

Introduction: Hi, my name is Gina Atwater. I am Emory College class of 2006, Georgia native, and am a film and television writer/director.

Question 1: Can you tell us a little bit about your journey (and where your headspace was at) from your Emory graduation to your current role?

Response: So I graduated from Emory with a degree in Film Studies and Creative Writing. And I knew I wanted to be a screenwriter. But I wasn't quite sure how. Nobody in my family had been in the industry. So I had a lot of questions. And I also thought, I needed a lot more training, and I needed to be better at the craft and understand structure more. So I took a year off and I worked for Arts at Emory, actually, at the Schwartz Center as an intern, as a liaison between the student arts groups and the faculty and staff that fell under Arts at Emory. And then after that, I went to film school at Columbia University in New York. And there is where I realized that I was a director as well as a writer. I lived in New York for four years, made a few short films and then wasn't quite sure what to do, honestly, because New York's very expensive. And I knew that my tastes and the kind of stories I was interested in kind of fell in between. They weren't quite indie films and they also weren't quite studio films. And I felt like there were probably more jobs and more opportunities to make the kind of films I wanted to make, which tend to be very heavily focused on the South, very heavily focused on the Black experience in the US and also abroad. So I figured I needed to go to LA and a friend of a friend recommended me to become an assistant at Creative Artists agencies, which is one of the big agencies in Los Angeles and New York. And I worked there for five months. Very tough job, requires a lot. You can't just be artistically minded, you also have to be very organized and quick and thinking quickly. But after five months there, one of the agents there had seen a short film that I'd written and directed while at Columbia, and she recommended me to become JJ Abrams' assistant. And so I became one of two assistants that JJ Abrams had as a personal assistant. And I was his assistant from *Star Trek Into Darkness* to *Star Wars Episode Seven* in terms of movie times, that was about two and a half years. And the whole time I was writing on the side and at night and on weekends and showing my work to the heads of Bad Robot Production, which is his production company, to their film and TV departments and getting notes. And JJ and his wife also had me directing short documentaries for the Children's Defense Fund. So the whole time, I was balancing my assistant job with trying to make sure I had as many writing samples as possible when I was going to get to do what I really wanted to do, which was full-time writing. And finally after two and a half years, I had a good sample and one of JJ's shows called *Westworld* was greenlit at HBO and was picked up to series and they were starting a writers room. And I said, Oh my gosh, I really want to do that. So I gave my samples to Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, via Bad Robot, and became the writers assistant at *Westworld* for Season One, and stayed with *Westworld* all the way through season three and was up to staff writer for season two. So *Westworld* is my very first television job. I've done a couple other since and I'm now mostly in development on my own shows that I think I can talk about a little bit, but not a lot, because not a lot has been announced. But that's how I got from Emory to here.

Question 2: Reflecting on your journey from graduation to now, what were things that were unplanned/unexpected but meaningful to your growth?

