The Confession Book: Interviews with Great Authors on How They Write

Volume 1

By Noah Charney

Introduction

In March 2012, I began a series of interviews that have run every Wednesday on the Book Beast page of *The Daily Beast magazine*, which ran for a good two years. "How I Write" features my conversations with fellow authors, asking questions beyond the five standard queries that journalists tend to ask writers, but which get to the heart of how one lives the writing life, and which allow readers to get to know their favorite authors in a personal way, highlighting their charming quirks, recommendations, and personal stories that rarely appear in press interviews. Writers have loved the series, and it has been particularly popular with those in the publishing industry, who regularly write to me to both express their enthusiasm for the series, and also to put in requests for me to interview their favorite authors, their clients, or them.

To date, around sixty interviews ran in *The Daily Beast.* When I moved on to write for other magazines, I retained rights to the format and the interviews, and relaunched the series, now with the same questions but new authors, in *The European Review of Poetry, Books and Culture*, with the column now called "The Confession Book."

The Confession Book, or Confession Album, was a popular 19th century pastime. These books contained a set questionnaire to be filled out by friends and visitors, each answering the same set of questions. The most famous of these is the Proust Questionnaire, which the novelist created in 1886, at age 14. A very much abbreviated variation of the Proust Questionnaire has appeared on the back page of *Vanity Fair* magazine, and has also been put to actors appearing on James Lipton's television series "Inside the Actor's Studio." The original Proust Questionnaire, and Confession Books in general, is far longer, and is based on the concept of comparisons. At dinner parties, guests around a table would each respond to a question asked by the host. The various responses of the guests would prompt conversation, and the responses could be written into the books themselves, as keepsakes.

With Confession Books as my source of inspiration, I developed the questions for this series. Around thirty questions are given to each author, though the questions were also adapted to be suitable for each author. Around two-thirds of the questions in each interview are standard to the series, with about one-third adapted to each subject. By using a majority of consistent questions, the series allows for interesting comparisons across respondents. For instance, we can collect the three must-read books recommended by each interviewee into one master list, or gather the advice for aspiring writers.

I have learned a huge amount from interviewing so many great writers, all of whom I admire. I feel very fortunate, because I am both a peer and a groupie. Reading "horizontally" (considering how several dozen authors answer the question of what they do when they have writer's block, for instance), is enlightening. There are many similarities (just about everyone has a goal of 1000 words a day), and lots of fun quirks and differences (one author's favorite snack is roasted peanuts, another Tio Pepe sherry). I think you will enjoy reading these interviews, whether you are a writer, a reader or both. Having done many of these interviews years ago, it is bittersweet to go back over them and recall them fondly, since several of the subjects (Maya Angelou and Oliver Sacks) are no longer with us.

There are around eighty interviews in the series so far, and more every month. We, the editors of *The European Review of Poetry, Books and Culture* have selected a dozen to feature in this first volume, which we are offering to our readers, free of charge, as a thank-you for supporting our new magazine by reading it.

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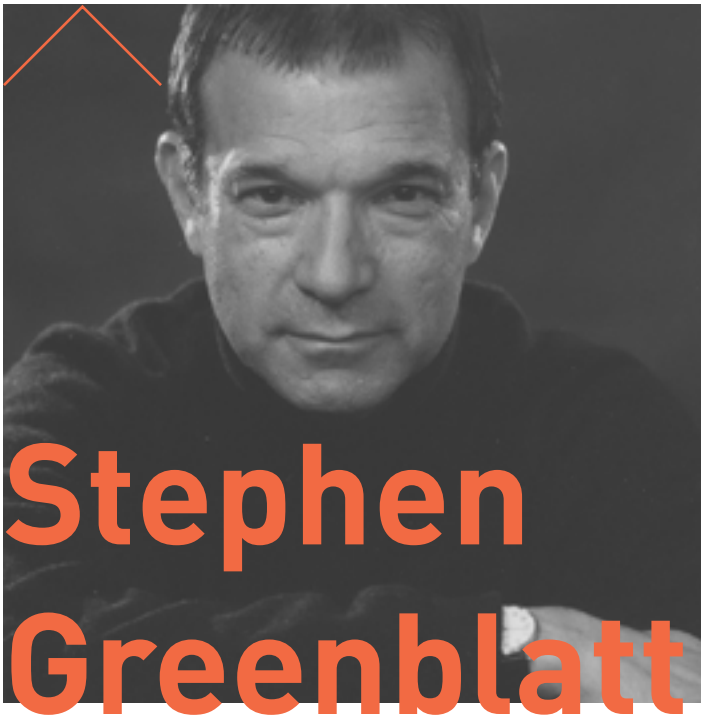


Stephen Greenblatt

Stephen Jay Greenblatt is an American thinker, Shakespearean, literary historian, and Pulitzer Prize winning author. Greenblatt is regarded by many as one of the founders of New Historicism, a set of critical practices that he often refers to as "cultural poetics"; his works have been influential since the early 1980s when he introduced the term. Greenblatt has written and edited numerous books and articles relevant to new historicism, the study of culture, Renaissance studies and Shakespeare studies and is considered to be an expert in these fields. His most popular work is *Will in the World*, a biography of Shakespeare.

Where did you grow up?

Newton, Massachusetts

Where and what did you study?

I went to Yale, where I majored in English; then on for two years on a Fulbright to Cambridge, and back to Yale for my Ph.D., also in English Literature. I wrote my Ph.D. on the English poet and adventurer, Sir Walter Raleigh.

Where do you live and why?

Cambridge, Mass. I teach at Harvard and my wife [teaches] at nearby Brandeis, so it is convenient; but Cambridge is an interesting, lively place, so it is not only about the proximity to work.

Describe your morning routine.

I am an early riser (around 6:45). After we have breakfast and get our son off to school, the mornings are generally for work. (Only in Italy, where many things are closed in the afternoons, are we forced on occasion to change this routine.)

What is a distinctive habit or affectation of yours?

I am not particularly habit-driven – that is, I do just fine if I skip my morning coffee.

A personal question that I believe readers would also love to know about. In my research as an art historian I recently came across the information that Leonardo da Vinci owned 118 books, quite a number for the 16th century. I could not locate the list itself, but it made me think to ask you what the must-read list would have been, circa 1500, for an educated Humanist living in Italy? This list may be far too long to write out here, but then again the number of volumes that had been discovered was rather more limited. If I were to seek to read my way through the volume of written knowledge available to someone like Leonardo, what would be on my list?

That is an amazingly large number of books – I would love to see the list, if anyone has reconstructed it. And in the case of Leonardo, it would be

particularly interesting, since he was so wide-ranging in his interests. As for the reading of an early 16th century humanist, I think that one would want to start with religious, rather than classical writers – that is, with Augustine, Jerome, and Thomas Aquinas, and perhaps more recent theological writers (like Nicholas of Cusa). But Virgil and Cicero would certainly be on the list; perhaps Livy and Tacitus; Boccaccio and Dante. It is perhaps as interesting to think of what might *not* be there in 1500: Homer, for example, and much of Plato.

Do you have a writer friend who helps and inspires you?

One of my closest friends is the wonderful poet Robert Pinsky, a constant source of pleasure and rich intelligence, and imaginative wildness.

There are few famous professors who have made the jump to best-selling authors of multiple volumes. What do you think was the secret to the success of your Shakespeare biography, *Will in the World*, when there have been so many books about Shakespeare that did not make the same sort of impact?

I have always loved to write, that is, to pay attention to the fact that I am doing something more than amassing scholarly information. And I have always despised the monkish obscurity cultivated by certain academics. The first sentence of my doctoral dissertation was "Sir Henry Yelverton was no friend to Sir Walter Raleigh." I liked it precisely because you could not tell if you were beginning a novel or a history or – as it happened – a Ph.D. thesis.

Is it difficult to balance your professorship with your career as a best-selling author?

No—that is, I have a very clear sense of my obligation to my students and my colleagues (as well as to my family).

Do you ever still write articles for peer-reviewed academic journals, or have you switched permanently to books?

I still do so, though distinctly less often than I did when I was starting out – but this is not a new development. Even when I have written

what are, in effect, articles – for example, several of the chapters in *Shakespeare's Freedom* – I have tended to hold them back for use in books.

It strikes many in the publishing world as amazing how you managed to write such a gripping, successful book about an ancient poem few people had heard of. *The Swerve* may be more about the world of the Humanists who discovered *On the Nature of Things*, rather than the poem itself. At what point did the story of that poem jump out to you as the topic for a book? And did you immediately know how you wanted to present its story, through the biographies of various Renaissance thinkers, or did the presentation format evolve?

In conjunction with a play I wrote, in collaboration with Charles Mee (a reimagining of Shakespeare's lost play *Cardenio*), I started to think about cultural mobility – that is, about how objects move about, disappear, reappear, cross borders, get burned, get smuggled, etc. I began somewhat idly to reflect on the books that mattered to me, one of which was *On the Nature of Things*, and it occurred to me to wonder who found it, after its long absence. Then I was off running.

Describe your routine when conceiving of a book and its story, before the writing begins. Do you like to map out your books ahead of time, or just let it flow?

I do not generally map out books very elaborately – I try to trust the movements of my own unconscious at the beginning of a project – but, in the case of *The Swerve*, I did chart a plan. The problem was that, in the course of writing, I had to redo it about 10,000 times, in order to get it right.

Some author-to-author advice: what has to happen on page one, and in chapter one, to make for a successful book that urges you to read on?

I think it is important, directly or indirectly, to establish a personal relationship with the reader and to begin to tell a story.

Describe your writing routine, including any unusual rituals associated with the writing process, if you have them.

I do not really have unusual rituals – just ordinary self-discipline, linked to self-loathing, if a day passes in which I haven't actually done something, however small, that justifies all the effort.

When I taught, at Yale, the English department was divided between Harold Bloom and Everyone Else. What's your opinion of the Bloomian approach to literature, and the debates over Deconstructionism that began at Cornell and moved on to Yale a few decades back?

I never felt I had to choose.

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

Pomposity.

What is guaranteed to make you cry?

The end (often the happy end) of good novels.

Do you have any superstitions?

