

# On doing what it takes to finish the work

Writer Atticus Lish discusses the joy and pain of editing, working alone and with others, and how knowing your characters helps to create a blueprint for the path ahead.

December 3, 2021 -

As told to Elle Nash, 3468 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Day jobs](#), [Inspiration](#), [First attempts](#), [Mental health](#).

## **As a writer, do you involve yourself in a literary community at all?**

Well, I don't have any writers that I share work with yet. There's always tomorrow. I haven't tried that yet. But I can tell you who I'm in touch with. I am in touch with [Tara Clancy](#), who's the author of the great book, *The Clancys of Queens*. I just talked with her yesterday on the phone and she's doing well. She's in New York. And I'm in touch with a writer named [Bud Smith](#), who is located in New Jersey. I've had the privilege of seeing his forthcoming book *Teenager*, and I'm very excited about it.

## **When did you first get the idea for *The War for Gloria*? How long did you work on it?**

Psychologically, the story goes back to real events in my life that took place, all the way back to childhood, but especially in the late '80s to early '90s when my mom was sick. But when I actually started working on the book was not until I finished *Preparation for the Next Life*, and it had come out.

During the intervening year I knew I wanted to write another book. I was thinking about different options. In early or late 2014, I was sitting alone in the room where I did my writing in Brooklyn. And I asked myself, what was still close to the bone for me after writing *Prep*? It really was the story of my mother getting sick. So, I said, well, the book will have to be about that. I think the first meaningful step I made on the book was writing the very beginning. Also going out to the cemetery next to where we live, the Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn. I went with my wife and we looked at headstones. I wanted to find a good name for my villain. And I saw the last name Agoglia. And I thought, that's a beauty.

## **What was your process from idea to let's say, first complete draft?**

You got to remember first of all, after two books, I still don't know much about this. I'm only a two-book writer. And after the first one, I was just a one book writer. I mean, I had no idea. I thought, I'd really like to see if I could write a thriller. I did try to do things like outline, because I like logic. I love coherence when I see it in art. When I look at sculpture, I like to see well-proportioned figures.

The figures themselves don't have to be physiologically well-proportioned. I just mean the entire assembly of the characters has to look right together, has to be balanced. When you listen to music, you like it to have the high notes and the low notes. I wanted to make something that was coherent; I prize that very highly. In the beginning, I was planning, I was outlining and I drove my poor wife crazy.

Because she's trapped in the house with me, and I'm going, "Well, do you think this should happen?" And what is the poor woman to say? I mean, well, maybe, if you so choose. So, I'm thinking out loud. After all of this, I dug myself into a giant hole. I came out the other side of this experience with a resolution that I don't ever want to plan a book before I do it. And that the only sane way to try to write a novel, at least for me, is not to plan it but to do the following.

And here's why: It's to get a sense in your bones of who the characters are. You can feel them. You have an intuition for who they are. You know them. You know how they'd act. You can channel them. You can sing for them. They can come through you like a medium. And then, you put them in a situation and you let them act. People have that expression, the character driven story. I said, "That's what you have to do." Why? Because otherwise, there are infinitely many possibilities.

What is so good about going from the character is the character limits you. There's only a certain number of ways a particular person, not a cardboard character, but somebody you really think you know down to their bones is only one or two ways that that person is going to act.

That gives you the blueprint. That replaces what would be an outline. If you write something thrilling, wonderful. There's nothing wrong with writing something exciting. For me, I will only try to be a dramatist first, which means knowing the characters intuitively and letting them act out the story.

**If you're struggling to get into a particular character in a story, do you have advice for how a writer could break out of that, and try to get to know the character more?**

I think there are people you sometimes just feel like you know. Maybe there's someone you met, maybe there's someone you remember. You may not really know them, all you have to do is feel like you know them. I mean, you just have to be confident that you've got a gut feeling of them. You might ask yourself how would my brother-in-law act in a certain situation?

And in conversation with a pal of yours, you'd be like, "Well, I can't see Jimmy doing that. But I can see him doing something else." If you have that sense of a person, I think you're set.

**One thing that I noticed about *The War for Gloria* is that there's not a moment that is like skipped over. Every moment has the deepest sense of experience in it. It takes an incredible amount of discipline and restraint to be able to keep the same intensity in a work for over 400 pages. How long did it take you to get to the first draft?**

I don't have a recollection of specific drafts. I rewrote the book many, many times. It was a long seven years. What I recall happening is that I would come up with pieces of the book at different times. There were pieces of the book, for example, the very ending that were written right at the beginning, the first year I was working.

At different points, I would get these pieces, which I suppose I think of this something like the bricks that you make something out of, making a building out of. My big trouble was moving them around and getting them in the right place. And also telling a coherent story with them. I didn't know where the parts went. In fact, my agent, Amanda Urban, saw an early take and said to me, "You've just got the parts in the wrong place."

