I consider it in terms of precociousness and a desire to know things that were supposedly beyond my reach



as a girl, or as a child, I understand the episode as something other than an act of violence for which I could only feel guilty.

**ADRIANNE ROLDAN:** I’m fascinated by how

you can take a small moment and then expand upon it, like when you find the letters from your grandfather. How do you feel that you can get away with that (because you *can*, obviously)? Also, what makes an expansion of a small moment lose your interest?

**MC:** That’s a great question. It makes me think, Adrienne, about the possibility that as writers we’re architects and physicists because we need to be attentive to scale. We need to decide what’s important; we need to work with measure and distance and weight and whether we want to take a reader down a long stretch of a path or a zig-zag, how much room we want to give over to a particular image, whether we want to work by way of distillation or expansion. So, I really like what you’re asking me to think about here. I wouldn’t consider the finding of my grandfather’s letters a small moment. That might be a matter of where and how we find meaning, or what matters to us. For me the documents are weighty and momentous, and my encounters with them are risky because these documents bear the trace of a self, and I could end up being a bumbler with them. But you’re right to notice the ways in which a writer might find something where other people might notice nothing. The fact that we pay particular attention to detail, to minor matters, to life’s—to use your professor’s phrase—“infinite finities.” I mean, I know that Patrick has written a tremendously beautiful essay on the idea of finitude.

In a book that I’m writing about breast cancer—I’m just completing this manuscript right now—I perform an extended meditation on the trope of “on the count of three.” Things are always being done to me on the count of three. I always used to hold my breath while a needle was put in or taken out, and I end up musing on this necessity to be prepared on the count of three. Why not the count of two, you know? And it leads me to think about temporality in ways that I never would have

anticipated. This is an instance, I think, of what you’re drawing attention to, right? Finding some small moment and letting it open into possibility. I love doing that. What makes it lose my interest or what is the risk of this sort of gesture? Fetishizing the thing is the risk, making it precious, stilling it or capturing it rather than liberating it.



**WHITNEY HORITO:** I noticed that many of your experiences, like the conversation at Sea World with your nephew or your dad’s story of Rumpelstiltskin, are recorded in such detail. I was wondering if you write them down in a notebook immediately after they happen or if you recall them while you’re writing essays. How do you preserve these stories?

**MC:** You’re making me think about the fact that as writers we’re all probably archivists of a sort. Just for clarification’s sake, my father’s story was something *he* had written down, so I didn’t need to remember that one, but for each short essay that I’ve written there exists an entire file drawer of folders filled with notes and other articles I’ve read that formed the raw material for the piece. I also never go anywhere without a notebook, and I hope you all do the same. For the book I’ve just completed, I brought a notebook with me everywhere, I had it at all times. Sometimes I’ve recorded interviews for the writing project I was carrying out. But people who know me well and with whom I share a past have noted that I have a particularly fine memory. Of course, writing is also an aid to memory. But I wonder if the preservation of what we observe maybe gets better with practice, and I *do* think it’s something that a person can practice. I have a young writer friend who has been to some of my readings and who accompanied me and my friend James Morrison on a reading tour we did this June, and she was able to recite line for

line entire paragraphs from both of our books after having been to only two or three readings. This seems to be a gift, but I can't not also note that the girl is a gifted writer, and I think that maybe these abilities in her are related.



**APRIL OSBORN:** I love your wordplay in *Awkward*, and I was wondering what was your research approach for finding all the connections that you make and what or who have been your major inspirations in terms of language and style?

**MC:** April, I'm so glad you noticed this, because working at the level of a single word is extremely important to me. I believe that as writers we have a responsibility toward something that I call "word auras," and I don't mean this in a New Age way like word aromas, or something like that, but I mean to draw attention to the world that exists in any word, the multi-dimensionality of the word, its volubility, the fact that a word has a past from which it issues, a history of usage and a future towards which it points, that words have weight and color, that they are body-full, that they enjoy their own materiality. I like to consider that words were once the things that we put in our mouths, because when we were babies we knew the world by putting it into our mouths and we only later learned to replace those things with words. And that all words have a political unconscious—this is another aspect, a major aspect, of any word's "aura." Most of us don't know much about the very language that we call our own and that we use to represent our most significant thoughts and feelings or to represent our reality. I like to think about the fact that words have kin—there are words that are like each other but not quite the same.