Response: It's very tough. When you are having to be in a job that's not your end goal, that's not you getting to do what you love, principally. And you have a goal in mind of where you want to be, but you're not quite sure how you're going to get there or if the current job you're working is going to get you there. And it's tough to stay self-motivated. But you do have to be self-motivated, especially in the years when I was an assistant working in Hollywood, it was tough because those are 40/50/60 hours per week jobs. Those require a lot of mental energy. And so it's hard to go home at night and still write and it's hard to devote your weekends to doing what you love and writing knowing that, you know, you're missing birthday parties sometimes, that you're missing events that you know you'd rather be at but you know, like *oh my gosh, there's a deadline coming up for a screenwriting competition. I want to have my work to the best of its abilities, so I really can't do all the things I want to do now.* I have to pick and I have to prioritize, and I have to focus. And there will be a time when I'm going to be able to do all the things and see my friends more. And I remember calling home a lot. My parents are in Atlanta. And calling home a lot to get a boost of confidence and you can do this. And my mom gave me perspective a lot, she would say, *yeah, I'm sorry, you just can't do everything now but you're very good and you're going to get there. So just concentrate on what you need to do and have fun later.* And that would always give me what I needed to keep going. And I remember my dad as well. I remember once calling him from London, and I have no idea what time it was in the middle of the night in Atlanta, but he still picked up the phone. And I was just like, *I'm so discouraged, I'll never get to be what I want to be* and he listened and he was like, *you have to be patient, things aren't gonna happen right away for you. And the time in between when you're being patient, and you're working towards your goal, that's character building time.* And I'm really glad I got to have that time. Because now that I am a full-time writer, I really have to call on those emotions. I have to call on those experiences so that I have something to say. It's very, very important as an artist that you have lived life before you get to the point where you are a full-time artist. Because you need to have something to say, you need to have something to contribute to the world, you need to have character, you need to have a sense of what people are going through, you need to have lived. So if you're feeling like you're not hitting your goal, if you're feeling like you're stuck in a rut, embrace that time, embrace how frustrating it is, embrace how painful it is. Because it's making you a better person, for one. And two, it's making you a better artist, and it's going to make your art better. So it is a marathon, not a sprint. And you have to remember that with these art careers, it's impossible to know what the thing is that's going to hit, that's going to land you your big break, it's literally impossible. And that can be scary. But that should also be freeing, because it means it's going to happen. At some point, it's going to happen and no one has a story that's the same as anybody else's, like not a single person. And that can be weird and disconcerting because you can't have a checklist and you can't do what the person who came before you did. But I would encourage everybody to think of that as confirmation that your path is your path, and it's gonna happen for you. And it doesn't matter if you didn't get to do the thing that the other person did. Because you can literally have 1000 other ways to get to the place that you want to be.

Question 3: What kind of stories resonate with you?

Response: I tend to be drawn to stories that are coming-of-age. And I think that is because there were so many years where I wasn't sure where my life was going to go or the kind of person I was going to be. And a lot of questions, which I still have, are "Am I going to be allowed by the larger system to be the artist that I want to be?" Because there's so many barriers and so many people who have to say "yes" in order to get your idea from the page to actually being in front of an audience. It can be really discouraging to know that you have something to say but knowing that there are a lot of people with the financing, with the power to say whether or not your story goes in the air, and they're all standing in the way of you and the audience. And so sometimes it can be very frustrating and scary because you think, *I'll never ever get to be able to tell my stories, I'll never get to be able to say to actual people what it is I want to say.* And I think a lot of that does end up in my work, usually metaphorically speaking. I'm drawn to characters who are trying to figure out who they are. I'm drawn to characters who are usually a person of color, a lot of times in a predominantly white space, trying to understand what that means for them, trying to have a sense of self-esteem, a sense of self-worth in a system that is telling them that they aren't worth as much as their peers or counterparts. And I feel like those were things that I struggled against a lot, definitely in those formative years between Emory and now, of wanting to know what kind of artist I wanted to be and knowing that I was very attracted to stories that were not traditional. And knowing that I was being told time and again, that I wasn't commercial, that I couldn't be sold, that nobody wanted to see these stories. They weren't like four quadrant stories or things that young teenage boys wanted to see and so they weren't worth being on screen. And that can really hit you in self-esteem, that can really hit you in the head and the heart. But the struggle to keep going and to say, *No, one day it will happen,* I think definitely ends up in my work. And it's good too because the way a screenplay or TV show is really structured, it's not good if there's not a conflict. And so if you're feeling that conflict in your life, you're able to put it on the page, and anything without conflict, no one's gonna want to see. So it does all come in handy. And it does all inform the work.

Question 4: What advice do you have for your younger self?

Response: I wanted to stress that in creative fields, I don't think you ever quite get to a place where you were like, *I have arrived.* Because you're always going to be striving to be more creative, a better artist, a better person. And so I think it's hard because in this world, in this society, we want to have the checklist and then say, *Tada, I did it.* And you never quite feel that ever, especially in creative fields. And that's okay. And so if you are in a place where you're struggling, and you're thinking to yourself, *If only I could get to this position, then everything will be great and perfect and I'd be happy.* I just want to caution you because that won't be true, you'll get to that place and then you'll immediately be looking to the next place, and looking at that place to be what makes you happy and fulfilled. And so the happiness and the fulfillment is going to have to come from within, from yourself, from the contribution that you're making to the world and the people around you and the people that you've been given. And making sure that the life you live is also a work of art, and it's also the kind of thing that you're shaping as your legacy and not just the work itself.