I often feel a mysterious sense of gratitude when I've arrived home after a difficult drive, say, in a blinding rain. Gratitude to whom?

What do you need to have produced/completed in order to feel that you've had a productive writing day?

I feel absolutely great if I have written 5 pages, but I rarely succeed in doing so. I'll settle for 3.

What is the story behind the publication of your first book?

My first book was my undergraduate essay on Waugh, Orwell, and Huxley. There was a Yale University Press series that published such books from time to time. I could not bring myself to go back and look at what I wrote, but it had the effect of removing the anxiety I might later have felt in trying to get published.

Was there a specific moment when you felt you had "made it" as an author?

Not really, and I'm not sure I feel it now. But I got a distinct thrill some years back when I saw someone actually buying one of my books in a bookstore. ■

Dante asks Giotto how he can bring to life such beautiful paintings and engender such ugly children.

Alain de Botton

Alain de Botton was born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1969 and now lives in London. He is a writer of essayistic books that have been described as a 'philosophy of everyday life.' He's written on love, travel, architecture and literature. His books have been bestsellers in 30 countries. Alain also started and helps to run a school in London called The School of Life, dedicated to a new vision of education. Alain's latest book, published in April 2016, is titled *The Course of Love*. He started writing at a young age. His first book, *Essays in Love*, was published when he was twenty-three.

Where did you grow up?
Zurich, Switzerland

Where and what did you study?
History, Cambridge University

Where do you live and why?
London, England. Because it's easiest.

Of which of your books or projects are you most proud?
Living Architecture and *How Proust Can Change your Life*

Describe your morning routine.
I dress and take my kids to school.

What is a distinctive habit or affectation of yours?
I am always anxious.

What is your favorite item of clothing?
A grey v-neck pullover from Gap I wear. I have 30 of them.

Please recommend three books (not your own) to your readers.
John Armstrong's *The Secret Power of Beauty, Palinurus, The Unquiet Grave*; Normal Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon*.

Do you have a writer friend who helps and inspires you?
Yes, my friend John Armstrong, a philosopher.

What is a place that inspires you?
My office. It's drab and boring, but quiet.

You write about very complicated ideas, like philosophy and theology, in an accessible manner. Could you describe how you convert complex, intellectual concepts into a format digestible to popular readers?

I ask myself whether my mother, who never went to university, would understand it. If she couldn't, I change it.

Describe your routine when conceiving of a book and its plot, before the writing begins.

I assemble my ideas in pieces on a computer file then gradually find a place for them on a piece of scaffolding I erect.

Describe your writing routine, including any unusual rituals associated with the writing process, if you have them.

I waste most of the day, then finally start to write around 3pm, totally disgusted with myself for my wasteful nature.

Besides the obvious, what do you keep on your desk?

I keep a picture of my beloved children close by. Also water, and plenty of pads and pens.

What do you do when you are stuck or have temporary writer's block?

Check emails or answer things like this interview.

Describe your ideal day.

Lying in bed with pen and paper, reading and thinking.

Describe your evening routine.

Watch "Newsnight" on TV and go to sleep.

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

A tragic insight gracefully delivered.

What is guaranteed to make you cry?

The illness of a child.

Do you have any superstitions?

Yes: if something too nice happens, worse is to follow.

What is something you always carry with you?

A pen.

If you could bring back to life one deceased person, who would it be and why?

My father - in order to get to know him better.

What is your favorite snack?

Jaffa Cakes.

What phrase do you over-use?

Melancholic

What is the story behind the publication of your first book?

I sent it to an agent, she accepted it, and off it went.

Was there a specific moment when you felt you had "made it" as an author?

Never. I hope, in a few years...

What do you need to have produced/completed in order to feel that you've had a productive writing day?

At least 1,000 words

Tell us a funny story related to a book tour or book event.

All tours are filled with humiliation. My publisher once hired a private jet to fly me to a venue where 1000 people were waiting. It almost bankrupted them.

What would you do for work, if you were not a writer?

An architect

What advice would you give to an aspiring author?

Never ever become a writer. It's a nightmare.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

"He tried."

Tell us something about yourself that is largely unknown and perhaps surprising.

I'm very austere and modest. ■

Athena Farrokhzad: Untitled

**My father said: You have a
tendency towards metaphysics
Still I schooled you in the means
of production
when your milk teeth were
intact**

**My mother said: Your father
lived for the day of judgement
So did your mother, but she was
forced to other ambitions**

Ma Jian

Ma Jian was born in east China in 1953. As a child, he was the pupil of a painter who had been persecuted as a Rightist. After his school education was cut short by the Cultural Revolution, he studied by himself, copying out a Chinese dictionary word by word. At fifteen, he joined a propaganda arts troupe, and was later assigned a job as a watchmender's apprentice. In 1979 he moved to the capital and became a photojournalist. Ma came to the attention of the English-speaking world with his story collection *Stick Out Your Tongue*. The stories are set in Tibet. Their most remarked-upon feature is that traditional Tibetan culture is not idealised, but rather depicted as harsh and often inhuman.

Where do you live and why?

I moved to London twelve years ago, to live with Flora Drew, whom I met in Hong Kong on the night of the Handover. Until recently, I would spend many months of every year in Beijing. For the last two years, however, I've been refused entry into China, so I am now a genuine exile. London used to be a refuge I returned to, in order to write in freedom. Now, it has become a place of banishment.

If you can imagine a world in which the Cultural Revolution had not taken place in China, do you think that you would still have become a painter and a writer?

The Cultural Revolution was not the only calamity to convulse the China of my youth – there was also the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Great Famine. All these events affected me deeply. Whatever China I'd been born into, I would probably still have become a painter – I loved sketching portraits as a child, and began art classes at the age of seven. But if China hadn't been under Maoist rule, I might never have become a writer.

How did you shift from being a painter to a writer?

In my twenties, when I was a photojournalist in Beijing, I joined an underground art group, and put on clandestine exhibitions of my paintings. It was the early 80s, and China was just beginning to open up. But in 1983, the Communist Party launched a Campaign against Spiritual Pollution, to clamp down on experimental arts. The police ransacked my home, confiscated my paintings and placed me in detention. When I was released, they warned me that if I didn't mend my ways, they could make me disappear. I lost interest in painting after that – it was an art form too open to misinterpretation. I gave up my job and took to the road. Three years later, I returned to Beijing and wrote my first novella – *Stick Out Your Tongue*, inspired by my travels through Tibet. Writing, I discovered, allowed me to express more deeply and clearly my view of the world.

Do you recall your first reaction to learning that Stick Out Your Tongue had been denounced, confiscated, and destroyed?

While I was writing *Stick Out Your Tongue* in Beijing, the police began knocking on my door again. As soon as I finished the book, I moved to Hong Kong, so that I could work undisturbed on my next novel. One day, while I was living in a bookshop in Wanchai, I turned on the television and saw, to my astonishment, a clip from Chinese state TV announcing that my book had been publicly denounced, and that all copies were to be confiscated and burnt. I knew at once that this was the end for me: my writing career in China was over.

It was brave and noble of you to establish New Era and Trends, venues to publish works that had been banned in China. What led you to establish these projects and were you concerned for your safety in doing so?

After the Tiananmen Massacre, I felt compelled not only to continue writing but to actively resist the restrictions placed on freedom of speech. I set up the publishing company in Hong Kong, with offices in Shenzhen in Mainland China, and managed to publish works of fiction, philosophy and politics by unapproved authors. But in 1995, I went a step too far and published a memoir by an illegitimate son of Chairman Mao. My Shenzhen offices were closed by the police and the company's bank accounts were frozen. So that was the end of that.

Describe your morning routine.

My mornings are always a blur. Flora and I have four young children, so I write late into the night – the only time our home is silent. At three in the morning, I usually collapse on the narrow bed in my study, but am often woken a couple of hours later by one or both of our three-year-old twins, who like to waddle down from their room and climb on top of me. At eight, I make pancakes for the children, then sleep again until eleven. This is when the day really begins. I make myself a cup of tea, sit at my desk, phone my friends in Beijing, read for a while, then start thinking about what I am going to write.

What is a distinctive habit or affectation of yours?

I have few habits, but one thing I can't do without is green tea. Now that I can't return to China, I ask my friends to bring me new supplies whenever they visit.

Please recommend three books by Chinese authors that your readers might enjoy, but might not know about, and tell us why you like them.

Strange Tales of Liaozhai, by the Qing Dynasty author Pu Songling. Wonderful supernatural stories in which the ghosts, demons and fox spirits are kinder and more humane than the human characters.
China 1957, by You Fengwei. A powerful novel describing Mao's persecution of China's intellectuals.
Border Town, by Shen Congwen – a beautiful evocation of rural China in the 1930s.

Describe your routine when conceiving of a book and its plot, before the writing begins. Do you like to map out your books ahead of time, or just let it flow?

Each of my books begins as an image I can't get out of my mind. For *Beijing Coma*, it was a sparrow perched on the body of a comatose man; for *The Dark Road*, it was a pregnant woman floating down the Yangtze in a dilapidated barge. Slowly, themes and ideas emerge. I paste my walls with maps, drawings, lines of poetry, and sketch out a vague structure. After the first draft, I like to travel to the places in the book, to absorb the rhythms of the local speech and the colors of the landscape. By the third or fourth draft, my characters take control of the novel, and it is they who decide how it will end.

What is your process like with your wife and translator, Flora Drew, when she is translating one of your books?

At the beginning, I answer her many questions, and we have long, detailed discussions. By the end, when she's struggling to meet deadlines, my role is merely to bring her cups of tea and chocolate.

Is there anything distinctive or unusual about your work space? Besides the obvious, what do you keep on your desk? What is the view from your favorite work space?

My study is a book-lined room on the first floor. During the day, the children often wander in to distract me from my work, or to draw pictures on a small table set up for them in the corner. I try, in vain, to keep my desk clear of clutter. The window looks out onto the overgrown weeds and an abandoned pool table in our neighbor's garden.

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

The unanswerable questions my twins often ask me, such as, "Dad, why is your ear here?"

What is guaranteed to make you cry?

The many assaults on human dignity that I have witnessed in China.

Do you have any superstitions?