I also believe in the *reality* of words. If you don't already own an OED, an Oxford English Dictionary, you should probably ask for one for your birthday or access it online. If you're not already studying a second language, I suggest you might want to. I use a dictionary and a thesaurus, certainly, but I also used my own imagination in exploring the nature of the words I was pursuing in this book, because it's equally important to draw upon your own internal lexicon in order to investigate how the word figures for you. In other words, you can't rely just on the dictionary and the thesaurus. It's a question of playing what you think the word means, its usage, your experience of the word, off against what its history is.

I wanted to share with you a stanza from a poem by Emily Dickinson that I'm asking my students to work with, around the nature of the word. It goes like this:

I heard, as if I had no Ear  
 Until a Vital Word  
 Came all the way from Life to me  
 And then I knew I heard.

I'm asking my students to identify their own vital words and work an essay out of them.

You asked me if there are inspirations for me in this regard, and I just wanted to mention that, stylistically, I would like to find a place between the utter purity of line, the sense of silence and voice that I find in the writing of Natalia Ginzburg, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Sarah Kofman, and the textured playing beyond the instrument of Osip Mandelstam.



**JENNIFER RICKS:** What kind of revision did *Awkward* go through? What was the most difficult process—writing the individual essays, grouping them, ordering them, or revising after you’d written the book?

**MC:** Originally the book emerged out of conversations and meetings I had with my writing partner, a woman named Karen Carr, who read and re-read the whole book several times, lots of drafts. A lot was scrapped. And the book that I’m currently writing sees three trusted readers in addition to myself before I send it to anyone else. My partner, Jean Walton, my friend and fellow writer, James Morrison, and my writing partner, Karen. *Awkward* went through a co-creative process also, with an editor at Bellevue Literary Press, Erika Goldman, who gave the manuscript a lot of great attention and care; she had an eye for juxtaposition and arrangement. I’ve been very lucky to have found this with each of the editors I’ve worked with: the ability to step back and see the big picture, which is sort of a talent in itself. So she made suggestions to remove a paragraph, for example, or situate one section nearer to another section, and I could see the resulting improvement, which was quite exciting. I also cut 80 pages myself from the book. I would say revision is by far the hardest part, because you have to keep re-entering and changing. If you change one thing, other things change. And, then, too there was the fun of generating chapter headings for this book, which was a creative process in itself, and emerged out of an on-going give and take, back and forth set of prompts and suggestions between my editor and me until I felt, and she felt, that we’d hit upon the best cast of characters, or constellation of terms.



**KIMBER GILES:** Do you find yourself living in such a way as to welcome subjects to write about? For instance, when you were writing your book, did you seek out the awkwardness or did it find you?

**MC:** Well, awkwardness definitely found me, I would say, rather than my finding it. And I think that there were historical conditions that made it come to me. I also notice all the time that the moment I think I’m onto something original, I find out that it’s all around me. And that tells me that my historical conditions bring subjects to me. I wanted to write a book about taxidermy—I still want to write this book—a year or so ago, and now I’ve found out it’s a new craze. I was starting to investigate what I call “literary acoustics,” bringing sound and the study of acoustics to bear on literary analysis, and then I discovered that there was a conference being offered somewhere in Amsterdam the very moment that I came up with this idea on this very subject. I decided to write a book about awkwardness because it was everywhere I looked but under-theorized, and then I realized that it’s a word as current as *cool* among teenagers right now. So, I think that life gives me my material; I don’t go looking for it.



**MALLORY EAGAR:** How do you think writers experience the world differently? (i.e., is there any danger to approaching life as source material? Or is it somehow a better way to live?)

