

Clawing Our Way Towards Delight: A Conversation with Lyndsay Rush

By Gabriella Souza

Lyndsay Rush began writing poetry to explore the confluences of emotions that happen during life's most inexplicable moments. Instead of keeping these thoughts tucked away in her journal, Rush did the opposite—she started an Instagram account, [@maryoliversdrunkcousin](#), and posted her words daily. Within a few months, she'd garnered thousands of followers and a book deal in the process. Her debut collection, *A Bit Much* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2024) has become a *USA Today* bestseller

In *A Bit Much*, Rush blends pop culture witticisms, wordplay, and unlikely profundity in her quest to find joy, especially when life is most infuriating, anxiety-inducing, and heart-wrenching. She uses humor to analyze the female experience, including aging, the decision to have children, and the anger that exists when you are made to feel that you deserve less. She writes as if your funniest girlfriend is sitting on your shoulder, narrating the pitfalls and delights of being a woman. In addition to being a poet, Rush is a comedy writer and co-founder of the branding agency Obedient. Her work has been featured in *Reductress*, *McSweeney's*, *New York* magazine, and *The New York Times*.

During an exuberant phone conversation this fall, we talked about Doritos, what she's most nervous about revealing in her collection, and why she dedicated the book to Michelle Pfeifer. This interview has been edited for clarity.

The Rumpus: You began writing poetry on Instagram in 2022. Can you give us the origin story of your account, [@maryoliversdrunkcousin](#)?

Lyndsay Rush: I started writing poems by accident. My background is in comedy writing and in branding and copywriting, so brevity and saying a lot with a little has always been my favorite way to write. I never, ever dreamed about writing a novel or anything long form. In the fall of 2021, I was visiting the hometown of my boyfriend at the time, now husband. His parents still live in the house that he was born and raised in, and it was only the second time I had met his parents. He's got this big family in Alabama, and I'm from Minnesota and Chicago, so the contrasts in our experiences were comedic and meaningful, and I wanted to combine those two things in a way that I couldn't just be a joke. So, I wrote my first poem, "My Boyfriend is from Alabama," which is in the book. I decided not to change the title or barely anything about that one because it was so precious to me. After that, I was hooked. I fell in love with poetry as an art form because it combined my love of humor and my love of emotions and feelings. It felt like a very safe way for me to explore deeper, heavier things, because I didn't have to solve them. Not having to be definitive was very liberating, and being funny is the only way I'm ever able to be earnest.

I decided to start a dedicated Instagram account to give this experiment room to breathe. I thought, “Let’s just see what this is and if it resonates with anyone.” A tried-and-true marketing and branding device is to put a twist on something that people are very familiar with, and I wanted an Instagram handle that would instantly let people know what they were in for. Mary Oliver is the queen of observing and practicing the art of astonishment, but she’s talking about all these gorgeous things in nature, and I’m talking about Doritos and nail art. Being her drunk cousin was the funniest way I could think of it, even though I don’t particularly love alcohol jokes or bathroom humor. But the phrase “drunk cousin” was so funny to me.

Rumpus: Did you start by posting poems that you’d already written? Or were you using the Instagram account as an accountability tool to continue your writing practice?

Rush: Probably a little of both. I found that once I started, I was writing several poems a day, so I would write out a bunch of drafts, look at the ones that held my interest, and clean them up. Every morning, Monday through Friday, I would post a new one on Instagram. It was less a writing practice and more that I had so many that I wanted to share. The stakes felt really low, which allowed me to experiment with different styles.

Rumpus: How did your work go from poetry posts to a collection?

Rush: It happened very quickly. After “She’s a Bit Much” went viral, I started getting direct messages from literary agents, asking if I had representation. I’d only been running the account for six months, so it hadn’t really crossed my mind. But I took some calls, and then I heard from a literary agent who represents [Kate Baer](#), a poet whom I super admire. We talked and really hit it off. We put together a manuscript and went out on submission in January of 2023 and sold the book. I had to have the manuscript done by July of that year, because that’s when I was having my son.