I have grown more superstitious with age. As 2013 is my Chinese zodiac year, which is traditionally believed to be inauspicious, I am wearing holy beads around my wrist to ward off evil spirits.

What is something you always carry with you?

I always carry a pen, notepad and a pocket torch.

If you could bring back to life one deceased person, who would it be and why?

My mother. She became terminally ill last year, but all my requests to return to China to visit her before she died were refused. When I heard she only had days to live, I flew to Hong Kong and pleaded with the border guards to let me through, but I was turned away. A few weeks later, after many appeals, I was given special dispensation to return briefly to my hometown to bury her ashes.

What is your favorite snack?

Chinese dates and roasted sunflower seeds.

What advice would you give to an aspiring author?

Read ten thousand books, travel ten thousand miles.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

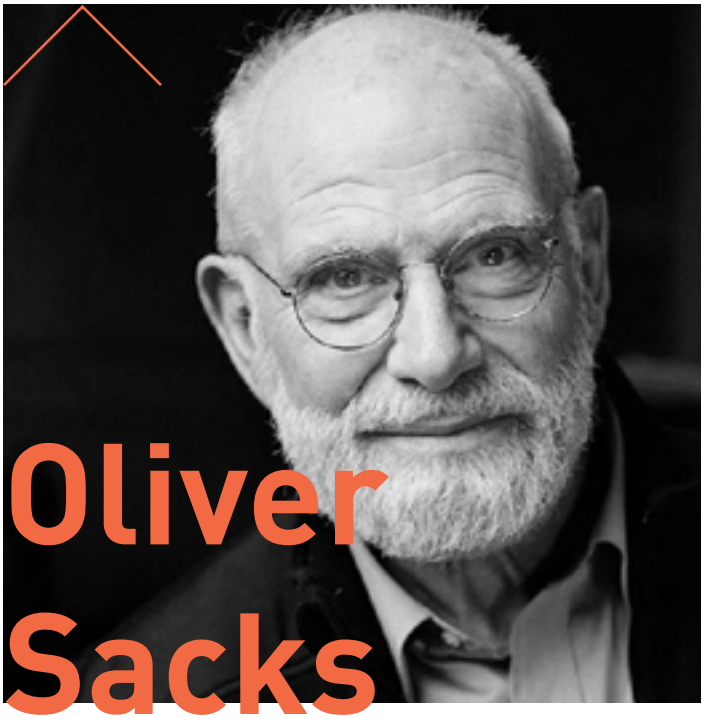
I don't want a tombstone. I'd like my children to scatter my ashes over a mountain or into the sea.

Tell us something about yourself that is largely unknown and perhaps surprising.

I like baking sponge cakes and macaroons. ■

Pernila Berglund: Untitled

You have no idea how it comes to you. It is the roads that travel. You have no plot, it is a shoving forward. The place around you, about to come unstuck.



Oliver Sacks

Oliver Wolf Sacks was a British neurologist, naturalist and author. He believed that the brain is the "most incredible thing in the universe" and therefore important to study. He became widely known for writing best-selling case histories about his patients' disorders, with some of his books adapted for stage and film. His writings have been featured in a wide range of media. His books include a wealth of narrative detail about his experiences with patients, and how they coped with their conditions, often illuminating how the normal brain deals with perception, memory and individuality.

Where and what did you study?

I studied physiology and medicine in England, at Oxford.

You teach at NYU Medical School. What is your favorite course to teach?

Well, I enjoy bedside teaching with medical students. And I enjoy classes on non-fiction writing, narrative in medicine, with people who want to be science writers.

Please recommend a book that make science accessible to trade readers, and that has influenced your own work.

One book that was very influential for me was published in English in 1968, and it's called *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, by A. R. Luria. When I started to read the book, I thought it was a novel. Then after a few pages I realized it was a case history, the most detailed I ever read, but so beautifully written, and so full of feeling and pathos and characterization and richness... For me, that combined science and art ideally. That's my model.

For readers coming to your books for the first time, which would you recommend as a starting point, and why?

I think maybe *The Island of the Colorblind*. I have a sort of soft spot for it, because it combines different sorts of writing. It has medical writing, but it also has travel writing. Going to Micronesia to see this island of colorblind people. I think it's broader and more colorful than my purely medical books.

You have researched a wide variety of neurological phenomena, including Tourette's Syndrome and migraines. What about a condition or phenomena speaks to you, and prompts your desire to study it in detail?

Tourette's Syndrome is a good example. There, people who have it severely may not only make sudden tics and movements and barks, occasionally curses, but their perceptions are accelerated, their imagination is heightened, and sometimes there's an almost convulsive reflection of all they perceive in the form of imitation. It is so complex and so extraordinary that, even though I first saw a patient with it more

than 40 years ago, and I wrote about him in *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, I am still amazed and enchanted, both by what I see and what it shows that the brain is capable of. In particular, it shows what it's like to move and think much faster than normal—the advantages, but also the disadvantages, of this.

In reading your new book it occurred to me that reading about a multi-sensory phenomenon like hallucinations might not be as effective in understanding them as a multi-sensory experience would be. A film or a ride, for instance, which could include visual and audible sensations.

Well, firstly the difficulty of writing about any experience, because experience is always richer than language (although language can focus on different aspects of it). In *Hallucinations*, I'm writing about other people's experience...no, wait, that's not quite true, there's also a scandalous chapter on my own experiences... Well, I think a page of print is not adequate to convey what a multi-sensory experience is like, you're right. A multi-sensory experience is, well, opera, which I love. There's music, there's theater. The words and the music and the actions all have to blend together. Though lots of hallucinations are not multi-sensory, just one sense at a time. Perhaps opera would be a more vivid way to present it, but I had to write a book, you see.

Describe your morning routine.

I usually get up fairly early, I got up at 430 this morning, but I usually get up between 6 and 630. I always have a pad on my bedside, in case I want to write straight away. I also have a habit at night of leaving a sentence unfinished, so I can pick up on it the next morning. I'm also a bit afraid of going to sleep. If writing is flowing, I'm afraid it might disappear. I'm also slightly afraid of mealtimes. If the mood is upon me, I tend to write non-stop. But I'm not very systematic. There are mornings when I don't write, and others when I can't be stopped.

I get up, a pad by my bedside. I have my usual breakfast of oatmeal, again with a pad in the kitchen, because you never know what's going to go through your mind when you're eating your oatmeal. I then...you want details do you? I then go to the toilet, for necessary reasons. And I

always have a pad and pen there, because all sorts of things can occur to one, when one is under the shower or on the loo. I then usually go for a walk. I like to walk before 7, when there are not too many people around, and there's something about exercise that gets my mind going. And I always have pen and paper with me when I walk.

Describe your writing routine, including any unusual rituals associated with the writing process, if you have them.

I'm not all that systematic. There's an important preliminary. I have to have pen and paper always available, not only in the office and in my apartment, but if I go for a walk, then ready in my pocket. It infuriates me not to be able to write something that has popped into my mind.
I get to the office around 8. I always find that paperwork has accumulated. I get, I don't know, well over 1000 letters from readers per year. My assistant selects some, but I do have a bunch every morning. I will answer some of the letters. When I answer an email I use my fountain pen, which means that the correspondents need to give me a postal address. I find the physical act of using a pen gets me going. But also the act of communicating by writing letters also gets me going. Letter writing tends to lead on to book writing.
On Friday morning, I went to see patients at a place I've gone for many years. There, seeing people, although I've seen all sorts of conditions for forty years or more, they still amaze me. I keep copious notes. Sometimes those copious notes turn into articles or books, though usually years later. Monday morning was an unusual one. I had to be at another hospital because I watched a brain operation. The morning tends to be my high-energy time, and I usually write in the morning.

What is something you always carry with you?

I have a special pad, waterproof paper and a waterproof pen that I take with me when I go on botanical excursions, but also I sometimes keep it by the side of the swimming pool, because I swim every day, and sometimes ideas occur to me in the water.

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

Ooh, good question. The Marx Brothers, I suppose.

What is guaranteed to make you cry?

Yes, I cry fairly easily. I'm a sentimental slob for various operas. When Mimi dies in *La Boheme*, I can't help shedding a tear.

Do you have any superstitions?

Some superstitions I object too, for instance my building doesn't have a 13th floor. I'm sure I have lots of them, because I'm a bit on the obsessive side. Ah yes. In general, I feel that, unless I put things in certain places, they will surely be lost.

What is your favorite snack?

I'm afraid I do often tend to snack while writing. I try to get away from candies, and things I like are peas. So I often have a bowl of shelled peas.

What phrase do you over-use?

Yes, I'm usually not conscious of the ones in speech, but then I'm appalled when I listen to myself. I think phrases like "sort of" get into my speech and I'm not aware of them. In writing I tend to use "as it were" and "so to speak" too often.

Tell us a funny story related to a book tour or book event.

When *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* came out in 1986, I had an interview on the radio in San Francisco with call-in listeners. One of the people who called in said, "I can't recognize my wife either, though I don't mistake her for a hat." He went on to say that he doesn't recognize anyone or anything. He said he had a rare brain tumor. I said, "How very interesting and extraordinary. Why don't I meet you at the radio station after the show?" In fact he came along, and I saw him as a patient, in a way...I didn't charge or anything, but I visited him several times, and encouraged him to form a support group for people with recognition problems like his own.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

"He tried."

Tell us something about yourself that is largely unknown and perhaps surprising.

Well, I blurted out some of my dark history in Hallucinations, so much of it is known now. People who see me now, as an old man, may have difficulty believing that I used to love motorcycles, and even race them. Yes. As a young man, of course. And even now, the sound of a good highly-tuned engine sets my pulses pounding! ■

Samantha Barendson: 36 Things to do Before You Die

1. **Make the list of the other 35 things to do.**
2. **Do not die before the end of the list.**
3. **Check the travel map.**
4. **Prepare your luggage.**
5. **Do not forget your pull-overs.**
6. **Do not forget your swimming costume.**
7. **Clear and close your bank account.**
8. **Redirect your mail.**
9. **Record a message on the answering machine.**

10. Take a shower.
11. Wash the car.
12. Purchase gasoline.
13. Check the tire pressure.
14. Buy some cookies.
15. Fill your water bottle.
16. Go to the toilettes.
17. Empty the fridge.
18. Do not forget to water the plants.
19. Ask your neighbour to sit the cat.
20. Empty the litter tray.
21. Throw out the old flowers.
22. Take out the trash.
23. Wash the dishes.
24. Fold laundry.

