



BOOKS

"You become a guardian of secrets": Inside the world of celebrity ghostwriters

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*Rigorous interviews, NDAs and calls at all hours, the reality of telling a celebrity's story is as complicated as you might expect. **Stylist** speaks to the women who do it for a living.*

It's a summer day in Brooklyn, as New York City mellows into fall, and [Caroline Cala Donofrio](#), a 38-year-old writer, is on

FaceTime with *Queer Eye's* [Tan France](#). Yorkshire-born France is in a hotel room, wrapped in his dressing-gown, ready for their scheduled, twice weekly call. Donofrio is prepared but open – the conversation could go *anywhere*. Elsewhere, on the opposite side of the country in sunny Los Angeles, another writer, [Michelle Burford](#), is waiting patiently in superstar [Alicia Keys's](#) trailer as she wraps up filming *The Voice*. It's their first meeting, yet there is a delicate understanding that Keys will go on to divulge her most authentic, raw self to Burford. "You have to get comfortable with each other pretty quickly," she smiles. "Bringing all of your fears and frailties to the process – as well as their own."

This is the world of celebrity ghostwriters: the highly skilled collaborators who transform the life stories of the planet's most famous A-listers, entrepreneurs, politicians and influencers into bestselling memoirs, asking for little or no credit in return. It's also an industry that's currently soaring; sales of arts and sports biographies and autobiographies have risen 45% since 2019, according to data from Nielsen.



Sharon Stone is one of the few celebrities thought to have written her memoir herself

As the pandemic reinvigorated our love of books, social media ensured that the public's – and therefore publishing's – appetite for platformed celebrities, who bring with them millions of potential readers willing to pay for more juicy insights, has soared. [Britney Spears](#) has reportedly signed a \$15 million (£11m) deal for her autobiography while [Prince Harry](#) received a reported \$20 million (£16m) advance for his, which was ghostwritten by JR Moehringer, the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer behind tennis legend Andre Agassi's industry-leading memoir *Open*. Dave Grohl, Sharon Stone and Matthew McConaughey, meanwhile, are among only a handful of celebrities who have written their own books.

Yet, it's also an industry shrouded in mystery and non-disclosure agreements. For most writers (who usually come from journalism or publishing backgrounds), the route into the job is accidental. Burford's "collaborator" came on the scene this fashionable autumn for a short-term gig in August

career – the currently fashionable term for ghostwriting – began in August 2012, when a friend in publishing needed a fast and reliable writer and knew Burford was looking for a change of pace. A founding editor on *O, The Oprah Magazine*, and now freelance, Burford had, along with the rest of the world, watched 16-year-old American [gymnast Gabby Douglas](#) win Olympic gold in London. “I remember the excitement, as a spectator and a Black woman,” she says. Within weeks, she was on Douglas’s tour bus and given four weeks to turn around her memoir. “I became good at finding quiet hotel alcoves for our conversations,” she says. Producing 60,000 words in 16 chapters was a step change, though. “I had to learn to stretch out the story, find through-lines and subplots, gather and re-excavate anecdotes, and then figure out what to reject.”

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HONEST CONVERSATIONS

Thirty hours of meetings, across six months, is as close as it comes to an industry standard for a memoir collaboration, Burford and all the writers who speak to *Stylist* agree, but story-gathering is determined not by writers’ preferences but by clients’ busy schedules and publishing deadlines. For Keys, Burford was lucky to clock up an above average 80 hours between them, many in her recording studio, where the two would chat between breaks in tracks for her new album. “They allow me to enter a sacred space,” she says of the clients who open up their worlds to her, both literally and emotionally. Similarly, she wrote [actor Cicely Tyson’s](#) *Just As I Am*, published last year, from 100 hours of conversation over three years. For Toni Braxton’s 2014 memoir, *Unbreak My Heart*, she relocated from New York to LA, renting an apartment for six weeks near the singer’s home. “She’d call and I’d just drive over. When she was busy, I’d sit in my apartment and write,” Burford adds.

When it comes to piecing these conversations together, Burford describes herself as a story architect who waits for the narrative to unfold. “I’ve had books where I write up two or three different beginnings,” she explains, adding that she shares credits on books including that of Keys and [US gymnast Simone Biles’s](#) *Courage To Soar* (2016), but like many in her industry, she is concrete on who the finished product actually belongs to. “They’re not my stories. I think of it like this: we’re building a house together – they are supplying the bricks and I’m arranging them.” That means being un-precious about edits. “They need to be able to tell me, ‘I don’t like this,’ without seeing a reaction that has them withdraw. My skin was thinner when I was writing under my own name.”



“I had one celebrity who would show up late, last minute or not at all and tell me to make it up or watch YouTube interviews”



The best collaborations, says Burford, can be summarised by one word: truth. “It needs to come from a raw, real place,” she says. “You don’t show up in interview mode; you show up as a human being. You have conversations. At the beginning of the process, I often ask, ‘What’s your intention in sharing your story?’ Another one of my go-to questions is ‘Tell me about a time in your life when you experienced true joy.’ That usually leads to a great story or powerful reflection,” she explains. “I like doing phone calls at night, too, when they’ve taken their wig and eyelashes off. There’s [an intimacy](#) you don’t get in the day. I’m not sitting across from the person the world necessarily sees.”



Donofrio, who has written for several high-profile people, worked in a Hollywood agency and then as a literary editor before embarking on collaborations. She asks for contractual clearance to talk about her projects within the industry as this helps her to get other work, while other writers sign non-disclosure agreements meaning they’re unable to discuss their involvement in the book at all. Of the 12 memoirs she’s penned, Donofrio chooses only to talk publicly about Tan France’s and Tyler Cameron’s. “Tan was one of my first really big projects,” she says. The pair worked on *Naturally Tan* for six months, FaceTiming once or twice a week. “We would talk and I’d extract stories. He would show up in his robe with his coffee in hand in a hotel room,” she says, “He’s very graciously credited me in almost every interview.”

