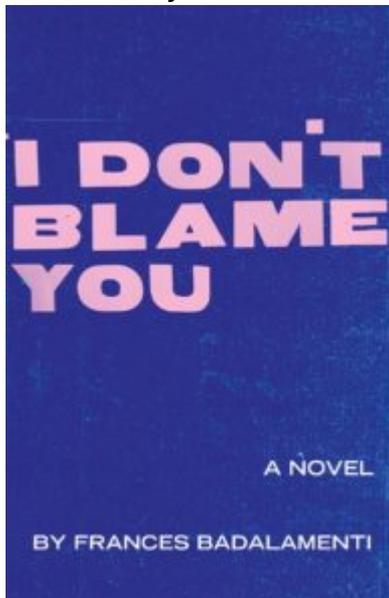


An Interview with Frances Badalamenti, author of *I Don't Blame You*

written by Guest Contributor | May 30, 2019



I met Frances Badalamenti in the summer of 2014, at a writing workshop in Portland. We were both working on book-length projects, and I was immediately struck by the electric quality of her character's voice on the page: rough around the edges, yet open, managing to access deep wells of pain, loss, and grief with humor and frank, unvarnished candor. Those pages have now become Badalamenti's debut novel, *I Don't Blame You*. The story follows Ana, once a latchkey kid in suburban Jersey—born to a chain smoking, tormented mother—who must confront her tormented childhood at the cusp of two pivotal events: the loss of her parent and the birth of her son. It's a story about the whole ugly muck of growing up and letting go, through that aching and electric voice I'd first encountered back in Portland.

But this book represents so much more than its value as a physical object. *I Don't Blame You* is the product of a years-long exegesis in both craft and process. After our workshop, Fran and I spent the next five years sharing our experiences—all the ups and downs and nitty gritty of trying to get our stories out in the world. The crapshoot stuff no one tells you about. We corresponded over email to talk about that process, her debut novel, motherhood and art monsters, privilege, ego, and doing the damn thing that is writing. — Jennifer Hope Choi

JC: Something writers rarely talk about with transparency is that Sisyphean act of getting a book published, and all the tricky steps and stumbles along the way. Your path was rather untraditional, from going without an agent and forming relationships directly with editors, to now publishing by your own rules with Unsolicited Press. What did you learn from the process?

FB: My book trajectory for *I Don't Blame You* was super untraditional and unconventional, you are totally right. I remember finishing the first draft, which happened rather quickly—maybe I finished in six months—and thinking that somehow this raw manuscript would somehow just turn into a proper published book. I was so naive and had no understanding of the publishing landscape. But I had friends who were established writers and was able to get my work read by a few agents. Nothing came of it, but it started me on a path toward learning how things work in the book world.

I would say, maybe after the second draft, a few independent publishers showed interest. I had started to submit without an agent. But again, nothing came of it other than getting a sense of the submission process, learning about independent presses, finding out what agents read the kind of work that I write, forming relationships, things like that. This process went on through multiple drafts of my book: the agents, the publishers, the rejections, the possible leads. It was a wild ride and through all of it, I really grew as a writer and as a person, because I was forced to come face to face with some heavy-duty, ego-based, emotional layers. It has been about a five year process from start to finish. I've worked with some amazing master teachers, met some great people at workshops (like you!) and feel like I get it now. When my current publisher, Unsolicited Press, came along, my book was deep in the drawer. I had finished a draft of another book and figured maybe that first book might not see the light of day for a while. I was fine with that. It taught me how to write a book, how to make sense of the book world, how to grapple with rejection; and I had a sense of closure through all of that. I had also taken on a full-time job, so creative writing wouldn't be my main focus—not for a while at least. The weekend after I started my job, I got an email from my publisher that they were interested. It's been a wonderful process working with them. They are supportive and allow me a good amount of creative control, yet they do all the backend things that I have no idea about. It's been pretty dreamy.

JC: One of the many things I really admire about the way you approach writing is how mindful you are in finding, and maintaining, emotional balance—cutting the difference between the urgency to establish your career and working your ass off to bust out a draft quickly and do the hardest part (getting your tail in the seat and write), but also knowing how and when to be kind to yourself, because the process can take such a toll emotionally. So when you say “heavy-duty, ego-based, emotional layers,” what do you mean exactly?

FB: What I mean by that is how our writing can be so tied into who we think we are as a person (the ego). When I first started writing seriously and with the intention of having a book published some day, that outcome was so much a part of who I was as a person. So when I would get rejection after rejection after rejection, I really came head to head with how connected that rejection was with how I truly felt about myself. It would feel like I was being personally rejected, that a publisher or an agent did not want me. My work and my ego were the same thing. So through a lot of interior work and therapy and all the self care bits (and doing tons of ass-in-chair writing), I have learned how to create a safe distance between my ego and my work. It's not as

painful and emotional anymore, because it's not me anymore. I make the art but the art does not make me. And a big part of my process of uncovering and unraveling my own psyche through my work has been the tremendous need to take care of myself and like you said, to be kind to myself. This work is very hard. It can be very counterintuitive and awkward to take care of ourselves, but it is crucial in being a good person and not an art monster.