25. Switch off gas.
26. Switch off water.
27. Turn off the lights.
28. Lock the door.
29. Put your luggage in the trunk of your car.
30. Check the situation.
31. Switch the mobile phone off.
32. Put your sunglasses on.
33. Light a cigarette.
34. Ride away.
35. Do not back down.
36. Live.

Margaret Atwood

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, and environmental activist. She is a winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and Prince of Asturias Award for Literature, has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize five times, winning once, and has been a finalist for the Governor General's Award several times, winning twice. In 2001, she was inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame. She is also a founder of theWriters' Trust of Canada, a non-profit literary organization that seeks to encourage Canada's writing community. Among innumerable contributions to Canadian literature, she was a founding trustee of the Griffin Poetry Prize.

Describe your morning routine.

I'd be lucky to have a morning routine! But let's pretend... I'd get up in the morning, have breakfast, have coffee, then go upstairs to the room where I write. I'd sit down and probably start transcribing from what I'd [hand]written the day before.

Is there anything distinctive or unusual about the room in which you write?

I'm not often in a set writing space. I don't think there's anything too unusual about it, except that it's full of books and has two desks. On one desk there's a computer that is not connected to the internet. On the other desk is a computer that is connected to the internet. You can see the point of that!

What do you need to have produced/completed in order to feel that you've had a productive writing day?

Yes, it's usually a certain number of words. Between 1000-2000.

What is a distinctive habit or affectation of yours?

I don't know whether it's a habit or an affection. I usually start writing books in longhand. I guess that's a habit. I usually like to write with an implement that flows. A Rollerball or a pen with ink in it. It's the way it moves across the page, that interests me.

If a reader would like to read one of your books, but is unfamiliar with your oeuvre, which of your 50+ books would you recommend they begin with, and why?

Let us ask what kind of a reader we are talking about. If it is a young man, they should start with *Oryx and Crake*. A young woman? *The Handmaid's Tale*. An older person interested in history, I would suggest *Alias Grace* or *The Blind Assassin*. If it is a person interested in reading very, very short things, I'd suggest any of the short story books. Or even shorter, they could buy something like *Good Bones*, *Murder in the Dark*, one of those collections of very short pieces of writing. If they are interested in poems, then the *Selected Poems* or *Morning in the Burned House*, or *The Door.*

Among all of them do you have a personal favorite?

I would never, ever say if I did.

Describe your routine when conceiving of a book and its plot, before the writing begins. Do you like to map out your books ahead of time, or just let it flow?

Never map it out. Just get into it. Jump in, like going swimming.

What is Canadian Literature?

It's too multiple [to give a concise definition], but let us say that the point of view (if the writer is not pretending to be American, which they often are) is never that of someone who feels that their country is an imperial power. Because, in fact, Canada is not an imperial power.

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

There is no short answer to that. Pieces of absurdity, I suppose.

What's with the Celebrity Tip Hockey Goalie video?

Yes, the Rick Mercer Show. Why did I do it? Canadians make fun of themselves constantly. Rick Mercer is a very well-known Canadian who can talk you into almost anything. He got hold of me at a benefit we were both doing and said, You have to do this hockey goalie video. I said, I don't think so. Shouldn't I be something else? He said, No, you have to be a goalie. I said, Why? He said, It'll be funny, trust me.

It *was* funny.

I fail to see why! I don't make a plausible goalie, or what?

Do you have any superstitions?

I never talk about books I'm writing.

What is guaranteed to make you cry?

I cry at the ends of sad movies or books. I'm a sucker.

If you could bring back to life one deceased person, who would it be and why?

Only one? Oh, I couldn't choose. I know so many dead people that I'd be happy to have alive again. Then again, I know quite a few who I'd really not be happy to have alive again...

That's a good answer. What is your favorite snack?

I know the thing I'm supposed to have, because I'm a brain person. You're supposed to have a slice of rye bread with peanut butter and slices of banana on top. And a glass of milk. So you get protein, potassium, energy.

But that's not what you actually have...

I usually have a cup of coffee.

How did you co-invent the Long Pen (for remote document signing) and why?

So a long time ago, back in 2004, it became clear that book tours were going to be curtailed, especially for young writers, and that some bookstores simply had no one coming to them anyway. Fedex was delivering packages, and you'd sign for them. Well, I thought that signature was going out through the air and appearing somewhere else in the air, but it turned out not to be. I thought, why can't we sign books that way? It turned out that nothing like that [remote document signing] existed, so we did invent that. It was before eBooks, and really before there was today's sort of internet. We did perfect it. We had to make it so it was the exact signature, in ink, because of course people who want their books signed don't want a rough facsimile, they want it exactly as you'd sign it live. We did that. It took several tries. We demonstrated all over the world. It was particularly valuable for events in places like New Zealand, where you couldn't go yourself, places in Eastern Europe that couldn't afford to bring authors there. We did all of that, but the problem was, it was quite cumbersome at that point. It isn't any more. Everything has gotten miniaturized. Then we had to convince bookstores. They realized they were going to have to provide something to draw people in

to them, instead of customers just ordering stuff online. I saw that, but they didn't yet. So [the Long Pen technology] moved over into business and banking. Now we can do signatures on a mobile device, on a tablet or smart phone as the front end, whereas when we started it was quite a clunky apparatus.

It's a cool idea.

Now I can be sitting here with my tablet in New York, I could get a request from you over there in Slovenia, you could get your book through a wholesale distributor, which I would sign and they would then send it to you, or I could even sign your eBook. Or I could sign a picture of myself, anything you like. Those are the book and entertainment uses, but in the meantime, it's been adopted for business.

I recently interviewed Gary Shteyngart, who is famous for blurbing everyone and everything that crosses his path—there's even a blog about his blurbs. You've decided not to blurb anything anymore, or risk having too many books sent your way. What are your thoughts on blurbing? And who are blurbs actually for? Reviewers? Readers?

They're for readers. The problem is simply that if you do one, you have to do them all, or everyone is going to be mad at you. It's very hard to say no to people once you've said yes to someone.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

That opens the question of whether I'm going to have a tombstone.

True.

Maybe I'm just going to have a tree.

Any specific type of tree?

I haven't decided that yet, but there is a "natural burial" movement which, instead of having a tombstone, you get yourself planted and then you get a tree planted on top of you. I suppose we could have a little plaque with my name on the tree... ■

Katja Perat: Miners

Blessed are the miners.
They don’t need to write poems.

Alan Shapiro

Alan R. Shapiro was born in Boston, Massachusetts. He was educated at Brandeis University. As the author of numerous collections of poetry, Shapiro has explored family, loss, domesticity, and the daily aspects of people's lives in free verse and traditional poetic forms. He has published over ten books of poetry, most recently *Reel to Reel* (2014), a finalist for the Pulizer Prize; *Night of the Republic* (2012), a finalist for the National Book Award and the Griffin Prize; and *Old War* (2008), winner of the Ambassador Book Award.

Where did you grow up?

Brookline, MA, a ten minute walk from Fenway Park

Where and what did you study?

Brandeis University, BA in English, class of 74

Where do you live and why?

Chapel Hill, NC. My ex-wife got a job here in 1986, when I was teaching at Northwestern in Chicago. When our first child was born in 1989, I moved here permanently, teaching first in the MFA program at UNC Greensboro, and then in 1995 at UNC Chapel Hill

Of which of your books or projects are you most proud?

The next one (I hope). The better you get at writing, the better you get at imagining getting even better, so the discrepancy between the writer you are and the writer you want to be only widens as you improve. This is why I can't bear to read anything I've already written. I'm only interested in what I haven't written yet.

Describe your morning routine.

Wake, if lucky; cup of tea, read for an hour, then write.

What is a distinctive habit or affectation of yours?

My wife says my only habit is that each day I go into my study and shut the door and don't come out till evening. Aside from that, I have no habits or affectations. I'm completely normal.

What is your favorite item of clothing?

Blue jeans, sweatshirt with a hoody.

What is a place that inspires you?

My study. My wife describes me as a rugged in-doors-man. I like nature through a window. Outside I have so many allergies I'm like a human no-pest strip. Hang me from a beam at a party in the country and mosquitoes will not be a problem (for anyone else).

Describe your routine when conceiving of a book and its plot, before the writing begins.

I read a lot, I fret.

Describe your writing routine, including any unusual rituals associated with the writing process, if you have them.

Aside from the spittoon beside the desk, I have no routine. I just keep my head down and work.

Is there anything distinctive or unusual about your work space?

On my desk I keep a few books for inspiration: Robert Pinsky's *Selected Poems*, David Ferry, Tom Sleigh's *Army Cats*, Elizabeth Bishop's *Complete Poems*, Reginald Gibbons' *Creatures of a Day*, Chambers Dictionary of Etymology. My desk faces a window that looks out on our backyard, but I keep the curtains closed.

What do you do when you are stuck or have temporary writer's block?

I don't get writer's block, but I do have a block that a friend gave me for my birthday on every face of which is the name of a genre I've worked in: memoir, poetry, criticism, fiction. That's my writer's block.

Does your routine differ if you are writing prose as opposed to poetry?

No. Writing is writing. On some level it's all poetry. Fiction is just like writing a poem on a larger scale. And memoir I refer to as creative non-poetry. Remember the movie *Contact*? When Jodie Foster finally reaches that alien planet and looks outside at that strange beautiful world, the first words out of her mouth are, "They should have sent a poet." Imagine how flat the line would have been if she had said, "They should have sent a novelist."

Describe your ideal day.

Sit down at the desk at 8 AM, and then look up a moment later to discover that it's 4 PM. That day long moment of sustained attention, what Elizabeth Bishop calls "a self-forgetful perfectly useless concentration," is in my view the closest one can get to heaven on earth.

Describe your evening routine.

