

[Book Journeys](#) Author Interview - Sep. 25, 2014

**Dr. Angela Lauria with Ramani Durvasula, Ph.D., author of *You Are WHY You Eat: Change Your Food Attitude, Change Your Life***

*"Write from a place of heart. Write what you know. Write what ignites you. Write about what keeps you up at night." ~Ramani Durvasula*

Angela:

Well, hey, hey, hey everybody. And we are back at Book Journeys Radio. It's another week and another book and we are, today, talking to Ramani Durvasula. She is a licensed clinical psychologist, professor of psychology, and most importantly for our show, she is the author of *You Are WHY You Eat: Change Your Food Attitude, Change Your Life*. So Ramani, thank you so much for being here.

Ramani:

Thank you so much for having me.

Angela:

Fantastic! So we'd like to get started just by giving people a sense of what your book is about. So tell us about *You Are WHY You Eat*.

Ramani:

To me, *You Are WHY You Eat* may represent one of the most, you know, unique and useful books. Not just in the weight loss shelf (I think it's actually a small part of it) but just a general wellness shelf. Every weight loss book out there is about don't eat this, eat this, work out like that. They're very directive. This book basically says you already know the answer. You've got it and it's really about listening to your body. Most of us eat when we're not hungry. If you could just stop doing that, the weight would probably just come off of you if you eat for lots of other reasons. So while it takes on the issue of emotional eating, it also takes on the issue of the fact that we tend to live our lives, just like we tend to eat food, when other people tell us to, when the world tells us to, just like when we live our lives like that. So a lot of people for example, will stay in a relationship way past its shelf life because everyone is saying you can't leave. We like you in that relationship. It's the same thing at the table. So this book is a really wonderful opportunity for people to sort of stop and take stock not just of how they eat but also of how they live.

Angela:

Hmm. Wow, that's incredibly powerful! So how did you make the decision to write this book? How did you come up with this idea?

Ramani:

This was a long process for me. I think that, you know, we started... in fact the original working title of the book was *The Dirty Plate Club*, which people said a lot of dark... But in fact

it was this idea that we're all raised on *The Clean Plate Club* - eat everything on your plate even if you're no longer hungry because you're supposed to, even if you didn't put that much food on it. That's where it started. What I noticed with a lot of my clients, my students, even myself, is that we tend to eat blindly. At the same time, I noticed that I and everyone else seem to be living blindly. Now I myself have lost 85 lbs. which gave the book... it's sort of like a little bit of truth behind it in terms of life. It's quite... it's one thing to never have struggled with weight and write a book on it. It's quite another to understand why, day after day, this is such a struggle. So it really came from my own experiences - myself, my students, my patients, my own children. And then the story of my own life, many of the things that happened in my own life - my divorce, my decision to run my career. And so I thought other people need to hear this because I'm tired of watching people beat up their bodies, beat up their minds, and beat up their souls. I want them to live according to the expert in them, which is themselves. So that's where the book came from.

Angela:

So that's a pretty personal story that you just told. But when I look at your credentials, you seem sort of, ahh, very well educated in the States. Can you talk about your training and your background, maybe? (Because we didn't start off with a bio.) So why don't you, kind of, talk about your background and your training and certifications and degrees, which there are many of, and how that applied.

Ramani:

I view myself as like a four-headed psychologist in some ways. I did my undergraduate work at the University of Connecticut, proudly it's a wonderful university. And then I did a little research in New York City but then I got awarded a fellowship to come study at UCLA, which in my mind was the best program of its kind in the country at that time. So I packed up my little Toyota, drove out here and got my Ph.D at UCLA (did a lot of my clinical training at UCLA) and then I went on to become a professor, where still I am still a professor at California State University Los Angeles. So I really developed myself as a scientist and as a scholar and a lot of that really drives the book. And another thing I like about this book is it's not made up. It's actually based on science. But I also became licensed as a practicing psychologist in 1998. So I'm licensed to practice in California and that obviously gave me exposure, not just... on the big samples we work on research but individual people's stories. Then, I'm obviously a teacher, I'm a professor, so I get to teach students. And students may be the best teachers of all because they share their experiences and you learn to, very quickly, get a lot of information to deliver to people who know less than you. And finally, as a psychologist, I got highly involved in the media and in fact one of my big forays into the media world was as a psychologist on a weight loss television show for Bravo. And that subsequently... then there was another television show for the Oxygen Network called *My Shopping Addiction*. I've since done series for the Biography Channel and Investigative Discovery. I'm regularly on Headline News. So I also get to be sort of an expert voice for the field on a whole variety of mental health issues. That is what I mean I have four heads - I'm a teacher, a researcher, I'm a... sort of a... private practitioner, a therapist and I'm a media expert. And so that's sort of the

