

Joe Hagan on writing a biography



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As told to Max Mertens, 2948 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Focus](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Adversity](#), [Collaboration](#).

Tell me a little bit about the impetus for *Sticky Fingers: The Life and Times of Jann Wenner and Rolling Stone Magazine*. Obviously there's a tremendous amount of interviews and research involved, how did you go about organizing this information?

The whole thing began with Jann Wenner asking me to write it. I had gotten to know him casually because he has a house near where I live in the Hudson Valley area of New York State. We had lunch a couple of times. It was mostly talking about journalism and politics, and I did a couple of freelance assignments for him. I would ask him occasionally about his history because I was fascinated, and one day he took me out to lunch, and asked me if I would be interested in writing his biography. For me, I was only willing to do it if it was going to be an independent book, he was sort of leaning towards a book that he could have more control over. Eventually he realized I wasn't going to do that, and legal papers were signed that this book was an independent book, he didn't have a right to read it before publication, and that I'd have control over it. Once he agreed to that, I was excited to do it because obviously there was going to be a huge story, a long history there and access to a lot of amazing people. And that's how it started.

As to the second question about organizing it, that was a big, long process. The thing you have to know about that is that he has such an enormous archive, and it was the access to this archive that was a part of the appeal. He saved everything. It was all the files of *Rolling Stone* magazine, but also his personal files, everything dating back to his childhood and high school and college, his correspondence with Mick Jagger and John Lennon and Bob Dylan and on and on and on. When I first started digging into this I realized I was sitting on a mountain of stuff, and I really had to come up with a working method of how I was going to get through all of it. That was something I developed in the first year of doing the research, but it ended up helping me write the book because I was able to focus how I wrote it.

The first thing I did in the process is write up a book proposal to sell to the publishers and I chose to write about Jann's relationship with John Lennon. I started going through the John Lennon material, and out of that material came what eventually became the opening of the book, the story of his relationship with John Lennon outside of the creation of *Rolling Stone* and how he ends up betraying him. Then the death of Lennon and what happens in the aftermath. I wrote that as a book proposal, and that was sort of a blueprint for what I ended up doing in the book, because you're talking about a cast of thousands here. I basically decided to focus the book to look at Jann's relationships with the major figures in his life, whether they're rock stars or photographer Annie Leibovitz or his wife, Jane Wenner, or Hunter S. Thompson, who was so seminal in the magazine. That helped me focus because I was looking at 500 boxes of material, of files, and you can't go through it all.

Did it help in terms of an outline that you broke the book down by time periods?

It was a huge learning curve, this was my first book. I've written magazine profiles and big exposés and investigative stuff, so this was a whole new beast. One of the things I did, which was advised by friends of mine, was to get this book writing program Scrivener—it's a program that allows you to organize your research and notes. With a biography you're working with a timeline, so I was kind of able to build on this timeline, and as I went along I was able to shape and reshape the timeline based on what were the big stories of that year or that period. Who were the big characters within that time? When am I going to introduce Annie Leibovitz, and when am I going to introduce Hunter? Hunter defines a whole three or four years of the life of Jann Wenner. If you notice in the book, there's a big break after 1970, and there's a second book within the book. Thinking of time periods was very helpful, but the story itself kind of ended up defining where breaks came and how I thought of it. If *Fear and Loathing* is published in the fall of 1971, that's really where Hunter S. Thompson makes his first big mark in history, and I really brought him in around that time. Basically the material helped establish how things ended up being organized in the book. You kind of learn that as you go during the research process.

When it came to reconstructing these stories, were there any authors or biographies that you looked to for inspiration?

I was really influenced by David Hajdu's *Positively 4th Street*. That book was just about one little sliver of history regarding Bob Dylan and Joan Baez in the mid '60s. What I loved about that is that he took a history that you thought you knew about, which showed you Bob Dylan's rise in the early '60s in Greenwich Village through the prism of his relationships with the Baez sisters, Joan Baez and Mimi Fariña. It felt really intimate like you were there with them in a small little world and I loved that. I wanted to basically take that model and kind of extend it over many decades about Jann and his wife, and a couple of other people who were really tight in his world like Annie Leibovitz and Hunter S. Thompson.