Drink wine, watch the news, curse the Republicans

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

The Republicans. Rodney Dangerfield is a close second. Steven Wright, a close third: "I want to die peacefully in my sleep like my grandfather, and not screaming in terror like his passengers."

What is your favorite snack?

Granola bars.

What phrase do you over-use?

WTF. A close second would be, "I'm so busy I don't know whether to shit or go blind."

What is the story behind the publication of your first book?

Robert von Hallberg, professor at University of Chicago, resurrected the University of Chicago Press's Phoenix Poets Series in 1983; I met him when we both were visiting professors at Stanford in 1980. He invited me to submit a manuscript to that series. One of the outside readers for the series was Donald Davie, who had been a teacher of mine at Stanford back in the mid-seventies. I got published by being in the right place at the right time. Pure luck.

What do you need to have produced/completed in order to feel that you've had a productive writing day?

Nothing really. I just need to feel like I've spent the day deep in that self-forgetful perfectly useless concentration Bishop describes. If I've had that experience, if I've accessed that state, if several hours have gone by as if in a single moment, if I've gotten to that place that athletes call being "in the zone," the amount or even quality of what I've written is beside the point.

Tell me a funny story related to a book tour or book event.

A few years ago I went to give a reading at the New England School of the Arts, in Brookline Village, not far from where I grew up. NESA is a commuter school. They streamed the reading over the internet so that the students who couldn't make it back to campus for the reading could watch and listen to it at home. Two relatives of mine, both in their late eighties, my cousin Sonny and my aunt Ethel, came to the reading, and as it turned out they were the only people there. As they entered the empty room full of empty chairs, Sonny leaned over to Ethel and whispered at the top of her voice, "I can't understand it; I thought he was such a big shot!"

What would you do for work, if you were not a writer?

A shepherd or a leech gatherer.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

Funny you should ask. About 10 years ago I had a heart attack while playing basketball at UNC. As I was being carted off the court by the paramedics, my basketball epitaph came to me: "He finally took it to the hole."

Tell me something about yourself that is largely unknown and perhaps surprising.

I am an avid reader in all the sciences: physics, cosmology, evolutionary biology, geology, chemistry, you name it. I read good science writing the way some people read the Bible, for wisdom and consolation, except the consolation I get is from being reminded at every turn of just how unlikely it is that there is something rather than nothing. Science is good for writing, for my writing, because it puts me in a state of perpetual wonder.

What is your next project?

I'm finishing up a novel about a historian who's writing a book about the Alamo. It's called *My Own Private Alamo*. I also have a collection of poems most of which are inspired by the science reading I've been doing for the past five or six years. ■

Asja Bakić: An Ad

every man is a
body girdled
with wall
I offer my Chinese
for a Berlin Wall
because
in a case of extreme
loneliness it's
easier to knock it down

Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou (April 4, 1928 – May 28, 2014) was an American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, several books of poetry, and was credited with a list of plays, movies, and television shows spanning over 50 years. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees. Angelou is best known for her series of seven autobiographies, which focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), tells of her life up to the age of 17 and brought her international recognition and acclaim.

Tell me about the dinner party at which a Random House publisher, James Baldwin, and Jules Pfeiffer first encouraged you to write your autobiography.

Well, I don't know if it was a dinner party! Martin Luther King had been killed, on my birthday, and I had been planning a birthday party. I had planned to join him after my birthday. [His death] shocked me so that I stopped eating, I refused to answer the phone. Finally James Baldwin came to my apartment door and he made noises, and said he wouldn't leave until the police came. He was cursing and shouting "Open this door! Open this door!" I finally opened the door and he came in. He said, "Go and have a bath. I'll wait and I'll have some clothes for you." He went to my closet and got clothes, and he said, "I'm taking you someplace." Now I had no idea where he was taking me, but he had a car outside the driveway. We went to another house, a brownstone not too far from where I lived. When we got into the house he introduced me to Jules Pfeiffer and Jules' wife at the time, Judy, and their daughter. Jules said, "You need to laugh, and you need to have somebody watch you laugh and laugh with you." In that sparkling company, I did come out of myself. I was impressed, of course, with Mr. Pfeiffer, and with their friendship. Jimmy [Baldwin] and Judy and Jules all acted as if they had grown up together. Very respectful and responsive friends to each other. That pleased me, because Jimmy was a brother to me, and these famous white people were so kind and good.

You're led an astonishingly diverse life in terms of careers, from musician and songwriter to dancer and pimp. Is there any occupation you've never tried but always been curious to?

No, everything that's crossed my mind I've tried a little bit.

I've read of some eccentric writing habits of yours, involving hotel rooms without pictures on the walls, sherry, and headgear. How did you first come upon that cocktail for writing success, and has the routine evolved over your career?

And headgear! Ha! It was head-ties, not head gear! Well, I was married a few times, and one of my husbands was jealous of me writing. When

I writing, I tend to twist my hair. Something for my small mind to do, I guess. When my husband would come into the room, he'd accuse me, and say, "You've been writing!" As if it were a bad thing. He could tell because of my hair, so I learned to hide my hair with a turban of some sort.

I do still keep a hotel room in my home town, and pay for it by the month. I go around 630 in the morning. I have a bedroom, with a bed, a table, and a bath. I have Roget's Thesaurus, a dictionary, and the Bible.

Which edition of the Bible?

Uh—that's a good question, it's slipped my mind. Name a famous edition.

The King James?

That's the one!

Anything else in the hotel room?

Usually a deck of cards and some crossword puzzles. Something to occupy my Little Mind. I think my grandmother taught me that. She didn't mean to, but she used to talk about her "little mind." So when I was young, from the time I was about 3 til 13, I decided that there was a Big Mind and a Little Mind. And the Big Mind would allow you to consider deep thoughts, but the Little Mind would occupy you, so you could not be distracted. It would work crossword puzzles or play Solitaire, while the Big Mind would delve deep into the subjects I wanted to write about. So I keep the room. I have all the paintings and any decoration taken out of the room. I ask the management and house-keeping not to enter the room, just in case I've thrown a piece of paper on the floor, I don't want it discarded. About every two months I get a note slipped under the door: "Dear Ms. Angelou, please let us change the linen. We think it may be moldy!" But I've never slept there, I'm usually out of there by two. And then I go home and I read what I've written that morning, and I try to edit then. Clean it up. And that's how I write books!

Do you still drink sherry when you write?

Not so much anymore. I stopped about two years ago.

When you did, what was your brand?

Yes I liked Spanish sherry, Tio Pepe.

How do you approach the distinction between straight autobiography and autobiographical fiction?

Well, I don't think there's such a thing as autobiographical fiction. If I say it happened, it happened, even if only in my mind. I promised myself that I would write as well as I can, tell the truth, not to tell *everything* I know, but to make sure that everything I tell is true, as I understand it. And to use the eloquence which my language affords me. English is a beautiful language, don't you think? I speak a number of languages, but none are more beautiful to me than English.

What is your second-favorite language, of those you speak?

I would say Spanish, because I speak it best, I guess. I used to think French, but when I'm doing a live promotion in France, and I look for a word, like "tablecloth," if it does not come out right away, it will snap out of my mouth in Spanish.

You have said that nothing frightens you as much as writing, but nothing satisfies you as much either. What frightens you about it?

Will I be able to say...will I write a sentence that will just float off the page? Easy reading is damn hard writing. But if it's right, it's easy. It's the other way round, too. If it's slovenly written, then it's hard to read. It doesn't give the reader what the careful writer can give the reader.

You are a renowned public speaker. The art of rhetoric, once a standard part of one's education, is no longer taught. What makes for a great public speaker and public speech?

It's the same thing that makes for a good singer. The speaker must have a good ear, and a love for the language. Love and respect. And must be convinced that what she has to say is important. And don't stay on the stage too long.

Who was the best public speaker you've ever heard? Since you were friends with Dr. Martin Luther King, I think I can guess the answer...

Dr. King. I don't know who could stand up to that.

You've written everything from the highest art form of poetry to your own line of Hallmark cards. I'm not sure how many great writers could also be as concise and universal as to write good Hallmark card greetings. What was the process like for you?

That's interesting. When Hallmark publicized the fact that I would be writing for them, someone in the *Times* asked the poet-laureate of the time, What do you think about Maya Angelou writing for Hallmark? He said, I'm sorry that Ms. Angelou has reduced her art to writing mottos for greeting cards. That day I read that in the paper, and that afternoon I was in a bookstore in Miami called Books on Books. It's a wonderful store, you'd love it—jam-packed with books. You'd want to live there. I walked down an isle and came face to face with a woman who reminded me of me. My height, my age, but she was white. She says, You look just like Maya Angelou! And I said, I am! And the woman steadied herself on a bookshelf and the tears came down. She said to me, Ms. Angelou, I've been estranged from my daughter for five years. But this past Christmas she sent me a card which said "Mother love heals." And she cried. I joined her. She said, My daughter and I are going to be re-established. She said, I take that card to my bed at night, I put it on the nightstand. In the morning I take it to the kitchen when I make coffee. I keep that card. My daughter and I are together again. I thank you.

That's beautiful, wow.

It was wonderful, wonderful! [Writing the cards] was challenging. I would write down a paragraph that expressed what I wanted to say, and then try to reduce it to two sentences.

That's tough self-editing.

Ha-ha! Any one of those cards I'd send you. I loved it. I didn't do it long, but I loved it.

What is your favorite item of clothing?

I guess my Uggs.

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

When another person laughs at herself sincerely. I never laugh when someone is laughing at someone else.

What is guaranteed to make you cry?

A lonely child.

Do you have any superstitions?

If I did, I wouldn't tell!

What is something you always carry with you?

I'm a child of god. I carry that with me.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

Ha-ha! "I did my best, I hope you do the same."

Dr. Angelou, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me.