trajectory that I've been on and it has been a great one because it's never boring, it's never the same day twice. And all of that went to inform this book, which is why this is such a great clearinghouse of information.

Angela:

So why did you.. What did you want from this book? What were your goals writing this for yourself? Obviously for your reader you wanted them to understand this connection between, you know, your attitude and your thoughts and food. But what do you want for you?

Ramani:

Yes. It's such a great question, Angela. The reason it's such a great question is that authors do need to think about other motivation. And in this case, my motivation was very much getting psychology off that big ivory tower shelf that it sits on and making it usable by everybody. I think one of my big problems is here you put all these hours into the training of all these scholarly psychologists and we can't speak a sentence that anybody can understand. And yet we're sitting on all this really important information. So I wanted to take all that scientist stuff and make it usable, No.1. Ahm, you know No. 2, many times my own patients were leaving, saying, "Gosh, I wish I wrote that down." And I, oh, write a book and then they can take it home. Many people don't live in California, can't come see me as a therapist so there's a way to get the word out there. And I'll be honest with you, I mean, this is sort of a strange relation but when I was a little kid, I wanted to be an author. I always wanted to write a book and I thought, "Well, you get one shot at this life" and just like I pushed myself to weight loss and all these other things, I said, "Write your story. Write it and get it out there." And so it became very much a labor of love, which now, I'm actually working on a second book and then it sort of becomes an addiction once you start writing...

Angela:

Yeah. That's why we say books are like tattoos. You never stop at one.

Ramani:

You never stop getting it. And I have a feeling before I know it, I'll get everything up my face tattooed so I'm on my way.

Angela:

Yeah. So what, uhm, so for you, [what is] one [thing] you wish that you knew before you started your book journey?

Ramani:

Hmm. Ok. Here's such an interesting question. What I wish I knew and it's the one thing I've never been taught how to do, and still can't do, is how to sell a book. I don't know how to sell stuff. Nothing. I mean that's why I'm a professor...

Angela:

They don't teach that in med school?

Ramani:

Ahm, I'm sorry?

Angela:

They don't teach that in med school?

Ramani:

Yeah, you know, we don't learn that. I think we learn how to give it away for free and so I never learned that. And I have to say the writing of a book is the easy part. Selling it feels almost impossible because it is, especially in a world we're in. There's so many different ways to market something which you think would make it easier. But I think the public is saturated by stuff to buy, books to buy, concepts to buy. And I just did not know how to do it, and nor am I not independently wealthy. Few professors are. So I wasn't able to mount some sort of big marketing campaign. So it was very grassroots and I was very lucky. There's some supporters I had, the folks at the Today Show, Anderson Cooper, were wonderful about giving me a platform on which to talk about my book. But ultimately, you know, it's hard to sell a book. People don't read and consume information the same way they once did. I wish I knew more about how to do that. I don't know what I would have done differently 'coz frankly, it does require resources. And I think for every author out there that's listening, write the book for the love of the book. Do your best to sell it but again, write it for the love of the writing because for the marketing, either you know how to do it or you don't. I simply did not know how to do it.

Angela:

Right. What are some of the other things, so here's an interesting thing is, a lot of people when they write the book, they're thinking, "Ok, I'm gonna write this book, I'm gonna put it out there and people will buy it." Some sort of, "if you build it, they will come" thing. But then what they found out is that part isn't so easy, but there are a whole bunch of other benefits to being an author. Can you talk about, for you, what are some of the things that have come out being an author?