While some might consider getting credit to be a battle in itself, getting the


job in the first place is equally tough. The interview and selection process to tell a celebrity's story can be laborious. Even those at the top of their game are subject to what the industry calls a "beauty contest" or "vanity parade", with three or four (who frequently know each other) auditioning for a book. It might involve meeting the celebrity in person, over video call or writing sample material in their voice. Researching a potential client can obviously help to prepare, but the real test is whether they get on and the likability has to work both ways. Donofrio has recently turned down an athlete and an entrepreneur because [they didn't connect](#). "Real magic happens when you find a person whose voice and story is, in any way, similar to your own," she says. "My greatest fear is handing someone a book and they'll say, 'What the hell is this?' But it hasn't happened yet."

HORROR STORIES APLENTY


For an industry that is so lucrative, the pay for a ghostwriter varies hugely. British-born, US-based agent [Madeleine Morel](#) has provided collaborators for over 50 *New York Times* bestsellers. Her top A-lister deal earned her writer \$500,000 (£400,000). More commonly, says Morel, a ghost can expect to earn around \$200,000 (£160,000) for a public figure in the world of business, politics or showbiz; \$50,000 (£40,000) for less marketable fields, like health and fitness. Figures can be lower in the UK, where the market is smaller. Working on several books a year, then, can be far more financially rewarding for writers used to small wages at prestigious but low-paying publications.

While many ghostwriters describe a good collaboration as immensely rewarding, there are horror stories aplenty too. To Donofrio's mind, these mostly derive from deals where the celebrity is not yet [ready to write their book](#) or the idea is being forced on them by an eager agent. "Worst case [scenario] is someone who is closed off, afraid that every word they say will be taken the wrong way, doesn't respect the process or an agent has told them to write this book for their brand," she says. Morel's writers, meanwhile, have run the gamut of authors who treat them "like glorified secretaries" to those who give feedback on every semicolon. "If you're lucky, you have someone who collaborates and respects what the writer brings," she says. "A good ghost is someone who can capture the author's voice, with no ego and a high pain threshold."

For one writer, who has worked with high-profile actors throughout her career and has asked to remain anonymous, the process hasn't always been easy. "I had one celebrity who, for months, I would chase for time," she says. "They would show up late, at the last minute or not at all and tell me to make it up or watch YouTube interviews." Another writer remembers her client backtracking on the truth after her first draft. "There was one who sacked their previous ghostwriter because they didn't like what they wrote. This person hadn't made peace with their own story. When they saw it on paper, they offered me an entirely different version." While a third had to walk away due to a client being flat out disrespectful. "I was hired by a jet-set billionaire who had no respect for my time or process," she says. "We had to give up altogether."



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When a writer-celebrity pairing works, though, it can become all-consuming. [Hilary Liffin](#), who has written for [Miley Cyrus](#) and counts Tori Spelling’s *Stori Telling* and Jay Shetty’s *Think Like A Monk* among her 14 bestsellers, describes the process as immersive, working on one if not two at a time, in different stages of interviewing and editing. Liffin, who at this point is a pro in the field, advises writers interested in getting into collaborations to focus on establishing work under their own name first, alongside building relationships with book editors. “I came to it through writing a couple of my own books,” she explains. “This proved I could handle the scope of a book-length work, but I would say it’s more common to come to collaboration through journalism – writing profiles or articles to develop areas of expertise and eventually writing for and with people in that field.”

She establishes her own writing patterns, and while she refuses to pull all-nighters, she keeps lines of communication open, allowing clients to offload their thoughts at any time. “I don’t set hard boundaries with my clients,” she says. “That means texts and voice memos or emails in the middle of the night. The point is to link our brains. I love the puzzle: a person downloads their story and you capture their voice.”

It’s this kind of no-boundaries, call-me-anytime relationship that can, sometimes, lead to real friendships. For Donofrio, this is the case with two former clients to whom she grew close. “I’ve shared some lovely meals with former clients after their books were finished and was even invited to one person’s [Thanksgiving celebration](#).”

Reflecting on walking away from the experience, Donofrio captures a feeling, so familiar to ghostwriters, of handing back a story that was never hers to begin with. “Helping someone tell their story is a privilege and a profound act of trust, one that continues to amaze me,” she says. “You wind up becoming a guardian of secrets – a trove of personal anecdotes that don’t make it into the book, scenes you’ve witnessed and details that you alone carry.” It’s these details, extracted over months of conversation, [cared for and crafted into narrative](#) by ghostwriters that are, in essence, at the heart of the role. “It’s a deeply meaningful job,” she adds. “Often more gritty than glamorous, but all the better for it.”

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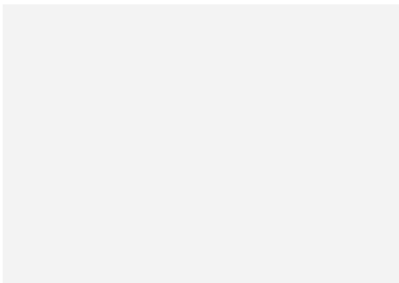


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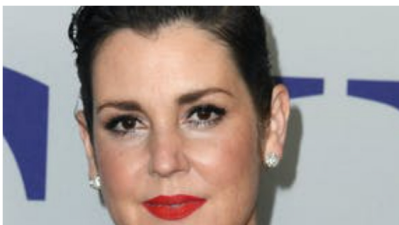
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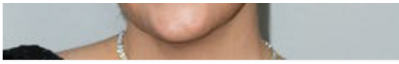
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