Oh, I'm so glad you called. You have a beautiful name, by the way... ■

Kim Moore: The Art of Falling

**This is for falling which is so
close to failing
or to falter or fill; as in I
faltered when I heard
you were here; as in I filtered
you out
of my life; as in I've had my fill
of falling:
a fall from grace, a fall from
God,
to fall in love or to fall through
the gap,
snow fall, rain fall, falling stars,
the house falls into disrepair,**

to fall in with the wrong crowd,
to fall out of love, to fall like
  Jessica
who fell down a well and
  watched
the bright disc of the sun and
  moon
slowly passing, for twins who
  start
so close together they must fall
apart for the rest of their lives
or be damned, to fall down a hill
like a brother, to follow like a
  sister,
to be a field and fall fallow, to
  fall pregnant,
for vertigo, the cousin of falling,

for towers and stairs and
pavements
which are the agents of falling,
for the white cliff top of a bed,
for climbers and roofers and
gymnasts,
for the correct way to fall,
loose-limbed and floppy,
to fall apart after death,
for ropes and fences and locks
which carry the act of falling
inside,
for fall which over the ocean
means Autumn, which means
leaves
like coins of different colours

dropped from the pockets of
trees,
which means darker evenings,
which means walks with the
dogs,
which means walking alone
and not falling apart at the
sound
of your name, which God
help me, sounds like falling.

Khaled Hosseini

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. In 1980 he moved to San Jose, California with his family. 1989 he entered the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine. In 2001, while practicing medicine, Hosseini began writing his first novel, *The Kite Runner*. Published in 2003, that debut went on to become an international bestseller and beloved classic. In May 2007, his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list, remaining in that spot for fifteen weeks. Hosseini's much-awaited third novel, *And the Mountains Echoed*, was published in 2013.

Where did you grow up?

I lived in Afghanistan until I was 11, then in France until I was 15, and finally the United States.

Where do you live and why?

I live in the San Francisco Bay Area in California. This has been home for me now for over 30 years. Most of my family lives in northern California, and therefore - aside from northern California's many appeals - I have developed roots that keep me here.

Describe your morning routine.

I get up and work out. Get home in time to get the kids off to school (on my days – my wife and I trade off), eat, read the paper, front page first, check all news on Afghanistan. Flip to sports page, check for any San Francisco 49ers news. Then I write, typically from about 8:30 to 2 PM, at which time I go to pick up my kids from school.

What is a distinctive habit or affectation of yours?

I can't watch TV without eating peanuts. Can't be done.

How and why did you start the Khaled Hosseini Foundation?

Our family foundation was inspired by a 2007 trip I made to Afghanistan as a Goodwill Envoy for the UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). While I was there, I met repatriated refugee families who lived on less than $1 per day, spent winters in tents or holes dug underground, and whose villages routinely lost children to the elements every winter. As a father myself, I was overwhelmed. I decided that when I returned to the U.S., to make an effort to advocate for these people and do what I could to help improve their conditions.

Who are some great Afghani writers that your readers should know about, but who are not so well known abroad?

Fariba Nawa, author of *Opium Nation*. Atiq Rahimi, winner of Goncourt Prize in France, author of *Stone of Patience*. Tamim Ansary, author of *West of Kabul, East of New York: An Afghan American Story.*

How does literature in your native language differ from English? Is one easier to write in than the other? Does one express certain things better than the other?

I write exclusively in English now. I could likely feign my way through a short story – a very short story – in Farsi. But generally, I lack a narrative voice in Farsi, and a sense of rhythm and cadence in my head, because it has been decades since I wrote fiction in Farsi. English has become very comfortable for me.

Describe your routine when conceiving of a book and its plot, before the writing begins.

I don't outline at all, I don't find it useful, and I don't like the way it boxes me in. I like the element of surprise and spontaneity, of letting the story find its own way. For this reason, I find that writing a first draft is very difficult and laborious. It is also often quite disappointing. It hardly ever turns out to be what I thought it was, and it usually falls quite short of the ideal I held in my mind when I began writing it. I love to rewrite, however. A first draft is really just a sketch on which I add layer and dimension and shade and nuance and color. Writing for me is largely about rewriting. It is during this process that I discover hidden meanings, connections, and possibilities that I missed the first time around. In rewriting, I hope to see the story getting closer to what my original hopes for it were.

Describe your writing routine, including any unusual rituals associated with the writing process, if you have them.

I write while my kids are at school and the house is quiet. I sequester myself in my office with mug of coffee and computer. I can't listen to music when I write, though I have tried. I pace a lot. Keep the shades drawn. I take brief breaks from writing, 2-3 minutes, by strumming badly on a guitar. I try to get 2-3 pages in per day. I write until about 2PM when I go to get my kids, then I switch to Dad mode.

Is there anything distinctive or unusual about your work space? Besides the obvious, what do you keep on your desk? What is the view from your favorite work space?

What's on my desk? Let's see. I keep taped to the wall behind my monitor old drawings my kids made me. Rainbows, fish, trees, very happy stuff. I have a model of a 1965 Mustang. Books on the shelf, of course, mostly novels. Aforementioned guitar next to desk. A big calendar where I write all my appointments – still doing it on paper, though my wife keeps urging me to use my smart phone for this purpose. I have a mouse pad that is a tiny Afghan rug.

Describe your evening routine.

In the evening I review homework with my kids, help my wife make dinner. Hang out with kids; get in a half hour of reading time with them, until 8:30 or so which is bed time. I put my kids to bed – there are bedtime rituals, relics of my kids' earlier childhood, which I am clinging to dearly. My wife and I then watch an hour or two of TV. Favorites are *Mad Men, Breaking Bad, Downton Abbey, Game of Thrones, Walking Dead* (for me, not her, she hates gore). Off to bed by 11 or so.

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

Bad puns. And Bill Murray.

What is guaranteed to make you cry?

The end of *AI, Artificial Intelligence*. I know I am being manipulated and yet I cannot help it.

If you could bring back to life one deceased person, who would it be and why?

My father. He was a very good friend.

What is your favorite snack?

Peanuts. Dry roasted.

What phrase do you over-use?

"It's coming along." (Meaning the writing, when people ask.)

What is the story behind the publication of your first book?

One day in early 1999, I was flipping channels when I came across a news story on Afghanistan. The story was about the Taliban, and the restrictions they were imposing on Afghan people, particularly women. It mentioned in passing that among the things the Taliban had banned was the sport of kite fighting, which I had grown up playing alongside my brother and my cousins in Kabul. This struck a personal chord with me and I turned off the TV and suddenly found myself sitting at the computer, typing a short story. I thought I was going to write a kind of simple nostalgic story about two boys and their love of kite fighting. But stories have a will of their own, and this one turned out to be this dark tale about betrayal, loss, regret, fathers and sons, loss of homeland, etc. The short story, which was about 25 pages long, sat around for a couple of years. I was fond of it, but thought that though it was deeply flawed and had missed. Nevertheless, it did have an undeniably big heart. I made hesitant gestures toward getting it published by sending it to where I knew beyond a shadow of doubt it would get rejected –*New Yorker, Esquire, Atlantic Monthly*- and rejected it was.

Then two years later, in March of 2001, my wife found the story in the garage. I re-read it, and though I found the same flaws in it again, I saw for the first time the potential for a longer work –the short story format essentially suffocated the story and curtailed its arc. I began expanding it into a book beginning in March of 2001.

Then, six months later, when I was roughly two-thirds of the way through the writing of this book, the twin towers came down. My wife suggested at that time, actually *demanded*, that I submit the manuscript to publishers. I was opposed to it. For one thing, I wasn't sure that it was any good. More importantly, if far more erroneously, I thought no one in the U.S. would want to hear from an Afghan. You must understand that this was in the days and weeks after the attacks, when the wounds were raw and the emotions ran high. Afghans are the pariah now, I told my wife. We're the people whose country was home to the terrorists who

attacked NY. In addition, I worried that it would seem opportunistic, like I was capitalizing on a tragedy.

My wife disagreed. A lawyer by trade, she argued her case to me convincingly. This was, she felt, the ideal time in fact to tell the world an Afghan story. Much of what was being written about Afghanistan in those days and sadly, still now, revolved around the Taliban, Bin Laden, and the war on terror. Misconceptions and pre-conceived notions about Afghanistan abounded. Your book can show them a different face of Afghanistan, my wife said. A more human face. By December of that year, I saw her point. I relented and went back to writing this story.

When it was done, I sent it to a whole slew of agents and began collecting rejection slips. I received more than thirty, before agent Elaine Koster – who has since passed, sadly – called me and agreed to be my agent. Even after I found Elaine, and after the novel was published to generally favorable reviews, I had very serious doubts that anyone would want to read the book. It was a dark story, downright depressing at times, set in a foreign land, and most of the good guys died.

So you can imagine my astonishment at the reception that *The Kite Runner* has received since its publication in 2003. It still amazes me to get letters from India, South Africa, Tel Aviv, Sidney, London, Arkansas, from readers who express their passion to me. Many want to send money to Afghanistan. Some even tell me they want to adopt an Afghan orphan. In these letters, I see the unique ability fiction has to connect people, and I see how universal some human experiences are: shame, guilt, regret, love, friendship, forgiveness, and atonement.

Was there a specific moment when you felt you had "made it" as an author?

The most surreal experience I had was when I was doing press for *The Kite Runner* and was seated next to someone on a plane who was reading my book. It was simultaneously very exciting and very odd. Also, finding that I was the answer to a Jeopardy question. That ranks up there.

What do you need to have produced/completed in order to feel that you've had a productive writing day?

At least three good sentences. And an idea of what I will write the next day. Cannot go in blank the next day, the seed has to be planted today.

Tell us a funny story related to a book tour or book event.

The time in London when I was booked to do a reading as part of a panel. Sadly it was a panel of erotica writers.

What advice would you give to an aspiring author?

I have met so many people who say they've got a book in them, but they've never written a word. To be a writer – this may seem trite, I realize – you have to actually write. You have to write every day, and you have to write whether you feel like it or not. Perhaps most importantly, write for an audience of one – yourself. Write the story you need to tell and want to read. It's impossible to know what others want so don't waste time trying to guess. Just write about the things that get under your skin and keep you up at night. You also have to read a lot – and pay attention. Read the kinds of things you want to write, read the kinds of things you would never write. Learn something from every writer you read.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

"No one he loved ever doubted it."

Tell us something about yourself that is largely unknown and perhaps surprising.

I love mob flicks. If I'm flipping channels and *Good Fellows* is on, I have to watch. I can't not.