I had to learn to write really fast. But luckily, I had a ton of stuff that I had never fully finished. When I started writing poetry, I was in a relationship, and when the book was finished, I was married, so I didn’t write a lot about dating. But I’d been single for all of my 20s and most of my 30s, so I dug into some of that. At first, I thought I would organize the book by topics, but it didn’t feel fun. I had the idea to organize them by mood and emotion, and then I was like, “Oh, that’s it!” Because people can look at the book and ask, “Am I feeling hopeful? Or do I want to feel a little bit enraged?” And decide what poems to read from there.

Rumpus: What was it like to put this collection together with a looming deadline?

Rush: Luckily, I get inspired often, which comes when I see an interesting word, or I think of a funny phrase. Or I’ll look back at my old Twitter and joke drafts and ask, “Is there more truth to be pulled from this?” It never felt like I had to sit down and force myself to write, because that’s

never what I have done with poetry. I've never felt like I can force good work. If it comes to me, I'll write it, which is a luxury, for sure. But the deadline looming was intimidating until we figured out the structure and I could envision what topics I needed to write about. It was also so intimidating to have a debut collection, especially because the whole process happened really fast. I finished the collection while I was pregnant, edited it right before I had my baby, and then I just had to wait because books come out so much later from the editing process. I had to tell myself that this collection didn't have to tell my entire story. That it didn't need to be reflective of my whole existence, or all of my work. This is not a lifetime achievement, it's just my first collection of some poems that I love. And hopefully, there will be more.

Rumpus: With marketing and comedy, the audience is such a part of the vision for the writing. How much did your background writing for an audience influence your poetry?

Rush: I didn't know my poetry audience for a long time. But as the account grew, it started becoming clear that people were excited by the idea of levity, joy, and delight for delight's sake. A notable turning point happened when I wrote the poem "[She's a bit much](#)," which was the inspiration for the title of the book. That is why I dedicated the book to Michelle Pfeiffer, because she shared it on her feed. I got a pulse very quickly about what would pop off. A lot of it made sense with the way that either Instagram users in general or my specific audience used Instagram at the time—as a way to find inspiration and motivation, or to feel better and to laugh. Mostly, I realized that people are very likely to share things that makes them think, "Oh, that's so me." Not everything I write is going to make 10,000 or 20,000 people feel that way. I remember telling myself not to think in terms of what is going to be the most viral or shared, and to post what felt true and funny to me. I wanted it to be joyful and fun.

Rumpus: There's a tendency for sarcasm, dry humor, or even the airing of unprocessed truths in comedy. That does not feel like your style. How did you craft your tone?

Rush: I thought a lot about that leading up to *A Bit Much* coming out, when I realized that people outside of my safe bubble would be reading this—people who don't get it, or who don't like it. I try really hard to make sure my work doesn't border on toxic positivity. I think there is a difference between hope and toxic positivity. Clawing our way towards delight, like I say in the book, is the way I view grappling with hard things. I don't want to be in denial that hard things are happening. I have a couple of poems in the collection that I wrote around the time that my dog passed away unexpectedly, which was two days after I brought my newborn son home from the hospital. It was a confluence of conflicting emotions. I talk about this in the poem "I Will Remind You of Your Joy," which says that laughter is not a betrayal, that it's okay to be reminded of what is around the corner, and that you are strong. Hope and joy helped me so much when I was going through that situation. It wasn't because I was burying my head in the sand—it was

because I was looking at it face on.

Rumpus: In Part Three—“When You Have Main Character Syndrome and Aren’t Looking for a Cure”—you talk about topics such as confronting the patriarchy, beauty and career standards, and the fact that women still don’t make as much money as men. What do you think is the role of comedy in dealing with that more serious subject matter?

Rush: Part three is the one that I am most nervous about being out in the world. It’s something that you can miss on Instagram, but in the book, you start to see common themes of my departure from my religious upbringing and my thoughts on feminism. There’s even one poem that’s about gun control—how I felt being pregnant, thinking that at any time, I could be somewhere and both me and my unborn baby would be in danger. At the branding agency I started with my best friend, we say that humor is the truth having fun. That has allowed me to play around with some of these heavier topics that are harder to talk about. At one point, the back cover description of *A Bit Much* talked about me grappling with whether to have children, aging, and dismantling the patriarchy. I was like, “Whoa, I’m nowhere near talented enough to dismantle, which isn’t necessarily the intent of my work. But I do want to roast some stuff.” So, we changed it to “roasting the patriarchy.”

