

Bestselling authors, professional creatives and emerging voices in quirky dialogue about how they write and why it works.

The Writer's [Inner] Journey

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Author
Interviews

The 5-Question [Author] Interview: Brette Sember

by [Meredith](#)

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“...just like a tree, I’m deeply influenced by the ground I’m planted in and whatever blows by....” 1 retweet
—*Brette Sember*

Brette Sember is the author of *The Parchment Paper Cookbook*, published by Adams Media. She blogs about parchment paper cooking at www.NoPotCooking.com. She also writes the popular food blog www.MarthaAndMe.net. She is also the author of the upcoming titles *The Organized Kitchen* and *The Muffin Tin Cook Book* from Adams Media. Sember is a former attorney and author of more than 35 (you read that correctly!) other books, including *How to Parent with Your Ex*, *The Complete Credit Repair Kit*, *The Divorce Organizer & Planner*, and *The Essential Supervisor’s Handbook*. She is a member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP), the American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA), the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), the American Society for Indexing (ASI).



Meredith: As a food writer and chef, where and when does creation really start? The kitchen, the page...at 3 am when you wake up starving or after a meal when your belly is full? Do words come first, or ingredients?

Brette: It’s all about the ingredients. A lot of my recipes happen because I am standing in front of the pantry or fridge, just looking at what I have and thinking about what might go together. Sometimes when I am in the middle of working on a cookbook and need ideas, I take a leisurely stroll through the grocery store, looking for things I don’t have or things I haven’t thought of. I also page through cookbooks and magazines, looking for flavor combinations or ingredients I might want to try.

There are two kinds of recipe creation for me. One is necessity – it’s dinner time and I have to make something. These are the recipes that tend to gravitate to my roots – spins on things my grandmothers and mom made, as well as food I’ve enjoyed at a restaurant, or that my kids like. The second type is when I am writing a cookbook and spend the day in the kitchen developing recipes. This is when I push myself and become very creative. I have favorites from both groups that I make regularly.

As I cook, I write down what I’m doing and later I go to my computer and type up the recipe. Recipe descriptions come later when I am pulling the manuscript together. I usually piece together the intro throughout the process, clicking back there to add in a sentence or two that summarizes my thoughts on this particular cooking method as I achieve clarity. Learning to cook and document what I’m doing was actually a huge change for me. I’m from the dump-and-stir school because this is how I was taught. My mom and I can convey entire recipes to each in just a few sentences. When I cook for myself, I don’t measure anything, so I had to really discipline myself to measure everything, write every single thing down, and also set a timer, instead of just cooking until something is done.



Meredith: How do you know when enough is enough—an ingredient in a dish, a line in a recipe (or article) a chapter in a book? I'm wondering if recipe development and cooking, not just in a metaphorical sense but in real, tangible life, is anything like writing? Are there pieces that translate for you?

Brette: I have to say that it's easier for me to know when a recipe is done than a piece of writing. When a recipe is done, it just tastes right. Once something is perfect, there is nothing left to be done with it. With writing, I could always make little tweaks and changes forever, so I have to just decide when something is done and press send because every time I read it, I can make tiny changes. However, like cooking, I always just know when an idea is right or my approach to something is on target. I'm this way with decorating too (such as moving the furniture around or choosing paint color on the walls). I always say to my husband that I have to see it to know if it's right, but then I always just know. I like to say (drawing on my background as a lawyer) that it's like pornography – I know it when I see it (one of my favorite Supreme Court quotes). So, in that sense, writing and cooking are very similar. There's just this strong feeling I have when I know something has achieved what I want it to.

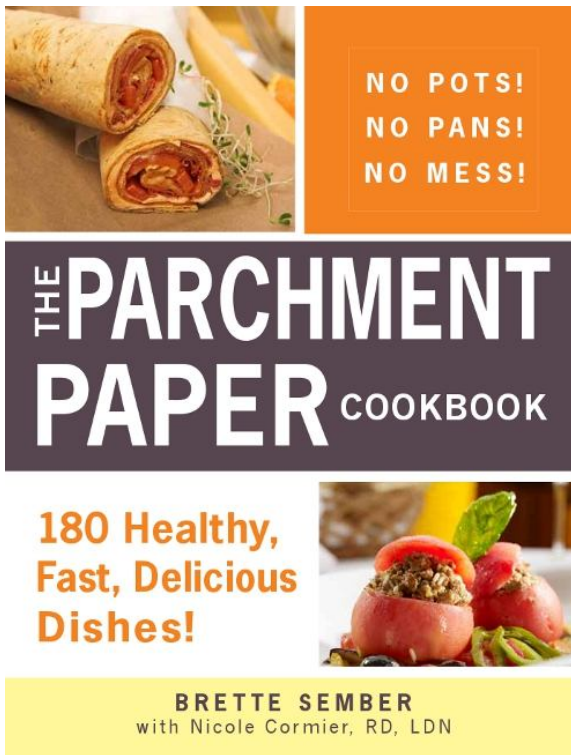


I have often thought of writing to be a lot like the actual cooking process. You have to let ideas and organization simmer, rise, or cook through. Often this means stepping away from a piece of writing and letting it percolate in your head subconsciously. When you come back to it, it has worked through a process and you know how to change it. It's really important as a writer to know when to walk away and let this happen. My mom (who is also a writer, I co-author a series of college textbooks with her) calls it the law of diminishing returns. You get to a point where you could work for 3 hours on something but if you walk away from it and come back tomorrow you can get it to where you want it in 15 minutes. I think there is an element of time to writing, just as there is to cooking or baking.



