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SHONDALAND STAFF

Five Women Working With Words


From the television we watch to the words we read, here are five women using language in amazing ways.

BY LAURA STUDARUS PUBLISHED: SEP 6, 2022

The average person speaks about 7,000 words a day and hears between 20,000 and 30,000 words — and that’s not even counting the number of texts, tweets, articles, and books that we see. Experts estimate that the number of written words a person reads per day clocks in at around 100,000. All this is to say, in one form or another, we’re communicating almost nonstop.

That means that language, and the way that we use it, matters. Yes, we’ve seen words become even more weaponized in our fractured world, but words can also be used to unite us, create a sense of inclusion, and carry us across cultural divides. Being able to express yourself is a form of power, which is why this month we’ve gathered together five women doing just that. From the writers of television shows that we love to the poets who illuminate our desires, to those working to unite cultural ideas, here are five amazing women of words.

Akshara Sekar, screenwriter and producer

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COURTESY OF AKSHARA SEKAR

Akshara Sekar is still at the beginning of what promises to be a long career. However, the writer, who has worked as a story editor on 10 episodes of the Netflix hit *Never Have I Ever* and has written an additional two episodes, has also already worked on the upcoming HBO Max animated series *Velma* and sold a project to Sony. While entering the entertainment industry can seem insurmountable to even the most talented writers, Sekar has a secret weapon: her time spent as an assistant to Mindy Kaling, who also serves as executive producer of *Never Have I Ever*. Even now, she thanks the former *Office* star for encouraging her drive and creativity.

"Mindy is the most hardworking person I know," Sekar says. "She is always hustling, for herself and for others. I learned how important it is to write what you know but also what you want to see. ... The industry is constantly changing, and having any kind of job stability often feels impossible, but if I can take one piece of advice from Mindy, it's that the best way to make sure you have opportunities is to create them for yourself."

Why she loves pop culture

"I have loved television my whole life, to the point that my parents had to cut our cable because they thought it was a hindrance to my education! Much to their dismay, I streamed everything illegally on my computer. I think they're over it now that they can chalk it up to research for my future job. It was a joy to escape into the world of TV characters and feel like they were your friends. That sounds like I had no friends, but I swear I had friends. Which is also something someone with no friends might say! My interest in TV came hand in hand with my obsession with being funny. I remember feeling really proud any time someone laughed at something I said. And I still do! It's a really special feeling to get that reaction out of people."

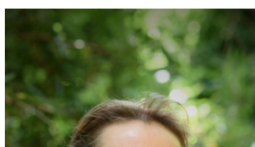
Her unconventional path to the writers' room

"It was mostly luck and a little catfishing! I created an Instagram for a character that Mindy and BJ [Novak] had on Twitter. After a year or so of posting, Mindy reached out via DM asking who I was. After I graduated college, I became her assistant on multiple projects, and it was like getting a master's degree in writing and producing. One day, Mindy was approached by Netflix to create a YA show about an Indian girl, and I just knew it would be my dream show, having just been an Indian teen myself. I was so grateful to sit in while she and Lang Fisher created the world of *Never Have I Ever*. After it was officially picked up, I sent them my script and hoped for the best. I know my path was only possible by having bosses who want to empower those around them, and I can't thank them enough!"

On the job that she's proudest of

"I'm only at the start of my career, but I would say *Never Have I Ever* is specifically special because it's the kind of show I dreamed about as a teenager. I really wish I had the chance to see someone like myself at the center of a YA comedy. Illustrating the specifics of a first-generation immigrant experience on such a huge platform can help normalize it for high schoolers who might not feel as seen as others. So many Asian characters on-screen have also followed the model-minority trope, and it's been an honor to help bring to life a family of messy, loud, confident Asian women. Also, it's just fun wish fulfillment to be stuck in a love triangle with a nerdy nemesis and handsome jock."

Ginny Tapley Takemori, literary translator





COURTESY OF GINNY TAPLEY TAKEMORI

After decades of experience as a freelance translator, [Ginny Tapley Takemori](#) can say one thing for certain: She loves language and worlds that can be created through reading.

“Reading works from other cultures can really broaden our perspective on life, and I am really excited to now be in a position to bring works of literature from Japan to English readers,” she says.

And certainly, Takemori has been a big part of that, including helping to bring Sayaka Murata’s smash-hit novel *Convenience Store Woman* to an English-speaking audience. But as she continues her work, she’s found that she’s working in an increasingly bigger professional community.

“There is more interest in translated literature generally — more people are buying and reading literature that has been translated from other languages,” she says. “I think a good part of the reason for this is translator activism — translators have been actively promoting their work, and translation in general, through events and readings, writing articles on translation, and generally making their work more accessible to readers.”

On realizing that she had a gift for language

“My parents were British, so my main language was English, but I was aware from a very early age of the existence of other languages and different ways of seeing and expressing ourselves. We moved to the U.K. when I was 5, when I promptly forgot my other language, but later in school I discovered I had a natural aptitude for languages and that I enjoyed them more than most of the other kids.”

