

doubt monster

Will I? Can I? Should I?

Creativity and the Moment: Is This Yours?

Formula as friend or foe



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Wouldn't life be grand if writers and artists could tap into a secret formula that would ensure success?

Sure. Just like it would be grand if the world woke up tomorrow and chose love over hate and compassion over intolerance.

Maybe someday...But until that day arrives, we stumble on, groping in darkness.

That said, every so often someone comes along and proposes a formula that's so compelling, you begin to wonder if there *is* a secret, after all, to winning the creative lottery—and it's hiding in plain sight, waiting for you to tap in.

Author and essayist [Aimee Liu](#) has come pretty darn close to [proposing a formula](#) that seems almost too perfect (and therefore, a bit suspicious). She calls it the **Three M's**, based on observations passed along to her by an experienced publisher:

- **Message**
- **Messenger**
- **Moment**

These concepts, aimed at the book publishing market, seem intuitively obvious, so I'll summarize them briefly.

The right **message** is “fresh and authentic,” “galvanizing,” “well thought out and defined,” Liu writes. It’s also “clearly and beautifully presented.” In other words, the message must be exceedingly well packaged: no sloppy writing, every word and concept carefully chosen and worked over.

The **messenger** is you, the writer. Do you possess the credentials, background, profile, and experience to deliver this beautifully crafted message? Liu refers to the author’s “stature” as well as their “appeal,” i.e., are they open to cheerfully mingling with the great mass of unwashed readers? Charisma helps.

And then comes the most intangible factor of all, the **moment**. Liu admits this is “largely out of your hands” and is “a moving target.” Basically, has your work captured the zeitgeist of the moment (*Between the World and Me*)? Are you writing what everyone is thinking? Are you offering fresh insights that readers suddenly realize they’ve been wanting (*The Tipping Point*)? I believe this is akin to putting lightning in a bottle. Editors and agents know it when they see it.

The **moment** also refers back to the messenger, in that authors who are not white, privileged, or Eurocentric are ostensibly having a moment, as publishing their work is considered a higher priority than in years past.

Setting Formula Aside

All of this makes sense and may indeed reflect the reality in publishing today. It’s also slightly depressing in that the formula is geared toward writers who want to game the market—to create bestselling books, score huge advances, and skyrocket to fame. (And perhaps more aptly, geared toward the publishers who live for this.)

This mindset is about corporatizing and commodifying art in a bid to appeal to as many people as possible (or perhaps, as many agents as possible) and launch bidding wars for hot properties.

As Seinfeld once famously said, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that...”

I admire writers who set their sights on this path and work hard to align those Three M’s in their favor. More power to you. And publishers gotta eat, like the rest of us.

But in every power game, there are winners and losers. And I wonder if creativity is occasionally the loser here—or becoming even more so. Personally, I’m never going to sit down and let the Three M’s dictate the subject, scope, genre, or topicality of my book.

When I wrote *Wrangling the Doubt Monster*, I didn’t do it with sales or market niches in mind. Certainly not while I was actively writing. I was gripped by a deep desire to communicate something I was feeling about self-doubt and how I struggled to live with it—and I wanted to share those feelings and ideas with the hope of connecting with others who felt similarly.

Only after I’d written the book did I figure out how to “package” and “market” it in a proposal to agents and publishers. That’s a necessity, of course, if you’re seeking to be traditionally published.

But it wasn’t a motivating factor at the project’s inception.

I don’t mean to come across as “holier than thou.” I’m not holding myself up as passing some kind of writing “purity” test that more market-minded writers fail.

Indeed, I tried, once, to write a novel that would, by design, meet at least two of the Three M's—message and moment. At the time, mermaid stories were in vogue, and it seemed the more outlandish the story, the better.

Well, I failed miserably at this self-imposed assignment. I love the book I wrote from this starting point, but it's a total mash-up of genres, as it features a mermaid-human hybrid crusading for justice while also being hunted by crazy cultists. It never found an audience and I can understand why: I missed the message *and* the moment, and I probably wasn't the right messenger, either (too old, too literary, too out of touch...take your pick).

But I told the story I wanted to tell, and that was a fun and challenging journey. So there's that.

Perhaps what I'm saying here is that for many creatives (myself included), hitting targets like the Three M's won't ultimately motivate us *or* result in sure-fire success. I guess I couldn't do it if I tried (having already tried).

I suppose for me the **message** will always be the story I want to tell; the **messenger** will never be other than the ornery, aging white lady I already am; and the **moment**? Well, when you figure that, please let me know.

My moment is now: To write, to feel passionate about the writing, and to let the future take care of itself.