

Fascination with the subconscious leads woman through two dreamy careers

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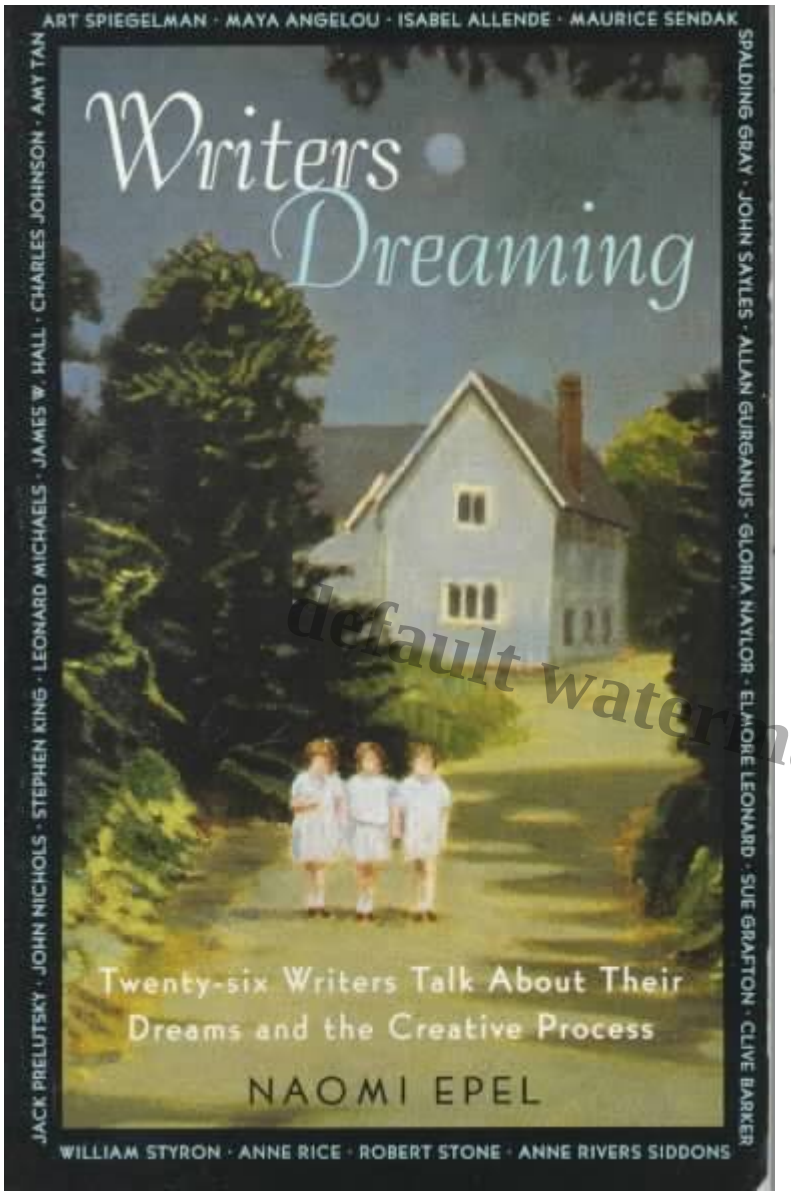
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Much to the chagrin of her schoolmates, she was the girl in the front row with her hand always in the air â?? asking questions. Naomi Epel is a self-starter driven by abundant curiosity.

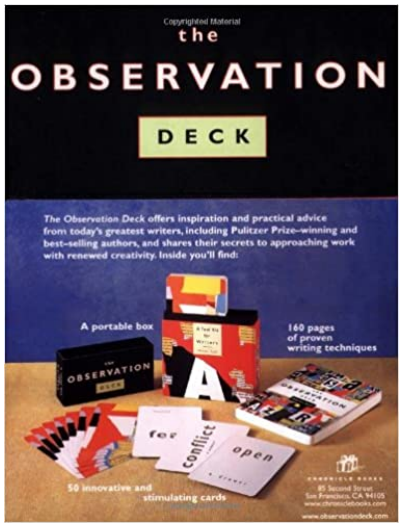
The questions she has been asking as an adult are about dreams and the subconscious.

â??Every dream has multiple levels of meaning,â?• said Epel, who has helped people explore their dreams as individual clients or in classes or large workshops around the Bay Area for over 20 years. â??After intensive inquiry into the dream, issues can often be identified, resulting in redress and growth.â?•

Backed by coursework in clinical psychology and her own research, Epel forged a confluence of careers around her interests: a dream consultant; an author writing about other authors and their dreams; and owner of a literary escort business ferrying writers to book signings and events.



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Her 1994 â??Writers Dreamingâ?• relates the influence of dreams on the work of some of the eraâ??s most heralded writers, including novelists Stephen King, Anne Rice, Isabel Allende, Sue Grafton, Amy Tan, John Sayles and William Styron. Her 1998 â??Observation Deckâ?• offers tips for kick-starting creativity culled from interviews with John Berendt, author of â??Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil,â?• film directors Wes Craven, Anthony Minghella and James Cromwell; violinist Isaac Stern; dancer Judith Jamison and others.