Ramani:

I couldn't agree more. And I think there's so many wonderful things, both of small levels and big levels. Like I said, it gives me something to give a patient or an interested person that they can leave with. So when it's 10 o'clock at night, they can read it and they get the information. The other thing it's allowed me to do is reach out to different kinds of audiences. Let me give you a great example. I had the pleasure of speaking to a large audience of folks at Universal Studios, so the wonderful people who work there, like everything from the concession stands to the offices and everything, talked to them about wellness and the lecture impacted a woman in the audience. And now this Saturday, I'm going to talk about the book with a group

of women who are living in homeless shelters or transitioning to more stable residential settings. I'm getting to outreach to groups in so many different ways, and getting so many different wellness messages out there, which I don't think would have happened if I didn't have a book to offer up to share. So it's allowed me to share my voice with so many more people, not just in the United States but also around the world. And so I think that that's been wonderful and so sometimes it's the individual conversations that feel the most transformative. I literally once had a woman approach me in a grocery store or something like that and she said, "You know your book gave me the courage to make the changes in my life I finally needed to make." I thought, you know what, if that's all the book did, I changed one life, it was worth every minute of work. So I think that it allows you to change people in a very, very different way. And you know what, it also makes me an interesting role model for my students. I work at a wonderful university that serves largely, uhm, first generation college students. So in me, then they see the possibility. I say there's no reason everyone of you can't sit down and write your story or write a book that matters to you. So I think you get to be a role model in a very different way, too. So all of these things came from being a first time, and hopefully second, third and tenth time author. Uhm, I just think it's a wonderful thing to do and in this world of self publishing, frankly, anyone can get out there and get their word out there which I think is wonderful.

Angela:

Yeah, absolutely. So let's talk about your writing process because you do not sound like a lady of leisure.

Ramani:

No.

Angela:

Doesn't sound like you're sitting quietly at a cabin... So talk to me about how you made time to write and what your writing schedule was like, and how long did it take? Did you work with an editor?

Ramani:

My writing process should be an inspiration to anybody out there, who says they don't have enough time to write a book. Like I told you, I have four jobs and I'm a single mother of two daughters. So I live in chronic chaos. And this book would be written sometimes an hour here, 30 minutes there. I decided to invest in a babysitter for six months, so I would feed my children, get them through their homework, and then while they played for a bit, I'd go work for two hours, and then I'd come down, put them to bed and work for another four hours. I worked a lot late at night. I'd work early in the morning. When I could, I would create entire writing days on the weekends, and those often made me anxious because, I was like, "Oh my gosh, you're here for the writing, this is your twelve-hour day" and I wouldn't be in the mood. I was like, "Oh, my goodness, if I blow this, this is gold," like I have to work on these days. And what I would do then is I'd break the task down to be more manageable. Instead of saying, write for

12 hours, I'd set a timer. I'd write for an hour, then I would go do something else. Whatever, could even be just washing the dishes or something, or go to the gym. And then what would sometimes happen is the timer would go off and then I'd be in my groove and I'd keep going. I would set myself a deadline of a chapter before I did something. And so, you'd be surprised. But I would say to anyone wanting to write a book, make it a daily practice, even if you all you do is like a minimum of 15 minutes a day. Everyday, your fingers hit keyboard, and you add to your book. And some days you have 12 hours, and isn't that grand? I think that's absolutely critical. And then, I gave myself one big reward. I actually rented a little house in Italy from a friend of a colleague and I went there. I had them shut down all wireless, and in this little house on the Italian coast I finished the book. And I was completely uninterrupted. And I didn't speak Italian. So that's how I did it.

Angela:

Wow that's pretty fantastic!

Ramani:

And that was like the gift to myself and I think some of my best writing happened there. But I think it has to be a daily practice. You have to find a way to schedule your life and again, even if you're managing kids and jobs and, uhm, you often have to sacrifice stuff. I'd often have to tell friends, "No, I can't get together. I have to get writing done tonight." So you have to make a promise to yourself to do it.

Angela:

Yeah. Let's talk about that. When you started your book, did you envision it as completed? Did you know it would be done? Did you say, I'm trying to write a book? What was your mindset when you started the project?