Also, I am terrified of chickens. ■

Goran Čolakhodžić: Last Moving

The last mowing another quiet ritual.
It is not obligatory, but it is good,
and pleasant too, because it re-enacts August,
the time when mowing is as contagious as yawning,
when you start the engine and begin,
and when you stop for the first time
you hear the entire motor choir from the near

distance, from all the four
corners of the world.
All of us conquering grass,
mimicking cows,
mimicking some neighbours in
the suburbs of Chicago.

But the last mowing is more
beautiful and manly:
you are alone in it, it's often
dusk and there is fog.
You do something unpleasant
and painful to the grass
for its own good, like a doctor
or a father.
You take care of the machine,
you clean it before it turns in,

you pour out the gasoline,
  dealing with – as you never do,
being a philologist, a scribe and
  a gay – oil and steel. At last
you lock the door, breathing out
  an “everything’s ready”;
now winter may come, now long
  nights without growth
spent far away from the earth,
that’s why you sigh.

Gillian Flynn

Gillian Flynn is an American author and television critic for Entertainment Weekly. She has so far written four novels, *Sharp Objects*, for which she won the 2007 Ian Fleming Steel Dagger for the best thriller; *Dark Places*. She gained fame with the novel *Gone Girl. The Grownup* is her latest book. Her books have received wide praise, including from authors such as Stephen King.

Flynn, who lives in Chicago, grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. She graduated at the University of Kansas, and qualified for a Master's degree from Northwestern University.

Where did you grow up?

Kansas City, Missouri. That's Missouri! It's a distinction that's apparently important to no one but someone from one of the two Kansas Citys. It's astounding the number of friends I have who still vaguely refer to the place of my birth as Kansas: "You going home to Kansas for Labor Day?" and then they catch my look and say, "I know, I know, sorry, you're from *Missouri*." I mean, it is a different state. My folks are still in KCMO, and most of my family, and a lot of my friends, so we try to get home every few months. Kansas City is truly an awesome town. Good music, an amazing art scene, great BBQ (for the record: I'm a Gates girl, all the way), and the nation's only World War I museum that you could spend days at (if you are interested in history; if you're not, you'd probably not do that).

You describe having a (pleasantly) dark childhood, enjoying horror films at an age when most kids would run from them with blankets over their heads...

I was a quirky kid. I think that's the kind way of putting it. My favorite picture book was Edward Gorey's *Gashlycrumb Tinies* (Z is for Zillah who drank too much gin). My favorite game was one I invented with my cousins called Mean Aunt Rosie, where I was a deranged maiden aunt who chased them around the house. I always liked the dark stuff, probably because I was a happy kid who lived in the City of Fountains/ Heart of America and could afford to be. My dad was a film professor, and so I inherited his love of movies, and for me, especially scary movies. We had an old top-loading VCR and I watched *Psycho* a million times. In the mirror, I obsessively practiced the final shot of Anthony Perkins: the Norman Bates smile right at the camera. I can still do it really well.

You're from Kansas. One of the best, and scariest, short stories I've ever read (and re-read) is Stephen King's "Children of the Corn." Stephen King also generously blurbed your debut novel, Sharp Objects. Are you a fan of his? What are some short stories or novels that influenced your desire to write?

Et tu, Noah? Missouri, Missouri! Close enough I could walk over into Kansas, true. But yes, I absolutely agree: "Children of the Corn" is utterly chilling. I discovered King early on—he was another writer we'd read aloud to each other at slumber parties. It was a huge deal, personally, to me when he blurbed *Sharp Objects*. The first novel is such a scary thing, and to get those kind words from him was just such a relief. Even more than a thrill, first it was a relief: OK, this book might be good after all. The guy is a genius, and he's so incredibly generous to new writers. So, every story in *Night Shift*—especially "The Boogeyman" and "I Am the Doorway"—was huge for me. I loved Ellen Raskin's *The Westing Game* as a kid, and I remember trying to write something like it (and maybe finally did with *Gone Girl*—at least Amy's love of games and wordplay). Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* and *Crooked House* were junior-high obsessions, as was Tolkien (I first thought I'd write fantasy). In college I discovered the Joyce Carol Oates short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" which is definitely one of the most incredibly unnerving, frightening short stories ever written. I reread it often: Oates invokes dread so beautifully it makes me weep. In my twenties, Donna Tarrt's *The Secret History* and Scott Smith's *A Simple Plan* were those rare, special books that kept me from doing anything else while I read them (I still have my original copy of both of them, and the pages are smeared with pie, which is what I like to eat when I'm obsessing over books.) And then Dennis Lehane's *Mystic River*. Huge for me, because I'd been trying to write *Sharp Objects* as a story about a mother and daughter and their toxic relationship, and the town that created both of them, and I couldn't get anywhere with it. I took *Mystic River* home from work one night, and I stayed up 'til dawn (no pie this time, sadly, I was not prepared) and the next morning I went into work bleary-eyed and happy and thought: That's how I do it, I tie my story to a mystery. And so I did.

What scares you in a good book? It seems that it takes more to sustain thrills, in this age of film, Internet, and quick-cut editing.

I'm old-fashioned. The stuff I love isn't about gotcha scares, and gore doesn't frighten me much either. It's that sense of dread, and the sense that characters have gotten swept up in a current they can't control, leading them toward something awful and dark. It's why I love Scott Smith's books, and Truman Capote's In *Cold Blood*, Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon* and Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*. That sense of inevitable doom.

You wrote for *Entertainment Weekly* for many years. Do you find writing articles or fiction easier?

They each pose their own challenges. But with articles at least you're employing facts and quotes and actual people, so have something to work with. Usually. The most chilling time any journalist has is that moment when you finish interviewing this charming, charismatic person for a profile, and you had just a grand old time talking to this human being, and you go back to your little Diet Coke-strewn office and transcribe the tape, and when you finish you realize this dazzling creature you've just spent all day with is, in actuality, the most boring person ever. And you have absolutely nothing to work with.

Describe your morning routine.

Drink half a pot of coffee. Go downstairs to my basement writing lair. Sit myself in my chair and threaten myself like a recalcitrant child: You will sit in this chair and you will not move until you get this scene written, missy. Get the caffeine shakes. Regret drinking so much coffee. Finish writing the scene. Reward myself with a game or eight of Galaga.

Do you like to map out your fiction plots ahead of time, or just let it flow?

I let it flow, although that makes it sound more jazzy and less despairing than the actual process often is for me. I wish I could plot more efficiently or stick to an outline, but I just can't. Partly it's because, for me, the plot is the least intriguing part of a book. I start writing because

of certain characters or themes or events I want to explore, but I'm often not sure what form that will take. So I do float along a bit. I probably write two novels for every one I end up with—lots of deleted scenes as I try to figure out what it is I'm really interested in. What it is I'm actually writing.

Do you have a writer friend who helps and inspires you?

My husband is my first and best reader—he's one of those annoying people who reads four books a week and actually retains all the information (early on in our relationship, I suspected/hoped he was skimming, but no such luck). He is really lovely at telling me what's working and not working, and doing it in a way that doesn't put my ears back like a rabid dog, and he's saved me from any number of literary disasters by asking me kind yet pointed questions.

Alright, some author-to-author advice: what has to happen on page one, and in chapter one, to make for a successful thriller that urges you to read on?

For me it's character. I don't need a burst of violence or an obvious villain or anything like that, but I need a voice and I need a character that hooks me. Not a character I like, but a character I find interesting.

Is there anything distinctive or unusual about your work space? I understand you have a video-game filled "basement lair" as you call it. Is this were the magic happens?

Yes, it really is underground, and you have to walk through the world's most frightening unfinished basement to get there: The basement has a root cellar attached to it, and I'm always sure someone with a chainsaw is going to burst out of it. So it sets the mood. I do have my Galaga set. Someday I hope to add Joust and Elevator Action. I have a wobbly desk that I put together poorly about three moves ago, and which is now being held together with gum and string. I keep meaning to replace it. I really hate it. On my wall, I have a *Lord of the Rings* poster, signed by Peter Jackson. The inscription: "To Gillian, a genuine nerd!"

You're a fan of a 1948 photograph by Frederick Sommer. I'm a professor of art history when I'm not writing, so I'm always interested in the role of art in writers' lives. Tell me about this photograph, and if there are other artworks that have particularly spoken to you.

I do love that photo: I just think it captures girlhood perfectly. It's entitled "Livia" (like the malevolent Roman empress) even though that's not the girl's name, but it's certainly the girl's tone. To me, it just captures how girls are: she's dressed so sweetly, with the frock and the braids, and she looks like she's trying to decide whether to go with that role—the darling sweet girl—or definitely, definitely not go with that role. She looks like at any second she could do you great harm. I don't think people give girls enough credit—we are just as feral as our male counterparts. Don't let the braids fool you.

What advice would you give to an aspiring author?

Read all the time and keep writing. There are a million talented writers out there who are unpublished only because they stop writing when it gets hard. Don't do that— keep writing.

Tell us something about you that is largely unknown and perhaps surprising.

I do a killer James Mason impression. ■

Will Self

William Woodard Self commonly known as Will Self, is an English novelist, journalist, political commentator and television personality. Self is the author of ten novels, five collections of shorter fiction, three novellas, and five collections of non-fiction writing. His work has been translated into 22 languages; his 2002 novel, *Dorian* was longlisted for the Booker Prize, and his novel *Umbrella* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. His fiction is known for being satirical, grotesque, and fantastical. His subject matter often includes mental illness, illegal drugs, and psychiatry.

Where did you grow up?

In the hinterland between a dull North London suburb called East Finchley and a rather tonier one called the Hampstead Garden Suburb. I also had a year in Ithaca, upstate New York.

Where and what did you study?

I read Politics and Philosophy at Oxford University

Where do you live and why?

I live in Stockwell, a rather edgier inner-city district of South London. Why? Because it's central - I can walk to the West End or Soho in 40 minutes. And also because it was the most house we could get for our money - we have four children.

Of which of your books or projects are you most proud?

The next one - all the others are lost to me, so may Elvises who have left the building.

What do you consider the main differences between American and English literature?

The main differences between contemporary English and American literature is that the baleful pseudo-professionalism imparted by all those crap MFA writing programs has yet to settle like a miasma of standardization on the English literary scene - but it's beginning to happen.