It took me a long time to see everything. There was dark matter. It was only by coming up with an approximation of the story that I was forced to look into the dark zone. The story would almost be there. And then, just like you were saying, nothing's missed? Well, things were missing.

My editor, Jordan Pavlin, my agent Binky, Amanda Urban, or I would see and feel that something was missing there. I would have to try to fill it. You might think, well, there's something that belongs in this gap. And you try to write it and it's not very well done. So that's a whole bunch of trial and error. I would describe it this way. I would feel like I was driving down a road and some sections of the road were simply gone. When I went down in them to fill them in, they became infinite tunnels. And I thought, "Christ, I'll never get out of this." There were some parts that got rewritten more than others. I mean, I'll tell you this, I literally filled tubs, those

sterilite tubs—they fill the room behind me—of paper, of takes that I did on this book. It's seven years' worth of wrong turns. I moved it all in myself, it was very tiring. It must damn near be 1,000 pounds. So, then, when you ask about actually getting everything to be as right as possible, to make it a smooth road for the reader, I think that just came from going back over it.

And seeing: Did I find it compelling to read? Was there fact in it? I want to say this so that nobody will think well of me and lionize me, that this could be encouraging for other writers. I didn't want to do that. I was tired by the time I was revising the book. I practiced avoidance behavior some of the time and then I couldn't sleep.

I think it's human nature. I struggled with myself. I found copy editing at the very end to be the hardest thing I could imagine. But eventually, I just couldn't not do it because I simply couldn't sleep. It has to get done.

**Did you do anything else while you were working on this novel? Did you have day jobs?**

There's this term that came out recently, snowflake. I think I was a snowflake long before there was snowflakes. I was very pampered, pampered even by the standards of sheltered, even by the standards of the kids I went to school with, which was an uptown school. I've done some working type jobs, but I'm not Bud Smith.

There was a tugboat out of Red Hook, Brooklyn. I was a deckhand during the summer of 2018. When I moved to Kentucky, I laid asphalt on a utility. They dig the street and they put the utility lines.

I was one of the dudes who helped to dig with a shovel. I would hand dig and hopefully direct the excavator so we just didn't break a gas line, but we broke some gas lines anyway. I also worked on a horse farm. I mucked out the stables. I will tell you that I got fired from that because I was too slow mucking out the staples. I think I lasted three days.

The last thing is...I worked at this moving company, Viking Moving Services up in Massachusetts. It's run by my friend Paul Webster and Taran O'Leary. Paul and Taran were kind enough to give me a job during the fall of 2020 and to let me live in the moving warehouse, while I was revising the last segment of the book. They really saved the book. I regard them as patrons of the arts.

**Is that process something that is a big part of your writing, spending a lot of time just only working in writing?**

If you're cooped up too much, you don't stimulate your nerve endings, you don't stay sane, you don't have any material. So, one way or another, you have to get out there. It's a long time. I was taking forever to finish this.

There are other jobs I could have attempted to get. I could have gotten a job sitting at a desk I suppose. The problem is you already sit at a desk when you're a writer. And I've always thought if there was some way to make this a physical job or to integrate the body with writing in the same way you would be integrated if you were a rock singer. I always was jealous of musicians. Probably the first artist I truly admired was Axl Rose, where he gets up on stage and he's singing "Paradise City" at Rock in Rio. And what could be more physical than that?

**Do you like editing your own work? Is that a different mental process for you?**

I think I'm much better off separating, editing, and writing just the same way when you drive, you want to not put your foot on the accelerator and the brake at the same time. So, it's good if there's a mental difference. I think I'm getting a little more practice to dividing these two things and not second guessing myself when I write for the first time. I do write freehand.

Something that really helps me with that is reading Charles Dickens because I don't think they had word processors back then. And the guy writes a million freaking words. So, clearly, he just put it in fifth gear and

wrote in one direction. I think that's a good way to go when you're going the first time. You asked me which do I prefer, well, it's wonderful to be able to just do something where you forget yourself.

So, the initial writing is in the zone to me, but it's also wonderful to see something attractive come together. That's the joy of editing. If you can think, oh, if I just cut that one sentence out, this thing clicks together like a lock and key, and then you're very happy. So, they have their respective satisfactions.

**Do you think on a sentence level, when you're writing or editing?**

I don't think I think on a sentence level really. I mean, it's tough to know what I actually do, you know what I mean? But I've thought about this. I've thought about it because I've heard so much about sentences, sentences, sentences. I grew up hearing that. My father's focus is the sentence. I believe he has been spending his life attempting to hone the sentence almost like if you'll forgive me, it's his phallus. It's a substitute him, the sentence.