Ramani:

When I started the project, it was obviously just a proposal. And then, it got pitched to multiple publishers and then a publisher, the skirt imprint of Globe Peacock Press acquired the book. The nice thing about having a traditional publisher was they gave me deadlines. And if you gave me a deadline, I'm the kind of person that come hell or high water, I will meet that deadline. So I think having the external demands of a publisher was very useful for me because it was my first book, I didn't want to let anybody down. So I sat down, I got the writing done. In terms of the final product, I had a vision for what, so by the time it gets to the proposal stage, you do layout sections and chapters. It's almost like the framing of a house you're building. Right? You kinda know where the windows are gonna be, where the roof's gonna be, and where the rooms are. The actual writing is where you start put up the "true" walls, and the doors, and all that other stuff. And things got moved around. Something I thought it was gonna be chapter 3 ended up being chapter 16. We added chapters. We moved around content. We used graphics. So that was, like I said, that's almost like you "frame the house" before you really write the book and then you start filling it up. And that's how I approached most of my large writing projects, whether scientific articles or grants and

certainly a book. So I think that you do need a framework. That has to start you and then that gives you something to work with. And it also help you break the task down. So I had a vision for what it should be. I'll be honest with you, the book turned out a lot better than I ever dreamed. Once I started, it just bloomed into something more, which is wonderful.

Angela:

That is wonderful. So with your relationship with your publisher, did you have just one big deadline when the entire book was due, or like, did you break it into thirds or were you sharing parts with an editor along the way?

Ramani:

I think what the publisher did with me is what anybody should do in writing a book even if they choose to self-publish it, which was, I had mega deadlines and I had smaller deadlines and some of those were self-imposed. So the mega deadline was, I was very clear when the final manuscript was gonna be delivered. Ok. Then I was also very clear on when the entire full, first... 'coz we had to count the words and all that, would end up going to the publisher for full on line-by-line editing. And then in between that, they wanted to see chapters and sections to ensure that the "voice" was in there. So those were the sub-deadlines. I gave myself a personal deadline of one chapter per week for a certain period of time so I had my deadline. I had a mega deadline when this thing was going to be delivered to the publisher and there were sort of these sub-deadlines when they had to have it fully for copy editing, meaning you could not add another word to this book versus these subsection deadlines. And I think anybody writing a book really has to take a long hard look and say, "Ok, this is it. This is how it's going to be done." And it helped a lot to have those - the big, the medium and the small deadlines.

Angela:

And so when you were aiming to write a chapter a week, you know, let's say the week was starting, you just turned in your last chapter and you knew what your goal is, "My goal this week is to write, whatever, chapter 15." And then maybe something would come up that week, ah, maybe a sick kid or you didn't feel like writing, or you had one of your 12-hour days and it didn't go well. What were some of the ways that you would get back on track? What did you do when you would feel stuck?

Ramani:

Those "stuck weeks" were hard weeks because no matter what, I wouldn't let that weekend without the chapter getting done. And what it really ultimately meant was a lot of personal sacrifice - canceling with friends, not going to anything that felt, quote-unquote, optional, uhm, maybe not working out as long as I wanted. Really, you gave up a lot because I'm unwilling to give up time with my kids. Obviously, I had to go to work to, you know, draw my salary and so I would say, "Ok, you have dinner plans on Friday. The chapter's not done. It has to be done by Saturday. Guess what you're not doing on Friday night? You're not going to dinner." And I think that was really, and then I have Friday night to, what, work. And that was often enough

time to get the work done. So I think it was that while the book was being written, the book was like a third child. It became a priority. Other things I would sometimes do is that I would rely on the babysitter more. So tonight, you're also going to get some dinner, you know, so I can get through this part of the writing. So you would have to...

Angela:

Actually, I want to go back to this point of the book was like a child because I think that's a really good image that people can put in their heads. If your kid got an ear infection, you wouldn't be like, "Hey kids, stay here and scream at the babysitter. I'm going to dinner. I have plans." You're gonna cancel your dinner and you're gonna take care of baby. And when you make a commitment to write a book, you're gonna cancel your dinner, and stay home and take care of the baby because baby's not doing well. So I think it was a really good mindset.