JC: Okay, do you mean art monster like *Dept. of Speculation* "art monster"? Or just someone who becomes a solipsistic beast in order to create their art (or maybe they're the same thing...)?

Speaking of novels we love: I have this perhaps false notion that writing fiction might be (at least emotionally) less taxing; that even if it's essentially based on real events or pulled from the frame of your own life, abstracting the story from the "I" somehow makes the telling of it—for lack of a better word—easier. When I first read a section of what would become *I Don't Blame You*, it was a memoir. I was struck by the voice—searing and clear prose that had a distinct edge, sort of unvarnished and raw in a way that I hadn't quite encountered before in literary memoir, channeling the latchkey kid you once were, growing up in the rundown, scraggly environs of Jersey. Now the book is a novel. When in the process of getting this project published did you decide to change directions and why? What did you do in order to alter the narrative, and how did you find that revision process when shifting the perspective into fiction?

FB: I totally stole that term "art monster" from Jenny O'fill. It has really become an archetype for me. I see an art monster as someone who becomes so over consumed with the need to be seen and heard by others that their art and their ego are fused. It's really off-putting to be around people like that, and I don't believe you have to become an art monster (or a solipsistic beast) to make good art. A great example of this type of person is Dustin Hoffman's character in the movie *The Meyerowitz Stories*. We all know people like this. They crave attention through their work and they end up neglecting relationships, dealing with so much depression and anxiety. They are always going to feel empty. They are the hungry ghosts who are never going to be fulfilled.

Now, back to me, ha!

The book was a memoir until the final editing process. My publisher had noted on the inside page of the edited draft that it was fiction, so I wrote and told her that even if that was a mistake, I would like to keep it that way. But I don't think it was ever really a memoir. I just thought it was a memoir because I wrote so close to my personal experiences. The truth is that I was simply creating stories from my own lived stories. The front story narrative is that my mom died when I was about to become a mother—that can for sure be considered memoir. But all the backstory that I drudged up around my childhood and adolescence, some narrative around my family of origin, things like this—is fiction in the end because so much of that happened so long ago. Those memories became stories. I like to use autofiction for this genre because we could go on forever trying to articulate the subtleties of fiction and memoir. The publisher calls it a fiction/nonfiction hybrid.

And yes, shifting the perspective to fiction has really stripped away a big layer of vulnerability for me. I have an out now. I can say that these difficult things happened to the protagonist and not to me directly. I am able to see my own messy, lived experiences through an outside perspective. In terms of the actual narrative, I changed the names of people and places and I gently altered some of the storylines. And I have to say, this whole process has gotten me really excited to get back into the book that I have been working on for the past year or two, which is also a narrative based on lived experiences. Although, I have nuanced a lot more detail in that book.

JC: *I Don't Blame You* begins with a tension of life and death: the main character, Ana, pregnant with her first child, and dealing with her mother's imminent passing. Your son Remy was born before you began working on this book. So many of my writer friends are *just* getting to a point in their careers where they're at what feels like the peak of their powers—hitting a stride, but preoccupied in how that intersects with the years they're able to conceive a child. I was wondering what you think about how motherhood factors into your writing life. Of course, people find ways to balance family and work (tale as old as time), but there's a fear that becoming a mother demands the loss of individual identity that especially takes a toll on a woman's creative aspirations and endeavors. How do you balance writing with being a mother and partner? What would you say to anyone worried about waiting too long to have a kid in favor of prioritizing their writing career?

FB: I had always been a writer, but I didn't truly allow myself to write until after Remy was born. And then, I had no choice but to write. I didn't grow up with parents or teachers who saw talents in me, which I believe was because it was the culture desert of '80s-era Suburban Jersey. I think they all thought that I was just a weirdo. But when I lost my mom and soon after, when I became a mother, I was overcome with all these super intense emotions. That's when I turned to writing properly for the first time in my life. I wrote a shit-ton in Remy's early years. I wasn't working and my husband was off being a normal person in the world. Instead of allowing myself to become super isolated like a lot of new moms do, I put together a babysitting co-op and sat in cafes putting my feelings on the page. So because of my privilege during that time, I was granted the time to write and really my identity as a writer and as a mother took root. That time was very challenging. I hardly slept. I had so much anxiety from losing my mom and being a new mother. I resented my husband for going about his normal life like nothing changed. But when I would write, I would feel this sense of freedom that I had never felt before. And my muse was my pain, so while there is fear for a lot of women that their muse will go away when a baby comes, I would say that becoming a mother will become the inspiration.

Now that Remy is older and pretty self-sufficient and now that my head is pretty much sorted out from those intense early years, the balance has become not about motherhood and writing, but it's more about making money and writing. You and I have both taken on full-time desk jobs over the past year and I am sure you would agree with me, those JOBS (not unlike SOBs) are way harder to balance with writing than motherhood. I haven't written much new shit in the past year. I edited my book and I did a big interview project

that will come out in [The Believer](#) later this year, but I haven't had the energy to express myself the way that I'd like to.

