

INTERVIEW

Finding Peace Within Chaos — An Interview with Author Shifra Steinberg on Her Debut Novel "Imaginary Order"

by Carolina Miniati



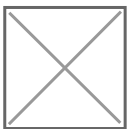
Shifra Steinberg © Carolina Miniati

Before Shifra settled down in Manhattan to attend Columbia University, she lived in more places than most people visit in a lifetime. Her nomadic life has proven to be a great chasm of insatiable inspiration and a way of finding herself. Today, as she wages war on her tea kettle, I sit silently in her bedroom, on the edge of her bed, staring up at her bookshelf filled with all kinds of ambiguous titles. Mostly quantum mechanics and philosophy. “Who is this girl?” I catch myself thinking. When she finally joins me, one hand balancing a steaming cup of tea, the other a cookie tin, she apologizes before plopping down next to me. She’s somewhat nervous, she’s never done this before. “The less questions, the better,” she says with a smile.

Carolina Miniati: You were 18 when you started writing *Imaginary Order* (published in 2022 by Austin Macauley). Did you always know you wanted to be an author?

Shifra Steinberg: Though I’ve been writing for as long as I can remember, the term author always felt like this far away thing, never quite attainable. Not to me anyway. What language would I write in? I’m Dutch, but I moved around quite frequently throughout my childhood and adolescence. English is, more or less, my second-and-a-halfth language, in a battle against German. Today I’d say English feels like my first language, but in the chronology of things it’s probably my third. So, that was my primary obstacle. The second obstacle was my low self-esteem. Both the bane of my existence, as well as what propelled my writing forward. As an act of self-preservation, I put all my self-worth in my craft. I didn’t think I was especially good at anything besides writing. Nowadays I am more confident, but it took time. In short: a small part of me always knew I wanted to be an author, it just took a while to accept it was attainable.

Carolina: So writing has been a part of your existence for a while... Do you have advice for writers battling with writer’s block or burn-outs?



Shifra Steinberg © Carolina Miniati

Shifra: Because writing has been such an integral part of my everyday life, I never saw it as something I had to do, but wanted to do. That changed somewhat upon starting *Imaginary Order*. Certain sections of any project are bound to be more difficult than others. That’s when your writing schedule becomes your best friend. It’s different for everybody, but I can only write in the mornings, the earlier the better, and never without a big cup of coffee. Find when works best for you. Set a daily word count goal. Especially if you are struggling with a burn-out, to which I am no stranger, I suggest making short term objectives. Because finishing a

novel is such a long term achievement, it can feel like walking up a mountain on a treadmill: no matter how fast you run, you'll still in the same place. Be kind to yourself, but not too lenient.

Carolina: Let's talk more about your debut novel, *Imaginary Order*. I love the title, what's the inspiration?

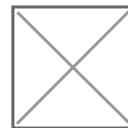
Shifra: Thank you. Before *Imaginary Order* it was titled *The Mirror Stage*. Both derive from the same theory, namely, Jacques Lacan's three stages of identity formation — the first being the formation of the ego in the mirror stage. Essentially, it's the birth of our sense of personhood and individuality. It's when we first understand the "I" which makes us, us. Of course we have no memory of this pivotal period, it usually occurs around 12 months, but because the novel deals with the severing between mother and daughter, I liked the image it brought to mind.

Carolina: Interesting. I see you have quite a stack of books here for someone who just moved to the city. Do you derive most of your inspiration from reading? If so, which books?

Shifra: Reading, art, music. However cliché it may sound, inspiration hides within everything, you just have to take the time to look for it. Anything analyzed to its very essence can bring forth an immense sense of revelation and beauty. On the flip side, it can also mold you into an incredibly anxious person. Sometimes you just have to let things happen and go with the flow. I'm still learning to strike a balance. As far as literature goes, I've been reading a lot of my classmate's work lately, which has been highly inspirational. And then there are the books which have forever changed my brain chemistry: *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker is one, then *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl. Or *The Soul's Code* by James Hillman. I love Russian literature too. Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Bulgakov. I like Brian Greene's science books a lot. Also Sean Carroll, David Deutsch. I'm still hoping to run into Brian Greene on campus.

Carolina: Your writing feels very European to me. Has your style changed since moving here? And what made you relocate to the chaos that is NYC?

Shifra: Since moving here I've been told my writing sounds very European. It's too early to tell whether that has changed. I moved just four months ago. It's impossible to live in a city like New York and not be affected by it at least marginally. Throughout the first few weeks I found it difficult to stick to a writing schedule. I couldn't find peace of mind anywhere. I'm used to small cities and even smaller villages. The chaos that is Manhattan, as



"Imaginary Order" by Shifra Steinberg

you said, took a real toll on my mental wellbeing, to the point wherein I simply could not write anymore. When deadlines forced me back to the keyboard, I did notice some changes. The words do not come to me as easily as they once did. I need to be in a flow state in order to write well, but there's nothing flowy about the city. And to answer your second question, I relocated because I'm studying at Columbia. In a very short time I've met some incredible and truly inspiring people. So, no regrets.

Carolina: Unfortunately, we are at the end of our interview. Thank you for the time, and I look forward to reading your other projects in the near future.

Shifra: Thank *you* so much. I'll make sure to send you anything decent.