Tone-wise, I was really influenced by [Joan Didion](#) and [Eve Babitz](#), who were the consummate writers of LA in the '60s and '70s. They have what I'll call an "LA tone," there's a cool way in which they lay down things, there's a kind of sardonic tone to it which I really enjoy. I was reading a lot of them because obviously they were writing about the period that I was writing about, and they were both characters in the book. Those were big ones for me and I could name all kinds of things that I was reading at the time. Another book that I loved was called *Season of the Witch* by David Talbot, which is a history of San Francisco in the late '60s and '70s. I couldn't tell whether it influenced me, maybe subconsciously, but I definitely loved it.

You started writing this book about four years ago, can you talk about a moment where you found yourself getting stuck and how you got through it?

Just beginning to write was a psychological thing. Once you're done with a year and change of research, that's all you've been doing, just accumulating research, you eventually have to start writing. I had a research assistant helping me go through the research, I'm interviewing every day and I'm just accumulating stuff, and then I had a timeline with lots of notes. Then suddenly you're at that stage where "Oh, I've got to start writing," and you're looking up a very tall mountain. There's sort of a psychological moment where you have to bite the bullet and just start, and luckily I had a book proposal from which I could start to build out from. That was challenging, but that was just a matter of holding your breath and diving in.

I have three kids so my life is very busy and full. My time therefore was kind of compressed and well-defined, so when the time had arrived to start working, I didn't have a choice, I just had to do it. I had a deadline as well because there was some idea about publishing this for the 50th anniversary of *Rolling Stone*, and I was on the hook for this thing. Those are very motivating forces. I'd usually work on a chunk, like I'd say "Okay, I'm working on 1967 to 1970 right now," I know what the main threads are here, I just need to put them together. I would sometimes arrive to a point where I just wasn't getting anywhere, I'd laid out a bunch of stuff and had a big mess, and I just felt like "I can't seem to get through this." Every time I reached that impasse, I would go on a writing retreat for four days.

On these writing retreats, I would go somewhere where there was no connection to the outside world. I would spend the four days just going on this epic all-day, all-night vision quest-style writing, it was extremely intense, but I would complete what I had to get done. I began doing that at a monastery. They had a guest house at this monastery down the river from where I live, and these really wonderful Benedictine monks run the place. They served three square meals a day by ringing a bell, and you come out of your very stripped-down, no frills room for your meal in silence, and then you go back up and do whatever you're going to do—pray, whatever people come there for. I would just be writing. That was a very intense four days, but it was extremely productive, so I probably did that five or six times in the course of doing this book. I did that at the monastery and my brother-in-law had a cabin in the woods, and I would go there and do it there, too.

I read in another interview that your wife is a novelist—did you bounce ideas off her when you hit these roadblocks?

Not really, although she was the one who turned me on to the monastery and nudged me to go try that. We don't talk about that too much. For one thing, imagine if you were living with me for four years and this was all I was talking about, you know? You wouldn't want to hear about it any more. She read the book when I was in draft mode, she gave advice then, and that's when it's productive to do that. But otherwise when you're in this sort of messy part of the writing process, you just have to wire it up yourself, because I found that somebody coming from the outside to an isolated section in your book is not super constructive. You have to do it on your own, because you're the only one who can hold it all in your head, and understand what the themes are and what makes sense.

Do you listen to music when you're writing?

No. What I would do is, it's funny, I was just looking on Twitter and there's an interview in the [Paris Review with Luc Sante](#). He's a fantastic writer, he wrote [Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York](#), which [Gangs of New York](#) is roughly based on. They asked him about the influence of marijuana in his writing process, and he said that he edited stoned, because it was like putting on another pair of eyes that lets you see your work as if you hadn't written it essentially. Which if that's what the writer is looking for, what a great thing that would be. The problem with writing is you get stuck, and you've read the same chapter about one hundred and fifty times and you can no longer really access it, that's where outside help comes in, right?