**MC:** This is a really interesting question, Mallory. I have a few very different things to say about this. I think we have to be careful about treating the writer as an exceptional person or exalting, or differentiating the writer from other people. I like to make a distinction between *the author* and



*the writer*. The “author” is the figure I was obliged to describe in my bio sketch for this interview; celebrity status is something reserved for authors—book tours, marketing ploys, prizes, and the like, all these accrue to *the author*. But the author is really just a figment, a phantasm, an idea, a cultural construct that will fade, even though it seems like all there is.

The author is sort of an advertisement for the writer, but in the end, the author is a poor substitute for her. I like to think that who I am as a writer is really what matters at the end of the day, where “writer” is understood as someone caught up in the humble plying of the word-trade, writing as humble, ethical work, the writer as the person in her studio lovingly laboring. Where the author cultivates a face, the writer cultivates a sensibility. Which do you think is more important? More essential to the making of art? More essential to the making of a life?

Is there a danger in using life as a source for your art? There might be a chicken-egg conundrum at work here if we use the question to refer back to the age-old matter of whether art imitates life or life imitates art, but let me say that what interests me about the question is the word “source” as it relates to “resource.” Writers have to be resourceful, to notice, to witness, to observe, to attend to, often to know how to make something out of apparent nothingness. Receptivity. Openness. I think that these are related to resourcefulness. While writing my breast cancer book, exactly in the middle of writing a paragraph, I received a phone call from a friend who lives in Scotland who told me a story that proved to be the perfect anecdote—though she didn’t know this—for the ending I was heading toward in the chapter I was writing. So I used it, and felt blessed that it fell into my lap, and that it fed me in this way. A serendipitous gift.



**KIRK WALLACE:** How much of your inspiration came from your conversations with other people as opposed to merely contemplating their actions and your own actions?

**MC:** I don’t know that I see an opposition between conversation and contemplation. And maybe I’ll bring this back to Gertrude Stein and the necessity to learn how to talk and listen at the same time. The question of where my inspiration comes from is a big one that I can’t possibly answer right now. But I would just say, I do think it’s incredibly important to be open, attentive, and alert to the question that no one is asking, and that’s where I could say my inspiration comes from.



**SCOTT MORRIS:** Some of your stories reveal very personal information about other people. When you write these personal stories, do you feel like you need to ask their permission, or are there things you don’t include because they’re too personal?

**MC:** This is a big question, Scott, a really big one. And I think we would have to probably look at specific examples in order to get to the bottom of it, and we can’t do that in this short space of time. I’m interested that in more than one question that the class has posed to me, the word *personal* has appeared, and along with it the adverb *very*! So, the “very personal” seems to be preoccupying you. I’ll just say the personal, as it relates to the private—the legal category that we understand over and against the public—needs to be investigated more fully if you think that to write nonfiction is to engage in something called “personal essay” or “personal writing.” If I use a person’s name and I quote them, I ask permission, absolutely, before doing that,

because what they said could be traced to them and they may not want that. I asked my partner if she was ok with my writing so intimately about her father. And of course I did not want to efface my relationship with her in any way. I disguise identities, including my own, on occasion, if the identity is going to detract from the point, if the identity is not essential. But there's a lot more to be said on this, and no doubt it's something that really needs to be taken up in the course of a semester.



**CHRIS JOHN:** How would you teach an aspiring essayist to balance the writing of abstract or general ruminations on a subject, and the sharing of very personal—there it is again—details and experiences?

**MC:** I don't want to know very personal things about you; this can only produce one kind of writing: confessional writing, talk-show-culture writing, which is an issue unto itself that would require a lot of discussion between us. What I do want to know when I read your nonfiction is what your relationship to memory is. How are you re-working it? If you're writing autobiography, I would be interested to know the history of your life in language, your relationship to language. How have you been embodied by multiple discourses? So, that's the "personal" I'm interested in writing, and also reading, not a person's secrets.

