

On getting past the first draft



Author Joshua Henkin discusses getting out of the way of your writing, aiming narrower to go wider, and becoming a teacher of your own work.

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As told to Maddie Crum, 2169 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Education](#), [Process](#).

You said in an interview that you wrote 100 drafts of your most recent book, *Morningside Heights*.

Oh, I was speaking figuratively. Well, I did write 3,000 pages. It's so hard to say. I mean, what do you count as a draft? If you count changing a dialogue tag back and forth, sure. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of drafts. I'm really compulsive about that. But in terms of bigger stuff, yeah, there were many drafts. I feel that's the only way I know how to do it.

What is your revision process like?

I try to force myself to go all the way through to the end. I feel like big changes at the roots are much better than lots of small changes at the branches. I definitely feel like every writer has their strengths and weaknesses, and I feel my strength is that I'm really flexible. I'm open to-not to doing anything, but to considering anything. So yeah, in this book, the protagonist, Arlo, came along fairly late. The structure totally changed. To me, it's all about cutting and structure. I think pretty analytically. So if I can just get past the first draft, and start to think like a teacher of my own work, that's helpful for me.

Do you have any general tips for revision, or do you think that it's entirely case-by-case, book-by-book, writer-by-writer?

I definitely think it's case-by-case and book-by-book. Maybe writer-by-writer. I do try to ask myself, "Does this have to be here?" I feel like the burden of proof is on keeping something in, not cutting it. Which is how you get from 3,000 pages to 300 pages.

How do you typically begin a project?

Sometimes I begin with a line, but usually with a situation. Like, a character and something happening. Marquez said that, you know, once you have the first paragraph, everything else follows. In my latest book, I knew I was writing about my dad's Alzheimer's. But I also knew I wasn't interested in ventriloquizing what it's like to have Alzheimer's from his point of view. You know? I just wasn't.

Are your characters generally drawn directly from life, or is there more imagination involved?

This book is probably my most autobiographical. But I don't know. Everything is still a composite. And everything is emotionally autobiographical. So yeah, I mean, this guy, this character, Spencer, is a lot like my dad. And his wife, Pru, to a somewhat lesser extent, is like my mom. But there still is so much that you're making up. I guess people are interested in what's true and what's not. But I actually think if you're interested in knowing the writer, which I don't know why anyone would be, but if you were, it's more interesting what they make up. Like,

what's true is just what's true. Whereas what you make up says more about your fantasies.

Morningside Heights often luxuriates in language. It has these long lists of words, of jargon.

I feel like all those words are from... My father would come home from Columbia and say, "I ran across this word today." And I'd never heard the word before or after. It's like, what do you mean, you ran across this word today? *Quondam*. So yeah, I mean, I love language. A word like *panegyric* is a noun and not an adjective, and you would think, ending in *-ic* it would be.

Do you think that language should serve story, or story should serve language? Or is this a false dichotomy?

I guess it depends on what kind of writer you are.

Yeah, "should" is a tricky word.

Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think there are fiction writers who are really interested in language for language's sake. I'm not. For me, it's about serving character. I'm not a showy writer. I do think it takes a lot of revision, a lot of effort, to make things simple. I have nothing against showy prose. Just, it's not my thing. My stuff works to the extent that I'm getting out of the way. And there are writers who are very much about not getting out of the way.

I will say the last five percent—getting from 95 percent to 100 percent or whatever—of getting it right, takes 90 percent of the work. And if you look at the original draft, you probably wouldn't think it's that different. Unless you're a writer, or a really good reader, and you hear things. The hard sound versus the soft sound when you're going for the soft feeling makes all the difference in the world. But a less good reader might think, really? You spent 95 percent of your time getting from there to here? And I'd be like, "Oh my god, there is such a huge difference, from there to here." But I think a lot of people don't notice that. Or they do notice it. They just don't realize they notice it.

That still isn't language for language's sake. It's about trying to get feeling across through character and narrative. But I just feel like you have to do it through language. You can't, even if you're really a character writer, you can't do it unless you hear things. You have to be able to hear things.

You mentioned pacing. To me, one aspect of this novel that's really impressive is how it moves through time, both, as you're saying, on a line level, and on a macro level.

This is, I think, where teaching comes in. I do feel like I was a teacher before I was a writer. And I feel like I was always instinctively good at figuring out what wasn't working in other people's work, and I feel like that helped me. And so, you read Alice Munro, and you teach Alice Munro, and you think about time. How can you not? Or you read Joan Silber's book about time [*The Art of Time in Fiction*], and you think about time.

Are there other writers who you admire in their handling of time?