So my advice to anyone who is grappling with the idea of having a kid and how to balance parenting with their writing, I would say: Work your ass off now and save up a shit-ton of money so you don't have to get a brain-sucking JOB. Focus on establishing some kind of child-care plan so you can be in your own head for a few hours a day. And don't grumble so much about being a parent when the kid comes, because you've done this to yourself, you dumb-ass. Having a kid is scary as fuck, but there is nothing worse to me than hearing people bitch and moan about how they can't get their shit together because of the kid. Having a child and also being a writer or artist of any kind is a true privilege. This really hit home for me one day when I was strolling Remy around my neighborhood, feeling super bad for myself because I was sleep-deprived and lonely and I couldn't call my mom for support because she was dead. And then I saw this woman wearing a bread factory uniform, loading three screaming kids into a car. It was a very sobering moment. After that, I stopped feeling sorry for myself because I am privileged AF.

JC: Speaking of JOBS, you and I are similar in that we're looking for that perfect-fit-money-gig that isn't soul crushing but allows us space to create on what is a liveable and comfortable salary. Because we know the fallacy that just anyone can be montarily stable by writing books (cue laugh track), how do you navigate the financial side of writing? You've held many different types of jobs over the years. What worked/works best for you? Does that perfect-fit gig even exist?

FB: I'll tell you what works best: having a benefactor and not having to need a JOB. For about ten years, my husband worked and made the money to support us while I took care of everything else. It was a brutal 1950's straight couple hell-hole in many ways, but I was able to write a ton and I would never have given that up. In the past year, things shifted for us financially and I had to go back to work. It was fine at first—the pleasures of routine and the joys of camaraderie—but now it sucks and I have an exit strategy. I plan to work for myself and am currently developing that business plan. I feel like if you are smart and savvy enough, you don't have to live the cube life. So much time is wasted at those JOBS when the time could be spent writing.

JC: When I first read a section of this book years ago at a workshop, what jumped from the page was the distinctness of your voice, which in any of your writing, in *I Don't Blame You* or memoir and essay, thrums throughout. We've talked before about how you're drawn to reading edgy, raw voices in the vein of Ottessa Moshfegh or a recent memoir you loved, *Sick* by Porochista Khakpour. What is it about that writing style that you find so alluring? How do you craft and create that seemingly effortless nuance on the page?

FB: Some people tell me when they read my work that it sounds like it's me talking. I have a very transparent, no bullshit, in-your-face voice both on and off the page. I love human pain and grit and struggle, because I've lived through a lot of very hard things and I enjoy the relatedness that comes through with certain writing. I wasn't physically abused and I haven't had to

endure serious illness, but I've certainly lived through neglect and verbal abuse and the loss of two parents. Plus, I have always been drawn to the human condition, which definitely shows up in my writing. But I have to say, I don't craft anything intentionally. It just comes out the way that it does, which is almost impossible to explain. I think it's the unconscious part of creativity. I do allow myself to be vulnerable and have grown to feel comfortable with the uncomfortable so maybe that's part of it.

JC: Now that you've got the book in your hands, how does it feel to have this come out in the world? What would you want to Fran ten, fifteen years ago if you could about this process?

It has been such a great process. The book feels sweet, safe, pretty. I don't feel weird about it at all, which I feel means that it was ready to be out in the world. I am ready. If I could go back in time and give myself advice it would be to be as patient as possible. I would say that you have to go through all kinds of things in order to make a book. I hear people say that putting a book out is like birthing a baby and I don't think that's true at all. Any asshole could make a baby if their body lets them and if they have the right ingredients. But putting a book into the world takes a lot more than human nature. So I'd tell myself to accept the fact that I might write a book and maybe book may never see the light of day. I'd say it's all about acceptance of the unknown. I'd say if I felt anxiety about if the work is good, if anyone will ever read it, if it will ever be published— I'd say to work through those feelings and that they will eventually pass. I'd say to keep writing no matter what gets in the way because so much will get in the way.



Frances Badalamenti was raised in Queens, New York and Suburban New Jersey, but she now lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband and son. Her work can be found at *Mutha Magazine*, *Hip Mama*, *Longreads*, *Vol.1 Brooklyn* and forthcoming in *The Believer Magazine*. *I Don't Blame You* is her debut novel.



Jennifer Hope Choi is the recipient of the Carson McCullers Center's Marguerite and Lamar Smith Fellowship, the BuzzFeed Emerging Writer Fellowship, the AHL Foundation's inaugural Wolhee Choe Art Writer's Grant, and a 2019 Pushcart Prize Special Mention. She is also a Bread Loaf scholar and an Aspen Words fellow. Her essay, "My Mother and I Went Halfway Around the World to Find Each Other," is anthologized in *Best American Travel Writing 2018*, selected by guest editor Cheryl Strayed. Her writing has appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Guernica*, *The American Scholar*, *Bon Appétit*, *Lucky Peach*, *BuzzFeed Reader*, *The Atlantic*, and elsewhere. She is currently working on a memoir.