A couple of times I did have this experience where I would write all day long at the monastery, or all day long at the cabin, and I'm talking 9 in the morning to 9:30 at night. I would just be totally blown out by the end of the day, unable to really look at what I was writing any more, so then at night I would say, "Well, what do I have to lose? I'm tired any way. I'm going to get stoned and re-read what I wrote and see if it looks different to me." And it did! I tried that a couple times and I had a lot of success editing the book that way.

In those conditions, I would listen to some music and I would usually listen to Art Blakely and the Jazz Messengers very loud, and I would just start having a totally different relationship with the text. Sometimes you'd look at what you did the next day and be like "Yeah, that was a bad idea," and undo it, but occasionally you would have revelatory insights into your own work. Of course you can't do this all the time, because it's not good for you, but reading that Luc Sante interview was an interesting insight.

How did you get your start in journalism? Did you study journalism at university?

I didn't and I kind of don't believe in it to tell the truth. I've taught at NYU journalism school and I enjoyed it a lot, and I'm sure there's a lot of great things you can learn, but I feel like journalism is a job that I learned on the job. You get thrown into a mix and you just start hoofing it, you make mistakes along the way, and you learn from them. I would say that my journalism school was being a fact-checker. I was fact-checker at [Esquire Magazine](#) in the late '90s, and that was really what sparked me wanting to go full tilt into being a journalist.

I remember I was asked by my boss one weekend "Hey, we'll pay you extra if you can transcribe these tapes." Back then it was actually mini-cassettes. So I took all these mini-cassettes home one weekend and it took me all weekend—it was hours and hours of interview time. I got to listen to a great reporter interview these people who were these weird anti-abortion radicals, who had harbored an abortion doctor murderer. This was a really creepy, fucked up story, and yet the reporter kept a very level head. He was not confrontational with them, he tried to be sympathetic to them in the interview. By being sympathetic to them he got the whole story by just saying, "Tell me why you feel this way."

And by listening to him for hours and hours I was like "Oh, that's how you do it," you go in and you act like you are curious, and maybe not even act, you do want to know. You just try to get to know the person and when you write the story, you can write it anyway you want after you have the information. Basically fact-checking was like doing a post-mortem on a reporter's work, you'd go around calling all their sources, figuring out where the information came from and how they got it, and then you'd go "Oh, this is how it's pieced together." This is how it works. And I got to do that with all these great [Esquire](#) writers.

Joe Hagan recommends:

I think we're in a great place for long-form documentaries. I thought the Grateful Dead documentary [Long Strange Trip](#) on Amazon was really well done. I related to it in the way I ended up writing my book, which was you're talking about this time period that has been so shrouded in nostalgia and cliché. The challenge is to cut through all of that, and tell a story that is really surprising and takes you behind it. Even if you're not interested in the Grateful Dead and hate everything about them, you'd be interested in this documentary, because it's a great story.

[O.J.: Made in America](#) was a mind-blowing event in terms of what you can do with long-form storytelling. I hope to see a lot more of that kind of thing, seven or eight-part documentaries, I think it's a great analogue to what great nonfiction books can do.

The last thing I read was [Emily Wilson's new translation of The Odyssey](#), which I highly recommend, because it's like getting to read *The Odyssey* as if it were *Game of Thrones*. Great, sexy, bloody storytelling that because of the way it was translated, really has a modern feel to it.

I'm also interested in reviving a certain writer who I really think is fantastic, his name is [Whitney Balliett](#), who was the jazz writer for *The New Yorker* for like 20 years, maybe more. I've been reading a lot of his work, I think he's a really fantastic writer. Again even if you don't care about jazz, just a really good writer, somebody who really knows how to write beautifully.

I'll tell you who I love is [Cécile McLorin Salvant](#), who just won a Grammy. She's a jazz singer. I saw her recently perform and I own her records, and she is fantastic, great, creative, dark, and something genuinely new, which you can't say that much about jazz. Often it seems like a form that's stuck in Lincoln Center or whatever, but there's something new with her, I really think she's wonderful.

Name

Joe Hagan

Vocation

Journalist, Writer





Samantha Hunt