Ramani:

And that's exactly right. It was my third child. Yeah, and that's how I treated it and I said no matter what, this has to remain a priority. And let me tell you, it was hard. There were weeks, like you've got to be kidding, Friday would come so fast, I'd always make myself promise it would be done by the end of the day on a Saturday and I would have that laptop on my lap in the carpool waiting line, at my child's basketball game. That thing was with me everywhere. If I had 20 minutes waiting at a doctor, I was writing. So I was squeezing it into every possible minute. The great weeks, I had a lot of time. And sometimes I'd get two chapters done in a week, which would give me a little breathing room the next week. So there were ways I would get around. But again, much as we're able to prioritize human beings in our lives, the book is a breathing living creature.

Angela:

So, uhm, did you ever get, just not know what you were gonna say, have some sort of writer's block? And was there anything that helped you get out of that?

Ramani:

Oh, I had writer's block every single day and I would do, sometimes I would talk parts of the book. So I'd say, maybe... so well. So at those times, I would actually dictate it into my phone or into a recorder, play it back and transcribe it because then I felt like I should talk and then write it, which is really useful. I would write, what I call crazy style which I start "vomiting" my words, complete stream of consciousness. Get it down, get it down, get it down. And I think that once I started getting it down, even if it was nonsense, nonsense started becoming good stuff. It was just a very act of sitting at the computer so let's say you're writing a section on choosing healthy foods. There are lots of healthy foods. Healthy foods are vegetables. I was writing like a first grader and then I'd start getting my momentum. It's almost like getting to the gym and starting to, you know, "I don't want to get into the treadmill." Just start slow and then before you know it you're writing at full speed. So it was never letting myself walk away from it, but whether it was dictation, whether it was typing stream of consciousness. Sometimes it



was writing bulleted points that I knew I would then be able to come in and fill in so I wasn't so overwhelmed what I'm going to say. I had my ten things I wanted to say. Subheadings helped me a lot with writer's block because then I didn't feel like I was having to write thirty continuous pages, but in fact I was having to write two paragraphs under a subheading, that made it more manageable. Then I could always jump to another subheading that felt more comfortable. But when it came right down to brass tacks I just couldn't get it together to write, I would change scene. I would walk. Exercise was huge because I would start daydreaming and I'd say, "Ooh, I get it." I would take a shower, believe it or not, before I do a lot of my thinking. So I would do something to change up the game. What I would try not to do is eat because that would sort of make me sluggish and it's exactly what I was writing about, telling people not to do. So I would do something different. Take a walk. Go to the gym. Take a shower. Those kinds of things helped a lot.

Angela:

Yeah, that's all really great stuff. So let's talk for a minute about, uhm, publishing. So you talked about the past that you had a traditional publisher. How did you find your publisher?

Ramani:

I had, at that time, I had a literary agent, a book agent, who liked the concept, felt like I had a decent enough platform through my television work. And then, she started taking it around town and I'll tell you about, probably, you know, many, many publishers said no. This one said yes. And the irony was the acquisitions editor of this publisher, of course, she had such "a great eye", of course I thought, she acquired my book. But she's got it.

Angela:

Brilliant woman!

Ramani:

It's either you got it or you didn't get it. And she got it. And uhm, as a result, we were able to talk in shorthand about the book from day one. So I had someone helping me sell this book. I've got to be honest with you, I don't know how I would sell a book to a traditional publisher had I not done that my first time around. And so that was very helpful to have somebody who kind of got it and that's how it got picked up and then it was off to the races. And that acquisitions editor remains a very dear friend of mine, you know, since she got it.

Angela:

And so the agent that you worked with, did you write your proposal to the agent? Did you write a proposal and send it to a bunch of agents or someone introduced you to an agent? How did you meet her or him?