Wallace Stegner's *Crossing to Safety*. And I love Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*. I love those books that cover big spots of time. I really, really like [Sally Rooney's] *Conversations with Friends*. And I think that what I like about Sally Rooney—well, this is not about time.

That's okay.

I just feel like she writes about the mundane stuff. She writes about how people hang out. Which is kind of what I like to write. James Salter said, "Life is weather. Life is meals." And I like that. I just like writers who get out of the way. I think it takes a lot of effort to get out of the way.

So, we've talked about time, but I wanted to ask about place and your relationship to place with this book. Do you

consider *Morningside Heights* a New York novel, whatever that means? What does that mean?

I mean, I grew up there. I spent the first 18 years of my life there. [My wife] teaches at Barnard. My mom still lives in the apartment I grew up in. My brother lives five blocks away. I wasn't consciously thinking about that, but it's true.

When I was a kid, I grew up on the Upper West Side, and I went to this small, Jewish private school on the Upper East Side, back in the time where there were real differences between the Upper East Side and the Upper West Side. I mean, now there are nuanced differences. I wasn't poor. But in the context of my private school, I was the son of the professor. You know, everyone had multiple TVs, and we had many books. My seventh-grade teacher had us go home and count our books, and I had more books than the rest of the class combined. I was both embarrassed and proud. And I do think the book is, in some way, a real ode to a time when... I mean, the only way you can live, I'd say even on a professor's salary, on the Upper West Side now, is if you were there for the last 40 years. So what's happened to the city and the wealth... I do think it's an ode to a city that is no longer... It wasn't conscious, but I do think it is about loss in terms of the city. It's a book about loss. But a writer can never think that way. You know, you can't think that way.

A writer ought not to write with an awareness of their subtext?

I would never say that no one can do it. You know, I certainly don't believe that everyone writes the same way. I feel, for me, no. I mean, I don't mean to make myself out to be like, "Oh, I'm such an intuitive writer." Actually, I'm deeply analytical. In revision, I'm really focused on, like, is this working, is this not? It's not like, "Look ma, no hands," at all. But it's really about pacing and narrative. And character. I guess I just kind of trust that subtext and themes will come through.

I think I would have done a less good job writing a book about a lost New York if I tried to write a book about a lost New York, rather than to write a book that takes place in New York over a period of time where things have changed, and to be true to what New York was. That loss will come through.

I think if you aim narrower, you will go wider. You aim wider, you'll go narrower. That's in my experience. And I see too many books trying to be... I'm all for big books. I just think, don't write a book about New York. If you want to write a book about New York, just set your book in New York. Have a lot of characters who've lived in New York for a long time. You know, and then it'll be about New York. Or if it's not about New York, it'll be about something else. I just kind of feel like everyone has the anxiety of influence. And I worry about the people having the anxiety of influence. Like, "What makes it different from the 10,000 other books out there?" And, of course, that's true. But what makes it different is not... I see this in my students. I see it in a lot of writers. I feel like they're trying to do something that's unusual. Something—

New.

New, right. They want to do something new. Okay. But superficial newness, for newness's sake, is not interesting. I kind of do believe there are only a few stories. A stranger comes to town; a person goes on a trip. I'm not saying that there aren't people who are doing things that are interesting, stylistically or formally, and you know, I'm not knocking Rachel Cusk.

I do love her.

Yeah, no, I know. I'm being a bit glib here. I'm just saying that I think there are a lot of different ways to be new. And I think the wish to be new, the wish to be big, hurts fiction. And I think if people were a little less obsessed with being new, they'd be newer. And if they were a little less obsessed with being big, they'd be bigger. To me, that's the paradox. That's the irony. And I think that, yeah, very few of us are going to write books that people will be reading in a hundred, two hundred years. And that's okay. I think you can write a really good book.

I mean, I really loved Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*. It's great. But if you described it... I mean, part of the reason it took me a while to read it is, like, "Oh my god, I'm going to read a first-person narration about someone's freshman year at Harvard?" And that's what it is. It's about her at Harvard. And yeah, she's studying Slavic. Okay. And there's stuff about that. But it's really just about being 19 years old at Harvard, and being in love with a guy who isn't reciprocating it. It's really good. It's really, really good.

Conversations With Friends. What is it about? These two friends, and this affair she has with a married man. I mean, how many books have been written about that? An affair with a married man.

So, it's not good for me as a writer, and it just runs against my instincts, to think about any of that stuff. It'll be there. It will be there. A writer's a thinking person. You have ideas. They will be there.

Joshua Henkin's novels:

Morningside Heights

The World Without You

Matrimony

Swimming Across the Hudson

Name

Joshua Henkin

Vocation

Writer

□

Michael Lionstar