

Beyond Books: A New Kind of Storytelling



By [Ashley Vercekaites](#)

We are all the sum of our parts, an amalgam of origin stories, myths, and fairytales. Every story we have heard and every story we have told ourselves, whispered or howled in the corners of our heads, becomes a thread in the fabric of our minds and our self concepts. As human creatures, we cannot help but be affected by the stories we witness around us. It is natural for us to take them inside, shelter them, give them sustenance, and then life in our own imaginations. For better or worse, we do not necessarily get a choice regarding what stories surround us from a young age. We absorb everything in our environment to an extent, and these influences become a part of our lives whether we like it or not.

Ultimately, it is my life's work to craft narratives through my music and my stories that enhance and enrich people's own

life stories. I remember long nights laying awake listening to albums from my favorite artists on my headphones – the songs of Bjork, Enya, Leonard Cohen, and Tori Amos pouring into my ears. Equally vivid are my memories of curling under the covers with a secret flashlight to illuminate the pages of my favorite books of mythology as a small child, then the pages of [Francesca Lia Block](#) and [Neil Gaiman](#) as a teenager. The musical and the narrative equally informed my inner world so it would only make sense that I would create [Beyond Books](#), a platform to marry the two storytelling forms together, bonded by the glue of visual art and technology.

The Beyond Books platform developed organically from the relationship that I share with my partner Alex. We met when he was in a writing program at UCLA, an Englishman transplanted to Los Angeles via Taiwan. His travels informed his writing and I loved to hear him read his work aloud as he was sorting through new ideas. We were friends first, sharing material with each other, testing out new songs and stories. Before we knew what we truly had together, we were separated due to visa regulations, time differences, logistics, and a very large expanse of land and sea. On one late-night/early-morning Skype session, I joked that everyone should have someone around to read them a story. He replied that everyone should be so lucky to have someone play them piano melodies at odd hours. An idea was born.

CREATING A NEW REALM OF REALITY

At the time, we had no clue what the future would bring. We created our first story, “The Hair Woven Rope.” A new take on an old tale: The story of a Rapunzel who saves herself. We agreed that it was far more exciting for women to have agency in fairytales. How had it been lost over time? Why as women do we have to learn that it’s up to men to perform heroics while we sit and wait?

The more we researched various versions of the story, the more we learned how Rapunzel had been stripped of her wits and agency. From that time on, we made it our mission to craft and create stories where women reclaimed their rightful place in our narratives. A friend graciously illustrated our tale, modeling Rapunzel after her gorgeous girlfriend. We performed it live that winter in Glasgow where Alex read the story aloud, just as he had on Skype. [Neil Gaiman](#) wished us luck on our first performance via Twitter when I joked about Alex's resemblance to him. I'm not ashamed to admit that I saved his tweet to this day and keep it for good luck.

The time came to publish our story but no proper publishing platform existed to accommodate the media we created. We could flatten our images and text to create a dull PDF, combine our narration and music into a flat audio book, and sell them together in some sort of a package, but none of that sounded particularly appealing or true to our vision.

On a lark, I posted on my personal Facebook page, asking if I knew anyone that would be interested in making a multimedia publishing app for musical fairytales. To my great surprise and delight, my friend Adam replied. We had been close as children, enjoying the same zeal for reading and making horrible sarcastic jokes. In high school, I remember seeing his band perform at the [Whisky](#), but I was not yet ready to share my music with others. Watching him, I wished I was brave enough to be in a band. But it wasn't until college that I opened up, and I haven't stopped since – [releasing albums and eps, music videos](#), and fun [photo shoots](#), playing in friends bands any chance I get. Adam told me he had been following my music career for a few years, quietly admiring my work. He explained that he had been working on app development for the past ten years and was interested in bringing my work to life. A team was born and [Beyond Books](#) took on a life of its own.

After a successful Kickstarter Campaign, we launched Beyond Books on the Apple Store. We have been so lucky to have had such an amazing base of creators and readers in the short time we have been around. Every time I get to interact with another creator or reader, I feel like I am on the right path and that this wild adventure is worthwhile. So far, we published eight individual stories and one anthology of five pieces of underworld mythology. We have worked with over 50 artists, writers, and musicians to craft these tales, to make them as vivid and engaging as they possibly can be. Crazy enough, we have had the privilege of working with [Francesca Lia Block](#), one of my all-time literary heroines. Crafting her story, "[Handless](#)," with the immensely talented artist [Dame Darcy](#) was one of the absolute highlights of my year.

In staying true to our first tale, our mission is to tell the stories that give everyone the chance to be a protagonist. My partner Alex is a straight white male and he is very cognizant of the fact that he has had the opportunity to relate to just about every modern protagonist while others have not. This has definitely pushed us both to collaborate with artists and writers who want to tell more diverse stories and incorporate a broader base of themes into our collection. It also sparked our idea to have live storytelling events to bring together people in the community instead of just on the platform online.

We held our first event at El Cid in Los Angeles to celebrate the release of [Tales of the Underworld](#), our most recent mythology collection. Seeing a crowd of people gather to hear these new takes on classic myths inspired me in a way that I cannot fully put into words. As proud as I am about our creative work thus far, I am very excited about new collaborations, partnerships, and live readings that are on our horizon.

WOMEN, NEW MEDIA, AND TECHNOLOGY

Aside from learning how to manage a multimedia art team in a very short amount of time, I have also immersed myself in the world of tech entrepreneurship. It's been surreal being a woman in the tech world, relegated to clickbait articles about representation and witnessing first hand the negative treatment that we often receive. There is a reason why the term "tech bro" exists.

Until quite recently, no one thought to research the number of female founders in the tech space. Tech Crunch [recently released an article](#) reporting that female founders are on the rise; with 17.9 percent of all startups evaluated in 2014 having been established by women. In my eyes, this is rather abysmal representation.

Thankfully, there are now many places running groups for female entrepreneurs to gain skills, to seek funding, and to network; a refreshing change from an endless array of fist bumps and conversations about "disruption" and "life hacks." After being in this arena for just over a year I can now see that it's my life's work to carve out a space for female voices – not only music and literature – but also in technology, which enabled our creations to come to life in the first place.

For me, the origins of [Beyond Books](#) possesses a mythic quality, making my own lived experience feel like a fairytale. Perhaps this is all that life really is – the act of crafting our experience into stories to share with ourselves and others, encouraging our imaginations to thrive and connect.

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