The question of balancing the abstract and the general: there are lots of ways to think about this. I think I would ask you to turn to other mediums for metaphors. Music offers us the possibility of the contrapuntal, the polyvocal, the two-part invention. Turn toward the art of weaving and investigate the ways in which a weaver brings more than one thread together to form a particular pattern. I've recently been teaching Susan

Griffin's essay "Red Shoes," which appears in *The Next American Essay*. This essay is made up of two running commentaries that run side by side; it's at once a rumination on the gendering of public and private, and the difference between fiction and nonfiction, and a memoiristic journey, focused on the writer's memory of a pair of red shoes. You could turn to that sort of piece to think about how to balance these things. But I would also ask you, Chris, to generate more and different categories than "abstract" and "personal" and work from those. I'd encourage you to write in different registers and become attentive to the work that different discourses do, like scientific tracts over and against poetic discourses. Become a fluent reader of multiple discourses.



**AMANDA AAGARD:** What are common mistakes you see in the writing of others, and, since it's harder sometimes to see those same mistakes in your own writing, how have you worked or learned to eradicate those mistakes

from your writing?

**MC:** Well, as a person who's written a book on awkwardness, I'm actually interested in mistakes, in other words, I might want to make them rather than avoid them, because when we make a mistake, we break an order. And I believe that something interesting can happen when order is broken. Think about the fact that a mistake can be a happy accident. I might want, as Emily Dickinson suggests in one of her poems, to be mis-taken. I might want to be taken as something or someone other than who you think I am, rather than be recognized or understood. I might want to be misunderstood. I've written a piece in which I theorize the mistake in the form of the slip of the tongue. It's a very rich area to think about: when we make slips, when we read words into

words that aren't there. These are mistakes, but they're productive mistakes. I write about this in an essay called "Heir to Ambiguity"; it just appeared in a literary journal called *Interim*.

I once heard Louise Glück, the poet, say that she liked to identify habits in each of her pieces of writing. She would write a book, then identify the habits that were at work in that book, and then consciously try to work athwart those habits in the next piece of writing. So I guess I want to replace the idea of the mistake with the category of the habit. And for my own part, I'm always trying to find a balance between commanding the page and letting my subject overtake me, letting something wild enter into my writing rather than taming it. That's a challenge for me. I'd also say that I've tried in the course of my career as a writer to move from something like the elegiac to the anti-eulogistic. The last thing I'd say about this is that it's not entirely true that I don't identify things that I don't want to reproduce that I see in other people's writing. Most recently, because I'm writing out of an experience that's very raw and very close to me, I've tried to be vigilant about whether I am ready to write it or not. I have read some books that strike me as having been written too soon, whose material wasn't fully processed. So I have tried to be a good judge of whether I'm too close to what I'm experiencing, and I've concluded that I'm not. [laughs] That's a rather bold claim to make, but I think that I can make that judgment.

**MALLORY EAGAR:** What's the most awkward question you've ever been asked in an interview?

**MC:** What a great question. Your question's making me think about the phrase "awkward question," and it makes me think I need to go to the dictionary before being able to answer it, because I keep stopping at "awkward quest." The word *quest* that

lurks inside of *question*—it makes me think that your question is, "What has been your most awkward quest?" And, wow, I'd like to think about that.

I just want to say that your question's making me experience a kind of exciting definitional crisis that I really have to figure out before being able to answer it, but it's also doing something else, because when I started to try to think about how I might answer it without investigating what an awkward question really could be, the examples that I come up with are actually things I can't share with you, because they would tell you things about me that probably are too personal to share. I want to say that that proves what I've come to discover about the power of awkwardness: that if we admit awkwardness into our relationships with others, it exposes things and it makes new truths available and it insists on being real.

There's much more to say about this but I think we must be running out of time. I so appreciate your taking such care and interest in *Awkward* to come up with these questions and giving me these things to think about, and I'm only sorry that we can't really have a *discussion*, you know? Because there are your questions, I'm giving you my answers, I'm not sure they're fully understood, and you probably have more questions as a result of my answers.



**PATRICK MADDEN:** We really appreciate you talking with us. We're going to let these students go to their busy lives and less important things, but thank you so much.

[applause]

**MC:** Thank you. Wow, I don't think I've ever received applause over the phone before. It was a wild experience. Good luck with your writing!