Meredith: When you cook does your mind wonder first what you would like, or what others would? Do you think about pleasing the crowd when you're first beginning? Now answer this question again, but rather than about creating a dish, tell us about creating work on the page.

Brette: I cook in different ways for different purposes. If I have people coming for dinner, I try to make food I know they will enjoy, so I consider their personal preferences and food styles. When I make dinner for my immediate family it's often a challenge because it can be really hard to find something both kids will like (one loves cheese, one hates it; one likes soup, one doesn't – you get the picture, it's like cooking for Jack Sprat and his wife at times) that I want to eat. Once a week or so I throw up my hands and just cook what makes me happy and try not to grimace at the chicken nuggets or processed cheese slices that come to the table or at the



mushrooms that are picked out of what I've made.

When I'm writing a cookbook, I'm thinking about providing a wide range of recipes that different people could enjoy, but which still somehow embody my personal food aesthetics. And the books I've written have been very narrowly defined by their concepts (everything made in parchment paper packets or everything cooked in muffin tins), so that has dictated what recipes I came up with.

With writing, it's a similar situation. I think about the audience. I never really write for just my own pleasure, although I almost always enjoy writing no matter what it is.



Meredith: Is there ever truly a balance between the left-brain activity of promotion with the right-brain activity of creation? For you, are they unified or polarized? Or something else?

Brette: In many ways they are quite different. I could write all day long, every day and never get tired. I find book promotion tiring sometimes, mostly because you never feel as if you've done enough. I've been at this for over 13 years though and in some ways the two skills have grown together because I usually think about the marketability and 'promotability' of a book idea when I'm evaluating it now.



Meredith: What fuels you creatively? Does the same thing always work? Are there standard ingredients? A shopping (ingredient!) list?

Brette: I have this vision of cooking as something like a family tree. I learned to cook from my mom and grandmothers and that influence is really strong. However, just like a tree, I'm deeply influenced by the ground I'm planted in and whatever blows by, so my cooking has been deeply shaped by my travels and experiences with TV, cookbooks, restaurants, and magazines. [I always come back to food as being part of a person's identity. You can try on other identities and incorporate parts of them \(which become part of you\), but at your heart you will always love the food that is "yours."](#) *[A-ha alert: isn't writing much the same way?!]*

Cooking was always a part of my life as a child and when I was in school or practicing law. It's so important because it physically nourishes your family but it also emotionally nourishes them. You put it on the table and it tells them you care. I also feel as though by cooking for them, I keep the cooking family tree going, imparting the wisdom of the women (and men who cooked) in my life to them so they can carry it forward. It connects us. I hope that my cookbooks say the same thing to the people who use them – this is who I am, this is what matters to me, and I am giving it to you because you matter to me and we are somehow connected.

I've had people ask me "how do you come up with your ideas for all the books you write?" I don't really know. They mostly just happen. I'm the kind of person who loves to come up with new concepts and approaches to things. It excites me to think of new and different things to write books about. Getting an idea for a new book is one of the most fun parts of my job. If I am deeply stressed

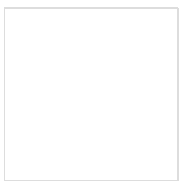
out, I usually am not in a position to come up with new book concepts. They usually come to me when things are a bit slower. I sometimes brainstorm to get there – writing down ideas that lead me from one to another. But many of the books I’ve written have just come to me as complete concepts.

BRETTE SAYS: “I don’t think I have a bone of fiction in my body, as much as I would like to write it. I love to read it, but I just don’t feel I have a made up story to tell. Instead, I gravitate towards writing things that help people do things or understand things, or that are just plain fun (for example, I wrote a quiz book for American Girl and a kids’ book about money and have some similar things in the works). I am the child of two teachers, so teaching comes naturally. I am a curious mix of logic (lawyer training) and creativity and I think that is embodied by the wide range of things I’ve written about.”

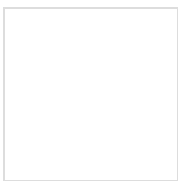
Brette lives in Buffalo, NY with her husband, two children, and two golden retrievers. Visit her at www.BretteSember.com and follow her on Twitter @brettesember.

[Thanks, Brette!]

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[Alexandra December 4, 2011 at 11:54 am](#)

Wow! Thanks for this interview. How prolific this writer is! When I was cooking with my granddaughter over Thanksgiving, I was, in a way, starting to pass on recipes to a new generation. I like the way it’s put here: looking at cooking as sort of family tree.

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