

Professor's latest book offers a creative perspective on navigating change

By Lacy Chaffee, ASU News
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Herberger Institute Professor [Liz Lerman](#) has spent much of her time at Arizona State University thinking about how the ideas of shape and momentum might change the way we view the world.

As a dancer, writer, choreographer, educator and creator, she captures these thoughts in a collection of articles in her latest book, "[Shape and Momentum: An Insomniac's Guide for a World in Constant Motion](#)."

Lerman, reimagining Heisenberg's uncertainty principle¹ as a way of examining life, proposes that people and institutions need shape as well as momentum, but they cannot perfectly hold both simultaneously.

"We need both," Lerman said. "Thus, a definition of creativity is our capacity to live in each and move between them as needed."

With tools to help people evaluate change and instability in the world, this new book bridges dance, education, politics and spiritual practice. Lerman considers it a sequel to her 2014 book "Hiking the Horizontal: Field Notes from a Choreographer," which was also published by Wesleyan University Press.

"I hope it contributes to people understanding that creativity is theirs to have," said Lerman, who teaches in the [School of Music, Dance and Theatre](#) in the [Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts](#), and is the recipient of multiple honors — including a 2024 Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio writing residency, 2024 Dance Magazine Award, 2023 Guggenheim Fellowship, 2002 MacArthur Genius Grant and 2017 Jacob's Pillow Dance Award.

Lerman kicked off the book launch with an event at Rizzoli Bookstore in New York on June 25.

The next events will be held in Washington, D.C. (July 11); Becket, Massachusetts (July 25); and at Changing Hands bookstore in Phoenix (Sept. 14). Registration for these events and a purchase link to the book is available on [Lerman's website](#).

Here, she talks about how the book came to be and what people can learn from it.

Note: Answers have been edited for length and/or clarity.

Question: What was the impetus for writing this book?

Answer: I've spent a decade thinking about shape and momentum — testing it, working on it, trying it out with people, trying to explain it. It's not the only way to see the world. It has flaws. But I do feel more confident about the ideas behind it — that you need shape, and you need momentum. You want to have the capacity to do both, and you want to be able to move between them.

Most people, and most institutions, for sure, hold their shape. Curriculums hold their shape. Because the shapes interlock, then it's really hard to move into momentum. A lot of moving people love momentum. The thing about momentum is, you don't actually control it. What's useful, though, is if you know how to construct shape, then you don't have to be afraid of movement.

Q: How does this book build on your work in “Hiking the Horizontal”?

A: For me, writing is a way of remembering little anecdotes that I think are meaningful and that I don't want to forget. Sometimes I write because I'm just furious and need to address some things. And I'm a bit of an insomniac. After “Hiking the Horizontal,” there were a lot of little articles that didn't get into that book. And meanwhile, I had started my new life here. So, really, it was a way to arrange myself inside life at ASU.

I don't actually think of myself as a writer. I think of myself as a choreographer, with a big idea about what choreography is, and part of that is documenting it, writing. But I would say that with practice, practice, practice, my writing's gotten more interesting.

Q: This book has been called a “choreographic manifesto.” What does that mean to you?

A: A manifesto to me is a little bit of a declaration. It's an aspirational declaration: “I hope I am reaching this thing. I'm trying to make it be this thing. Would you like to come along with me?”

Designing ourselves, being in ourselves, in relationship to all this motion is what choreography is. It's acknowledging that the movement itself is worth expanding, knowing, having, playing.

The manifesto part is more of the shape. It's like trying to stand up, pounding at the door, saying “Hey, take a look at this.”

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—

Liz Lerman

ASU choreographer and Institute Professor

Q: How can everyone benefit from reading this book?

A: Honestly, people are their own worst enemies when it comes to creativity. People kind of define themselves in boxes as creative or not, as artists or not. I don't think anybody is a non-dancer. Did you see what happened after the Knicks? In New York City, they're dancing in the streets.

I have been working consistently on [The Atlas of Creative Tools](#) and the idea that creativity belongs to all of us. Just because it's natural, doesn't mean you can't nurture it.

Q: How has teaching impacted your writing and your perspective?

A: Teaching makes you aware of what you need to articulate. People either comprehend what you're saying or bring something to you that you hadn't thought about. Our students are so interesting. I had to work during college, but I didn't have as many jobs as our students have. I am profoundly moved by their commitment. They show up in this book in a couple of ways. I know I'm their teacher, but they're busy teaching me; they're busy showing me the world as they see it.

[House](#) (Clinical Assistant Professor Jorge “House” Magana) and I have been in conversation now for a while around the nature of circles — my critical response process, ciphers, the nature of competition and support, and how that works.

I'm really grateful to ASU for giving me a place to be, for this period of my life. I'm really lucky to be this age and be this active. I am really, really happy about that.

Q: Do you ever have imposter syndrome?

A: I met somebody a while ago, and we were exchanging names. I said, “Liz Lerman,” and they said, “No, you're not.” I said, “I assure you, I am. At least today.”

We all have narratives about ourselves. A narrative that I have had is that I never got to perform at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. When I got here to Arizona, there was an article about me, and I think the headline said something like, “The legend has come here.” And I thought to myself, “Wow, either they don't know I've never been to the Brooklyn Academy Music, or they don't care. So therefore, why do I care?”

I suppose imposter syndrome has to do with how you're measuring yourself and how other people are measuring you, and what you think you're supposed to do or not do. Being off the two coasts and being immersed in this beautiful desert with these amazing cultures and communities of people has really been nurturing and nourishing. Also, when you get older, you realize that you don't feel a need to hustle. I mean, in this world we have to be hustling. Maybe that's part of momentum. But I'm not using it as a measuring device. And I think that's a lovely thing to let go of.

Q: Who should read this book?

A: I think artists and educators, for sure, no matter what your discipline is, and no matter what you're teaching. I think people working with youth, like Scouting — anybody who is engaged in being a shepherd for other people — will find the book really inviting. We don't use the term much anymore, but I think intellectuals would be interested in the content.

Political people worried about culture could be really interested in this book because the book speaks to our need for new shapes.

I'd love to have these kinds of conversations with people who think about this stuff, but who think art is just art. I don't think they see the way in which creativity and the way many artists work could change the fabric of the world.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

¹ Heisenberg's uncertainty principle states that there is a limit to the precision with which certain pairs of physical properties, such as position and momentum, can be simultaneously known.
Source: Wikipedia

Main image



ASU Professor Liz Lerman (right) speaks with moderator Wendy Perron, an American dancer and choreographer, during a book launch event at Rizzoli Bookstore in New York City. Photo by

Carson Robles

Text image(s)

Shape and Momentum

*An Insomniac's Guide for a
World in Constant Motion*

Liz Lerman



No caption