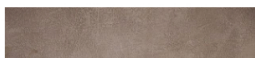
Her favorite professional relationships

“I am proud to be working with two women authors I adore. They are both fascinating and very different from each other. One is Sayaka Murata, whose first book in English, *Convenience Store Woman*, was a huge hit and is still popular today — a rare case of a translated novel crossing over to a more mainstream readership. We have since published two more of her books in English, the novel *Earthlings* and a collection of short stories, *Life Ceremony*, with more to come. She has an extraordinary imagination! The other is Kyoko Nakajima, who is a much subtler writer. Her first book in English was *The Little House*, focusing on a family in Tokyo in the run-up to World War II from the perspective of their maid. It was a huge hit in Japanese, winning the Naoki Prize and adapted to cinema by the famous director Yoji Yamada. We have since put together a collection of her short stories, *Things Remembered and Things Forgotten*, which I co-translated with Ian MacDonald.”

How she deals with words that don’t have a direct translation

“This really depends on the type of word or phrase and also the context. For example, the word ‘irasshaimase’ means, literally, ‘welcome,’ but it is called out by staff whenever a customer enters a commercial establishment such as a shop, restaurant, or hotel. We simply do not have an equivalent for this in English, since it is also a cultural practice that doesn’t exist in English-speaking countries. Normally, it only comes up in isolated cases where I can easily gloss over it by having the member of staff say, ‘Good morning,’ or even leave it out altogether. In *Convenience Store Woman*, though, it appears regularly throughout the book and almost becomes a keyword in itself. Glossing [over] it just didn’t work, and in the end, I decided to leave it in the original Japanese, which I think works well. Other examples might involve wordplay, which can be very challenging. I will always try to come up with some equivalent in English that might not have the same meaning or work in the same way in the Japanese but that fits the context and gets the humor across.”

Pauleanna Reid, celebrity ghostwriter and founder of WritersBlok





COURTESY OF PAULEANNA REID

Thanks to some seriously iron-clad NDAs, [Pauleanna Reid](#) can't tell you exactly whom she's ghostwritten for. (Although she assures you that you've read or heard her words before.) However, she praises the learning process that comes with telling someone else's story.

"It's best practice to pay attention to small nuances like variations of tone and breath patterns, but I also find it important to pay close attention to whether or not they speak in long or short sentences, and where they often pause in their speech," she says. "In addition to studying their content, I also host a series of recorded conversations where I'm able to ask specific questions that help me personalize their overall voice. During this time, I'm able to take note of words or phrases that are on their blacklist, as well as words, phrases, or jokes that are specific to them or their brand."

It's that attention to detail that Reid puts into her other endeavors as a blogger, journalist, and founder of [WritersBlok](#), a ghostwriting agency that has allowed a whole team of writers to shape the stories of celebrities, professional athletes, politicians, founders, and executives.

"My proudest accomplishment is being able to provide opportunities to other freelance writers," says Reid. "Knowing that the tiny idea I once had has afforded others an opportunity to dream bigger is the real blessing."

How she became interested in ghostwriting

"One of the reasons I pursued ghostwriting is because it gives me the opportunity to have a seat at the table with powerful players. We've all seen and heard about the rise and fall of politicians, athletes, founders, and celebrities for reasons that include — but are not limited to — poor message delivery and the inability to navigate cultural, societal, and generational sensitivities. Over the years, I've asked myself countless times, who is their adviser? What were they thinking? And each time, I was left puzzled. Years later, while I am still asking these questions, I am now in a position where I can do something about it. I have a lot of respect for the art of ghostwriting, and I take this work very seriously. As I continue to leave my imprint on the world, I hope to bring more attention to the profession so that every Black and brown woman and girl has a clearer path than I did and considers this career as a viable option."

On working as both a ghostwriter and blogger

"In my opinion, balance doesn't exist. I believe in work-life integration. But in all fairness, I had a very clear vision for my life quite early. It was also during a time when I didn't have a lot of responsibilities or a family to tend to, and so I took full advantage of that. Instead of partying during my 20s, I spent an incredible amount of time perfecting my craft. I knew what I wanted and exercised discipline to achieve it. Alongside my role as a founder, I am a senior contributor at [ForbesWoman](#) and have occupied this freelance role for six years. Nothing brings me more joy than amplifying voices of color in mainstream media. Whether by way of journalism, ghostwriting, public speaking, mentoring, content creation, or consulting, everything I do is a vehicle to shape and tell stories. I cannot imagine doing anything else with my life."

For women interested in a writing career

"What I've learned as a freelancer-turned-owner is the power of relationships. You need a contact to get a contract. So, even with as much time as you invest into refining your writing skills, don't forget to also invest in people, and build alliances with strategic partners. You'd be surprised at what amazing opportunities can arise from a simple hello. [Sallie Krawcheck](#) says, 'Play in traffic.' Since hearing them, I just cannot get those words out of my head. To achieve this, you should join online clubs and writing communities, engage with other writers and entrepreneurs, send introductory emails to creative agencies, and always provide a link to your portfolio. It also helps to be organized. I categorize

my contacts by name, title, and location, of course, but I also allocate columns to note whether or not they are a hot, warm, or cold lead, or a high or low priority. In addition, I also document at least one new thing I've learned from each conversation to help personalize future encounters. In short, you have to put yourself out there. Be your own biggest advocate and cheerleader, don't be afraid to let people know what your dreams are, and be ready for the moment someone connects you to the opportunity you've been waiting for."