I'm going to polish this Oscar statue of myself, this perfect sentence. I don't actually think this way. Part of the reason I don't like this way is because at my big brainiac college that I went to, Harvard, I took a linguistics class. It was very different from the type of prescriptive *Strunk and White* type where they tell you rules of style. This was descriptive linguistics, and in the influence of Chomsky, I suppose, in that same realm.

What my very good professor said, was that in real life in natural speech, people don't use a grammatical sentence, not necessarily. It's not really the basic building block of what people say. If you actually listen to what they say, you don't always hear the period. People use fragments and all that. I was very struck with that. Then, a guy who wrote *Legal Writing in Plain Language*, what he said was that don't think in terms of sentences, think in terms of paragraphs, think in terms of the utterance.

I think my theoretical answer to you would be it's the paragraph you think about, not the sentence.

**Do you have any superstitions about writing? For example, when I'm working on a book idea, I will not tell anyone about the book idea itself until I have at least completed a first draft because I'm afraid if I talk about it, the magic and the excitement goes away from my head, because I've already expressed it.**

I would agree that it's bad to talk. And I probably should be even more careful about that. I'm really thinking of my long-suffering better half and I can always grab her whether she's busy or not, and be like, "Hey, babe, you have to listen to this, something that's going through my head." And often, we're both worse off because of that. For anything that I write, I should probably keep it closer to my chest. I agree with you. I think there's some magic, that's the best way to put it. Keep it quiet.

**Why did you decide to explore the specific section of the working class with *The War for Gloria*?**

I have a problem a lot of times, whether it's a movie or a book, sometimes the action feels contrived. It's like in reality, the author is a low-risk person. The main character who's a projection of the author's imagination is a low-risk person. They're just not realistically going to find themselves in that dramatic of a situation. It's like that movie, *Adaptation*, where Nicolas Cage goes, "But nothing ever happens." And then, the guy up on stage says, "Everyday people are born, they die."

There is drama out there. It just may not be happening to you. So, I said, "Well, who is that drama going to be happening to?" And that's how I got the characters in *Prep*. For the characters in this, I don't know as clearly. Or a more honest answer would be I don't know that I'm willing to say. I think there was something mysterious to me about certain neighborhoods of Boston. And the mystery of those areas started for me in the early '90s. And so, I went with the area or with the place, and things germinated that way. I'll just leave it at that.

**Do you think about readership when you're writing? Or are you only thinking about what you want?**

I'm only thinking about what satisfies me. I have no way of knowing what other people would like. If I start to worry about it, I think that would be a bad interference. I remember when *Prep* came out, and it got some exposure, that was an absolutely new experience to me. It was mainly positive attention, but it was rattling. It was disruptive to my sense of privacy. It's not typical in my experience. I was uncomfortably aware of having other people in my head when I started the next book.

I wanted them out. For better or worse, the struggle to write the book for seven years, by the end of it, believe me, I felt completely isolated, which I guess is what I was after. All those people were gone. I guess at the end that was necessary. I cut myself off from everyone.

I cut myself off from friends and family. It will not sound like I'm a nice person when I say this. But I jettison people. I think my attitude was that I would do anything to accomplish the mission. And I didn't care who I hurt in order to get where I was going. Again, I'm not thumping my chest over that. It was a phase that I went through.

I was eager to keep the momentum of my first success going. A time came when I thought I was being punished by the gods, where I was being punished for hubris or for ambition. I read *Moby Dick* while writing this book. And I began to see that I was like Ahab, and that I was going to sink the ship and kill the crew and myself. My attitude was, I will write this book and it may be the last thing that I do. So, this is not a healthy way to think in general. But that is the state of mind I was in.

**Do you have any specific subconscious, like rules for yourself while you're writing?**

Earlier, in the first phase, when I was just getting started, I would tend to over edit things. One day, my wife that said to me, "This was better before you messed around with it." That hit me really hard. The idea of wasted energy, or worse yet, of being your own worst enemy of undoing your own success. That's a grim thought. I didn't want that to happen. So, what I tried to do—and I'm getting a little bit better at it—is I don't mess around too much with something I write.

I try to sequester the word processor and not use it too much. When I enter things from free hand, I try to make minimal changes when I put it into the word processor, print it out, leave it alone, edit on paper. I think those are good habits.

**Do you have advice for people who don't have anything published maybe who are going to go through those same feelings?**

I would just act. That is what I would tell people in life. And that is what I would tell writers.

**Atticus Lish Recommends:**

*Five Things That Are Good in the Universe Right Now.*

The song "[Destination Unknown](#)" by [Missing Persons](#)

The song "[Masquerade](#)" by [Berlin](#). The [YouTube video of the song](#) with John Travolta and Jamie Lee Curtis.

[The Plum Trees](#): A Novel by [Victoria Shorr](#)

Homer's [Iliad translated by Stanley Lombardo](#)

[One Man's War](#) by Paul M. Kippert

Name

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Vocation

Writer

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Ryan Hermens