Ramani:

I have a little bit of a convoluted process because at that time my agent was housed in the very same agency that my television agent was based in. And so, I already had, like I was

already interacting in that agency, then a third party said, "You should talk to this woman." And then I went and I met with her, and she got it. Like again, she was another person who sort of got it and said, "You know you really do have a great voice and let's get this out there." So, uhm, It was and I think that anybody who's searching for any kind of representation, whether it's a publisher, whether it's an agent, all of us are writing something that's a little bit idiosyncratic. I don't care if it's fiction or non-fiction. We're telling a specific kind of story. Not everyone's gonna get it. You want that person who represents you, who publishes you, to get what you're saying, the essence of it, and you'll know because they'll say it back to you, you know and say, "Ah, you get it." And without that I'm not convinced that anybody could ever sell your work, could ever sell your stuff to somebody else. If they truly don't believe in you, I think it feels empty, like, there are car salesmen who don't want to sell these cars. You don't want that as your voice for, again, for your own baby, so to speak. So I was very lucky that those people did get it and that's how it got through the process. And I hate to say it, it feels so random, right? I knew this person, then I knew that person because, once a upon a time, years ago, before I ever started doing TV, I tried to read a book and I started blind-calling and cold-calling agents and I got nowhere fast. I called thirty different people and most of them didn't return my calls or emails.

Angela:

Yup. Yeah, but that is all part of the process and building your platform is. An important key is you're gonna get an agent's attention.

Ramani:

Absolutely.

Angela:

So what's next for you? You said you have another book in mind.

Ramani:

I do.

Angela:

Would you go through the process the same way or is there anything you'd do differently?

Ramani:

Uhm, I don't know. And this is where, I'm gonna say this because I really want your listeners to benefit. My book did not make the New York Times list. It was not some runaway success. I'm not flying to Paris to talk to fancy people about my book. It had a very grassroots following. It did beautifully as an e-book. I'm very proud of how it did. I'm not a movie star. I'm not an athlete. I'm not a celebrity. I'm a bookish professor who gets to be on TV sometimes and so I think I did well with it. But I don't know that any traditional publisher on the planet is gonna take a chance on me now. And so I take the process of "Is this about selling a commodity or about the love of writing a book?" And for me, it's about the love of writing a book and getting

what I think is an important message out there. So interestingly, my next book is [in] a different space. It's a work... the things I work in clinically, which is relationships, and very specifically, people, particularly women, who get into relationships with really narcissistic men, and to help them not get in in the first place. If they're in, help them get out, and if they decide to stay in, help them prepare for what their life's about to look like or has already looked like. So it's a harder-hitting book because I spend a lot of my time talking people off the ledge of being with a really mean guy. And, uhm, I think that people sometimes need guidance or at least normalization. So it's really that book. It's very much a, this is how you deal with that kinda not-so-nice guy. And uhm, and I said it's a...

Angela:

Yeah, that's sounds like a very important book. I know a lot of people who... yeah.

Ramani:

And then, you know what, though... so many people stay, so that's why I'm writing it. And I love the process. That's the bottomline. I love the process.

Angela:

That is a fantastic advice. So we've got about a minute left and I know you get this question all the time. And so, every author seems to be asked, like, "Oh, I really want to write a book. How did you do it?" Like, what is your advice to somebody who comes to you and says that they really want to be an author but they haven't been able to make it happen.

Ramani:

Write from a place of heart. Write what you know. Write what ignites you. Write about what keeps you up at night, whether that's your grandmother's life story, that you love to cook, a fictional story that you've been carrying within you, about a time in history, about how to teach people to do yoga. You have to care about it and care about it deeply because that emotion and that passion comes out onto the page and that's what grabs people by the throat. A book can transform a life but it can only do that if you feel passionate about it. Once you have that passion just like we know, we walk through fire for a person we love. We'd probably walk through fire to write the book we love.

Angela:

Wow! That was fantastic advice. That needs to be the title of this program. That's what it all comes down to. I, uhm, I can't thank you enough for sharing that. Ramani Durvasula. Her website is [www.doctor-ramani](http://www.doctor-ramani). That's the word doctor spelled out. Dash or a hyphen and then ramani. R-A-M-A-N-I; [doctor-ramani.com](http://doctor-ramani.com). That is the website. The book you can find on Amazon is *You Are WHY You Eat: Change Your Food Attitude, Change Your Life*. Ramani, thank you so much for being with us today.

Ramani:

Thank you so much. This is a wonderful opportunity and I hope everyone goes up there and writes the book that they want to read.

Angela:

Write the book you want to read. Beautiful. Well, thank you again. We will be back next week at Book Journeys Radio. Changing the world one book at a time.