
Bestselling Author Joyce Maynard Dares To Be 'Shameless' And Speak Out

Story highlights

- A woman has NO right to tell her true story if that story reflects poorly on an important man.
 - the degree to which women still face reproach and dismissal when they dare to speak their truth — lies at the core of what I do
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Part of the series, "Women, Leadership and Vision"

As a midlife woman and 30-year professional who knows what it feels like to be told to “be quiet” and stop speaking out, I resonate deeply with -- and admire -- other women who’ve found the courage to be daring and “shameless” in telling their life story. Especially when thousands of people find that authentic story deeply unsettling and even enraging.

Joyce Maynard is just that type of woman, and writer. Joyce is a *New York Times* bestselling author of 12 previous books, including the novels *Labor Day* (adapted into the 2013 film starring Kate Winslet and Josh Brolin and directed by Jason Reitman), *To Die For* (a 1995 film starring Nicole Kidman, Matt Dillon, Joaquin Phoenix and directed by Gus Van Sant) and the bestselling memoir, *At Home in the World*.



In *At Home in the World*, Joyce told her true story, and the message she received from the world was this:

A woman has NO right to tell her true story if that story reflects poorly on an important man.

Her new book, *Under the Influence*, is the riveting story about the true meaning – and the true price – of friendship that also offers a provocative exploration of emotional seduction, guilt and sacrifice.

I caught up with Joyce recently to explore her writing, her courage to share her true story that made others call her “shameless,” and her highest visions as a writer.

Kathy Caprino: When did you start writing? What led you to make it a career?

Joyce Maynard: My mother had a saying, whenever I’d come home to report on something hard that had happened in my life: “At least you can write about it.”

And I’ve done that all my life.

At the time, I didn’t write about the hardest things. Top of the list: my father’s alcoholism, which we never mentioned.

But my mother instilled in me, very young, the idea that my words mattered, and she gave me the tools to be a writer. For me, writing was a way to open up my world. I started sending essays and articles to *Seventeen* Magazine when I was 14 or so. When I was 18, it seemed like a sensible thing to do, to write a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* that said, “I’d like to write for you.” He wrote back with an assignment.

That was a valuable lesson, by the way—and one I try to impart to young people. You don’t have to wait for anyone to give you a job. I’m a big believer in taking control of my destiny when I can. That starts with identifying what you want, seeking out the individuals who can help you, then letting them know who you are and what you’re good at.

Caprino: Tell us about the differences in terms of your writing process between the two genres of memoir and fiction—that is, how you decide what you’re going to write about, and how you piece the story elements together?

Maynard: The two are not so different as you might think. Whether I'm telling the story of something that happened to me —my experience of leaving Yale at age 18 to live with Salinger, for example, or the death of my mother, or falling in love and getting married for the second time at age 59—it's always about telling a gripping and powerful story, and doing that in a way that allows a reader to know and care about the characters.

When I'm writing a novel – whether it's *To Die For*, about a woman who plots with her teenage lover to kill her husband, or *Labor Day*, about a young boy witnessing a love affair unfold between his lonely single mother and the escaped convict hiding out at their house over a long hot Labor Day weekend, or my new novel, *Under the Influence*, about a woman who falls under the spell of the wealthy, charismatic but ultimately toxic couple who befriend her — one thing remains a constant: My job is to make a reader care enough about what happens to my characters that they can't stop reading.

Whenever a reader tells me she or he has stayed up all night reading one of my books, I know I've succeeded.

Caprino: *At Home in the World* is published in 17 different languages. Clearly, it had mass appeal. Please discuss the criticism it faced, and also the praise it received as a coming of age book. Tell us what happened with the book that you didn't expect? What did it teach you about how our society experiences powerful women who speak up, and how that has informed what you teach other women?

Maynard: People who haven't read *At Home in the World*—but read *about* it—often describe *At Home in the World* as “the book about J.D. Salinger.”