With Covid-19 shuttering her dream workshops and literary escort business, sheâ??s now trying her hand at writing fiction.

Epelâ??s career path was etched in the early 1980s when she volunteered at a residential treatment center for schizophrenic adolescents in the East Bay. One of her duties was to facilitate an activity called â??the dream temple,â?• an open discussion in which residents seated in a circle shared their dreams and got feedback from senior staff. For Epel, this was a launch pad for further investigation that became a road map for her lifeâ??s work.

â??Iâ??m a vivid dreamer; I love my dreams,â?• she said. â??I started taking classes, joining groups, learning about dreamwork.â?•

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Curiosity creates a whole new business

With the aim of satiating her curiosity, having fun and making a living, she eventually opened an office in 1988, specializing in the inquiry into dreams. She also began interviewing authors for her book and in the â??90s hosted the weekly public radio program â??Dream Talkâ?• on Berkeleyâ??s KALX as well as book talk programs on other stations.

A friendâ??s experience with a literary escort on a book tour led her into yet an additional career. The idea of shepherding writers around town appealed to her. She liked being around interesting people; she had a need for intellectual stimulation. Getting various gigs, she wrapped herself in learning and working the business. Armed with a list of media contacts, she flew to the 1987 booksellers convention in Anaheim with plans to start her own literary escort business.



After seven years in the business, in 2013 â??Naomi Epel and Associatesâ?• was incorporated. It became the leading agency escorting authors to their book signings, TV and radio station interviews, lecture series and even to lunch and/or dinner.

â??I adore mystery writers, journalists and food people,â?• she said. â??The worst are the self-help authors; they always need to practice what they preach.â?•

Epel has driven three presidential candidates â?? Al Gore, Pat Buchanan and Ralph Nader along with many other luminaries, dozens of journalists including Joe Scarborough, Ted Koppel and Chris Hayes; writer Norah Ephron; musician Mick Fleetwood; Howard Shultz (founder of Starbucks), and many

others.

She also held a series of author dinners â?? the biggest for Anthony Bourdain, which required four chefs for 150 attendees.

â??Work more fun than funâ??

â??Work is more fun than fun,â?• Epel quoted Noel Coward in describing her job. â??We all are on an adventure together when the writer is here, and there is so much intimate opportunity to converse with writers about their dreams when Iâ??m driving them place to place.â?• Upon learning of her other occupation, many were eager to do so.

Most of her literary escort work came from New York publishers. She had eight subcontractors, hired for their warmth, flexibility, and reliability â?? not to mention punctuality and nice cars. From the hub of San Francisco, authors couriered their celebrity wards as far south as Santa Cruz or north to Santa Rosa.

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Born in Detroit, Michigan in 1950, Epel remembers herself as a rebellious teenager growing up in an upper middle-class household, the oldest of five sisters and brothers. After a blow-out with the school administrators over some cuss words muttered to her mother in the hallway, she dropped out of her senior year and completed the coursework via written examinations. She later got her diploma through the mail.

When she left high school, she also left the suburbs, heading downtown to join a bunch of guys starting â??Creem Magazine,â?• Detroitâ??s underground paper. â??Yes, I was a hippie,â?• she said coyly. As the calendar editor for the Fifth Estate, another underground newspaper, she was able to get into the biggest rock concerts for free: Janis Joplin, The Who, and many others. A regular at the Motown review concerts, she saw the Supremes, Smokey Robinson, Martha and the Vandellas â?¦ even 13-year old Little Stevie Wonder.

The journey to the right job

She ultimately got into the University of Michigan but dropped out twice, moved to New York and then to California, intending to become a filmmaker. She managed to land a job at Scripps Institute of Oceanography in San Diego, where she worked on a short film about sea urchin fertilization. That helped her get into the University of California-San Diego, where she studied biology and worked as a lab technician, teaching assistant and gene sequencing researcher.

But this was all sidebar to her arrival in San Francisco in the â??80s. There was a lot of connective tissue between one job and another but none provided enough satisfaction on its own.

In San Francisco, she worked as a market researcher, private investigator, real estate agent and importer of Mexican artifacts. In her 30s, she â??decided she was a lesbianâ?• and partnered with a master blender in the spirits industry. She lived in Noe Valley from 1999 to 2002, then moved to Glen Park. â??I decided I wanted more trees and greenery. I like to garden and hike a lot, so I bought a house near the Claremont in 2010.â?•

Up until the Great Recession of 2008, the literary escort business was going great guns, she said. She had as many as 11 escorts on call; sometimes fielding as many as six jobs in a day. Even before the Covid-19 lockdown, she could still keep about six drivers on call; business was not thriving but nicely surviving.

With the complete shutdown of all her businesses since the pandemic, Epel is looking again to the book world for intellectual stimulation and economic support.

She is now writing and illustrating a book and game, an alphabetic adventure of sorts. â??Lula in Letterlandâ?• is the story of a girl caught in the alphabet looking for love and meaning. Each letter she meets can only understand words that start with itself, so is forced to alliterate. The game, â??Lulaâ??s Letterbox,â?• is designed to help people reconnect over the mail.

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