Hilary Saunders, managing editor of *No Depression*



KRISTINA MORAVEC

No Depression is a magazine that covers the roots, folk, and Americana genres of music. But as managing editor Hilary Saunders sees it, while the journal is the opportunity to tell human stories through music, it's also an opportunity to tell human stories that highlight the traditions, cultures, and art that bring us together. Like a musician practicing her scales over and over, it's a goal that Saunders sees further fleshed out with each new issue, an idea she's always applied to her own writing.

"I never allowed myself to finish a piece of writing until it felt right," she says. "So, even if I have experienced more things in my life, or learned more things, or achieved more academic degrees, whatever I wrote in the moment was done when I felt like I had done my best. ... I've always liked that sort of idea of I'm done when I feel like I've communicated the idea to the best of my abilities."

How she fell in love with music journalism

"I was a musician before I was a writer — I went to journalism school, and I am currently a part of the National Press Club and the Society of Professional Journalists, New York City chapter. So, why [I chose] music journalism is because I have this overly romanticized and idealized vision about music and art and all sorts of creative expression. These texts bring people together better than most other forms. How else can you gather people who wouldn't otherwise be in the same place at the same time together? And so, I think that we can try to tell these deeply human, creative musical stories. And we can help share and celebrate the ways that we as complex humans are more alike than different."

Why word choice is important

"I saw a [tweet](#) the other day that was like, 'What if someone corrected their pronouns or how they want to be referred?' As an ally, the best thing that you can do is say, 'Cool, thank you!' Saying, 'I'm so sorry; I won't do it again!' puts the person who was affirming their identity in the position of validating someone else's emotions. It's so simple and can mean more than the words themselves. It's a reminder that language is always changing. And we as people and slingers and purveyors of language have got to be the ones who adapt language. That's how we feel about language at *No Depression* and particularly within the realm of music."

On the power of a great editor

"I have a theory that every person on Earth should have a therapist and an editor. I look at the editing process as collaborative and not combative. That's a really hard thing for a lot of people! And so, I do my best to try to communicate that, and I think because I've been a staff writer, a staff editor, a full-time freelancer, a part-time contractor, and a nonprofit communications manager, I have a lot of experience in the realm of collaborative work. I try really hard to empathize with whomever I'm working with and try to make the editing process more like building something or finishing something together rather than tearing down

someone else's work to rebuild something else.”

Rachel Wiley, poet



COURTESY OF RACHEL WILEY

Rachel Wiley is an accomplished poet who has released two collections, *Fat Girl Finishing School* and *Nothing Is Okay*, that explore her identity as a queer, biracial poet and performer. However, in addition to writing, she brings her words to life on the stage at national poetry slam competitions. As a former acting student, she sees a distinct power to performance.

“For me, a poem is rarely ever capital-F finished as much as it is either presentable or not,” she says. “A poem on the page and published somewhere is a presentable draft, and it exists in its own ways in that space. In performance, the poem can be a little more pliable. I can add and remove words for the sake of pacing or rhythm, and that brings the people in the room and their energy into the work, creating something unique to that moment.”

How writing has changed the way she views herself

“I definitely didn’t see myself becoming a poet at all. I spent a lot of time believing I wasn’t smart enough to be any kind of writer. Shout-out to undiagnosed ADHD! I went to college and studied to be an actor because I loved performing and was good at it, but I also arrived around this belief that because I wanted something so big and ‘impractical’ as being an actor that I shouldn’t want anything more, but I was also writing poems in secret. Eventually, with encouragement from friends and community, I slowly started sharing at an open mic I started going to in order to hide from my roommates at the time, and the next thing I knew, I was competing in slams. I found that with poetry slams, I stepped into myself in a way that I’d previously only known as an actor, and I finally came to understand that I wasn’t just magic in theater, but that I carry it into everything I decide to do.”

On the Pink Door Project

“Initially, Pink Door was meant primarily to hold space for people organizing and, in some cases, holding whole slam scenes together without getting the kind of nurturing that they were often providing or expected to provide to others, and to spend time nurturing their own writing. As the retreat grew and the opportunity arose to help with it, I was all too happy to do so. We unfortunately haven’t held a retreat since 2019, but I am excited for the potential to bring it back with some new perspectives and practices learned over the past few years.”

What’s next

“I have a couple manuscripts I’m working on. Now that the world seems to be reopening, I am looking forward to getting back to in-person readings and workshops. ... Like a lot of things, just putting time and energy into relating with the people willing to do the same with me, seeing how we respond to mistakes and hard lessons, and how we show up for each other when needed.”

Laura Studarus is a Los Angeles-based travel writer who has contributed to Fast Company, BBC Travel, and Thrillist. Follow her on Twitter at [@Laura_Studarus](#).

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