Well, it's not. *At Home in the World* is a book about me. Specifically, it's about a small-town girl from an alcoholic family, with big aspirations to make her way in the world, and how she found her voice.

When I was 18 years old, a very famous and important-seeming man 35 years older than I, who presented himself as the possessor of all wisdom, wrote me a letter. He wrote to me in the voice of Holden Caulfield—the character he’d created, telling me I was the most special and wonderful girl he had ever encountered, and the most wonderful writer.

Eleven months later—having left my school and my family and my world to be with him—he told me I was no longer worthy of his love or acceptance. And because I was so young, and unable to recognize my worth, I allowed myself to believe he must be right. It was a devastation.

It took me 25 years – years in which I wrote books and raised children and grew up — to give myself the permission to tell that story. When I did, the literary world exploded with outrage. How dare I speak of a great man—a literary icon, so much more important than I, who had made it clear he wanted “privacy.” What were they saying? *That a woman has no right to tell the story of her life, if that life concerns an important man.*

That experience — and the degree to which women still face reproach and dismissal when they dare to speak their truth — lies at the core of what I do when I host the workshops I lead in writing one’s story. And it is the reason I continue to speak openly, in what I write, about subjects that remain, to some, off-limits.

When I published my memoir, the single word critics used to describe the book-- and me-- was “shameless.” An important aspect of my work is about encouraging women (and of us) that there is nothing shameful in telling the truth. Nobody should tell another person she has no right to tell her story.

Caprino: That’s powerful, Joyce. Please share about the experience of writing your newest book, *Under the Influence*. Do you have a good time writing novels, or is it a struggle every time?

Maynard: *Under the Influence* tells the story of a woman -- divorced, down on her luck, who has lost custody of her son after a DUI -- who, like my own young self in some ways, allows herself to let someone who possesses much more power to tell her who she should be. Over the course of the novel, she comes into her own strength and power and has to make a very painful and costly decision to be true to herself and her young son.

I loved writing this novel, in part because the story gripped me so much. I had to finish writing it so I'd know how the story turned out.

Caprino: *Under the Influence*, your ninth novel is a story about friendship and betrayal. It's also a story about an addiction to alcohol. You mentioned in a recent Facebook post that like so many women, Helen, the main character, had used wine to take the edge off the painful parts of her life, and in writing the book, you realized this part of your character's story was your story too. Are there other big insights you made from writing this book?

Maynard: Every book I've ever written—15 of them, now—explores some aspect or another of my obsessions and experiences, though when I write novels, I transform those stories into fiction. This time around, the loss of a treasured friendship was something I had lived through and suffered, myself, as so many of us have.

But alcohol – and addiction—is also a theme for me, starting with my father. And though I have been vigilant about my drinking all my life, and aware of the danger of my genetic predisposition, I had allowed the “socially acceptable” habit of a nightly glass of wine to expand into two glasses, and then sometimes three.

More of a concern than the quantity of wine I was drinking, though, was the particular way I was using wine—as a way of numbing out feelings that were painful. In my case, I know the desire to drink was intensified by the experience of my husband's diagnosis

with cancer, 16 months ago. I started using wine as self-medication. It made me feel better. For a while.

It was actually the experience of re-reading my new novel one last time, before it was published, that brought me to the conclusion I should give up drinking. That was six weeks ago. It has not been easy, but I haven't had another drink.

Caprino: What are next steps for you as a writer? Do you have a project in mind currently?

Maynard: I've got a new novel in the works, and a memoir about the journey of caring for a seriously ill partner. And as always, I'll be hosting my workshops, helping other people —writers and non-writers alike—to tell their stories. (Greece this summer. Lake Atitlan, Guatemala next winter.) There is not much that gratifies me more than to meet up with a person who has been carrying around an untold story for a few years, or a few decades, and help in the process of getting it told.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2016/04/13/bestselling-author-joyce-maynard-dares-to-be-shameless-and-speak-out/?sh=15530d5758a2>