You have to know something really well to roast it. I took a lot of familiar themes and poked at them because I feel like being able to say “I do not know” about big life questions is growth for me—especially coming from how I was raised, in a strictly religious setting. Poetry has allowed me to say, “I’m not really sure, but what about this, or maybe this, or has anyone thought about this?” It’s allowed me to stay in that gray area, which used to be a danger zone when I was growing up.

Rumpus: Do you consider particular poetry devices or techniques when you’re writing?

Rush: I really did not know a lot about form, which is an obnoxious thing to say, especially for people who *love* love poetry. One of the things that gave me permission was the rise of Instagram poets in the last decade, and the idea that maybe there aren’t rules when it comes to sharing poetry. I read some about poetry technique, but mostly just played around. I would break a line when I wanted to. When I saw someone else write in a list form, I was like, “Oh, that’s a fun thing to do, to find a specific rhythm without a line break.” If I was emulating anything, it was accidental. I started experimenting with indents. If I really want to, I’ll single out a word in a specific way. Because a lot of the endings of my poems are punchlines, I’m trying to make sure there’s the right emphasis, that people get the setup and the payoff. When I was going through edits, these very professional copy editors would ask if my breaking standard format was intentional. Almost every single time, I’d say, “Yeah, it was intentional,” and they let me have my artistic license. The one battle I lost was with an editor who I adore. I had put something about having no regrets, but I wanted to spell “regrets” wrong, as a joke. Sarah said she thought

the misspelling would look like a typo. I asked her if we could italicize it, and she asked me, “How much is this joke worth to you, and how original is it?” And I was like, “Not original and not worth it.” She won that battle.

Rumpus: Do you have an ideal reading experience in mind for this collection?

Rush: I like the idea of a reader opening it up and cherry-picking poems. That’s how I read poetry books—I will either look at the table of contents for a title that intrigues me or for a section that appeals to me. I’ll poke around and pick up the collection when I’m feeling the need for something that resonates. Of course, I’m happy if someone wants to sit down and read *A Bit Much* cover to cover, but I imagine it more like it’s on a reader’s bedside table, and when they’re feeling some type of way, they pick it up.

Rumpus: Where do you find inspiration?

Rush: I purposefully did not read any other poets while I was working on the manuscript, because I was terrified of accidentally co-opting anyone’s style. I love Kate Baer’s poetry, and I also love Catherine Cohen, who is a poet and comic. Her book of poetry, *God I Feel Modern Tonight*, came out two years ago. I love Jenny Slate, who is just so hilarious, and Casey Wilson’s newest memoir, *The Wreckage of My Presence*. I love reading funny women. Tina Fey’s *Bossy Pants* and Mindy Kaling’s and Amy Poehler’s memoirs, I read all of those as soon as they came out.

Rumpus: What’s next for you?

Rush: I would love to write another collection of poetry. I don’t ever see myself writing a book that is not poetry, or a children’s book. I would love to turn *A Bit Much* into something for younger girls.

Rumpus: I’ve heard from many writers recently, particularly women writers, that they are working on children’s books. What do you think is behind this trend?

Rush: For a while, I used to think, do we all want to write kids’ books because it seems easy? But now, I think it could be that as young girls, we found escapism for our imaginations in books, and I want to create that for someone else.

I think a lot about when I first felt like I was a bit much. As a pre-teen, you go from cartwheeling with your friends to realizing, “Oh, I might be a little bit different.” Or, “I might not be the right amount.” I write a lot about growing older and aging and I think a lot of women are trying to get back to childlike wonder and play—especially because we didn’t really know what we had when we had it. I feel like it has been such a powerful message for adult women who grew up feeling

like they were too much and that it was wrong for them to take up space and be themselves and be loud. So often I hear, “I wish I would have heard this when I was younger.”