What about the differences between American and British humor?

They're largely inconsequential. It's a myth that Americans are incapable of the levels of irony exhibited by the class-bound English - I should know, as an Anglo-American.

You write novels as well as articles. Does your approach differ, depending on the medium in which you write?

Journalism is largely a craft - I consider literary fiction an art. My journalism is mostly - but not always - functional.

Describe your morning routine.

I get up, service whatever children there are in the house, and then write. I prefer to write first drafts as soon as possible after waking, so that the oneiric inscape is still present to me.

What is a distinctive habit or affectation of yours?

The use of the word "oneiric."

What is your favorite item of clothing?

A Day-Glo orange jump suit - such as the ones worn by the Guantanamo inmates - across the shoulders of mine it reads: "24 HOUR EMERGENCY WRITER."

Please recommend three books (not your own) to your readers.

The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst by Nicholas Tomalin and Ron Hall
The Unequalled Self by Claire Tomalin
Solaris by Stantislaw Lem

Do you have a writer friend who helps and inspires you?

I regarded the late JG Ballard as a friend and mentor. Since he famously remarked that 'For a writer, death is always a career move', I like to think his new job is simply to be my friend and mentor.

What is a place that inspires you?

Duh! London.

Describe your routine when conceiving of a book and its plot, before the writing begins.

I keep notes - sometimes for four or five years while something gestates. Then at a certain point the notes reach a fissionable mass.

Describe your writing routine, including any unusual rituals associated with the writing process, if you have them.

As I say, I write first drafts in the morning - on a manual typewriter. I aim for 800-1,200 words. Once I'm nearing the end of the first draft I begin the second (which involves re-keying the text into a computer), so I'm working on the beginning and the end of the book simultaneously. Then I'll do the same with the third and fourth drafts.

Is there anything distinctive or unusual about your work space? Besides the obvious, what do you keep on your desk? What is the view from your favorite work space?

It's pretty strange - there are images of it on my website: www.will-self.com

What do you do when you are stuck or have temporary writer's block?

This never happens.

Describe your ideal day.

Any more or less ordinary day is fine by me - I like to walk, so if I have the opportunity to write in the morning and walk in the afternoon it's a good day; then some family time in the evening.

Describe your evening routine.

Watch a bit of TV - the astonishing burgeoning of quality US drama series has been a great boon in the past decade or so. The Sopranos, The Wire, Breaking Bad - these are the *Comedie Humaine* of the modern era.

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

My children.

What is guaranteed to make you cry?

Anything happening to them.

Do you have any superstitions?

I don't not believe in God.

What is something you always carry with you?

Cigarettes. I smoke unusual and very strong black tobaccos that I hand roll - so I always have to have my own with me.

If you could bring back to life one deceased person, who would it be and why?

JG Ballard. I think he'd be hugely surprised.

What is your favorite snack?

My favorite smack is definitely heroin - but nowadays, as Robert Stone once said, I admire it from afar.

What phrase do you over-use?

"Fuck off."

What is the story behind the publication of your first book?

I had a girlfriend who was working at a publisher's - Bloomsbury. She gave it to Stephen Amidon, the novelist, who was reading for them at the time. He recommended that they publish. The rest is "herstory."

Was there a specific moment when you felt you had "made it" as an author?

When the first book was accepted for publication - it's been all downhill since then.

What do you need to have produced/completed in order to feel that you've had a productive writing day?

800-1,200 words.

Tell us a funny story related to a book tour or book event.

A very beautiful young woman once asked me to sign her breasts. That was back when I was a hip young thing - it's been all downhill since then.

What would you do for work, if you were not a writer?

I wanted to be an academic - I was planning a thesis on the connections between the epistemology of Marx and Wittgenstein, then there were some trifling drug offences and it blew that one away.... Now I have a professorship at Brunel University in contemporary thought, so I suppose if I weren't writing fiction I'd devote all my energies to that.

What advice would you give to an aspiring author?

Consider whether you're prepared to spend at least 20 years of your life in solitary confinement - if not, don't bother.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

"Investigative Reporter of the Year."

Tell us something about yourself that is largely unknown and perhaps surprising.

I have a vestigial third buttock (although I don't, as many people imagine, have two anuses). ■

Yolanda Castaño: Pretending that the pain she feels is pain

My looks suggest I like
things that I do not.

Everyone speaks through
closed lips.

As does this.
The walls of a grotto where, ten
thousand years ago,
someone sullies the natural
essence of the stone.
Coins, alternating current,
a girl born with beauty in her
genes,

pock-marked by hang-ups.
  Like an orgasm in Hedy
  Lamarr,like Nikola Tesla's
  eyes.
A country where one needn't
  be,
but can merely
appear to.
A peeling away of gloves,
a touch of spice, the most
  prestigious
of all dubbing schools.

Capital is the nightmare
of being caught in our symbolic
  capacity.

The most flattering of all:
mortuary makeup.
Years of work turned into
equestrian granite.
An industry of poverty, wolfram
in kitchen gardens.
Like an ardent body, aware but
feigning innocence.
Cheap false eyelashes, an
image
identical to itself.

Like political poetry confused
with a selfie in the bathroom
mirror.
The metonymy of evil.
The normative wrenched.

A set stage, a menu, an
  emergency escape from the
  fires of discourse.
Something whose roots stretch
  out to the air and longs
to return to the soil, once time
has elapsed since it burst into
  light--
like the eyes in potatoes.

The poem's gaze is like this too:
worker ants in single file,
flattened forever
in timeless lines,

shreds of gestures
that look like
something else.

Dame Jane Goodall

Dame Jane Morris Goodall, formerly Baroness Jane van Lawick-Goodall, is a British primatologist, ethologist, anthropologist, and UN Messenger of Peace. Considered to be the world's foremost expert on chimpanzees, Goodall is best known for her 55-year study of social and family interactions of wild chimpanzees in Gombe Stream National Park, Tanzania. She is the founder of the Jane Goodall Institute and the Roots&Shoots program, and she has worked extensively on conservation and animal welfare issues. She has served on the board of the Nonhuman Rights Project since its founding in 1996.

Where did you grow up?

When I grew up, World War Two was raging and when I was five years old, I went with my mother and baby sister to the south of England, Bournemouth. We had very little money, but a nice big garden. It was my grandmother's house. Right from the beginning it was animals, animals, animals. I was watching them. Writing stories about them. So I was born like that. But I didn't have any desire to be a scientist. I wanted to be a naturalist. When I was ten, I saved enough money to buy a second-hand book called *Tarzan of the Apes*. I fell passionately in love with Tarzan, and was most distressed when he married the wrong Jane.

Tell me about your earliest personal interaction with a chimpanzee.

My earliest interaction...I wasn't a child. I had a job in London, and saw two chimps in the zoo. I was very sorry for them, because they had an absolutely dreadful exhibit. The reason I studied chimpanzees was that when I finally saved up money to get to Africa, as I was invited for a holiday by a school friend, I heard about the late Dr. Louis Leakey. The paleontologist. And it was he who asked if I was prepared to go and study chimpanzees. I would have gone to study any animal. I just wanted to be living out in the wild with animals, surrounded by them and writing books about them.

Could you tell some books about naturalism that were particularly influential to you?

Well, it's difficult, really, because I'm not joking when I say that *Tarzan* really influenced me. The jungle, the forest, and animals. Just what I wanted. I also had a book which was not for children, but my grandmother had saved up coupons from, I don't know, tea or something. And the prize was this book called *The Miracle of Lives*. It was literally divided into sections, a section on different tongues for different purposes, different feet for different purposes. A natural history of mammals. Evolution. There was even a history of medicine. It was an amazing book, and I spent hours and hours and hours with this book. I looked at the pictures, copied the drawings. Then also I suppose Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known*. And Jules Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Any book like that.

IF you're such a fan of fiction, have you ever thought of a career in fiction, as opposed to science?

I don't know if I ever thought of a career in anything. When I was growing up, girls didn't think about things in those terms. I just wanted to be out in the wild with animals. I don't know that I, sort of, contemplated…in those days you did what you could, and then somebody married you. That's how it was when I was growing up.

What is it like to be made a Dame? We Americans are fascinated with the knighthood concept.

Well, you've got these series of honors. It starts with an MBE, a Member of the British Empire. Then you've got an OBE, Order of the British Empire. Which they gave me. No wait, they gave me Commander of the British Empire, one up from that, which was the first one I had. And then, a few years later…I don't know, people suggest a name, then others endorse a name, and it goes to a committee. It's formal. Quite honestly…I mean there isn't a British Empire, is there? It's an anachronism.

Was the actual ceremony itself moving for you?

The CBE, that was much more moving, because my mother was still alive. She was so excited and proud. My father came, although they were divorced, they came together. My sister was there. That was actually very meaningful. It was the Queen, who handed it to me. And the Dame bit? I just don't like being a "Dame." A Dame is some funny person in a pantomime. If it was a knight…it's the equivalent of a knight, but for a woman. But a "Dame?" Anyway… I don't use the title.

You seem to have a good sense of humor, as in the incident with the Gary Larson *Far Side* cartoon. It seems like quite an honor to be so well-known as to be recognizable in a popular cartoon, and to be included in a Simpsons episode.

Yeah, I was absolutely delighted to be in Mr. Larson's cartoon. I think his cartoons are fantastic. I had this stupid executive director of the Jane Goodall Institute back then, and she actually wrote—I was far away in

Africa and had no idea what she was doing—she wrote to Gary Larson's people and said she was thinking of suing them, because that cartoon suggested that I had sexual relationships with chimpanzees! I mean, honestly, can you believe it?! About two years later, Gary Larson was invited by one of my friend to come to visit. He said, "Well, I don't think Jane will welcome me." He didn't know that I was shocked about this ridiculous gesture, and he didn't know how much I loved his cartoons. He came, and we sorted it all out.

How did you address the plagiarism accusations around your new book, *Seeds of Hope*?

In hindsight...Noah, I just got the book in my hands today, you know, the one they send around. It arrived the same time as me. I just arrived from Africa, and the book got here a half an hour after me. Isn't that amazing?

Congratulations. That's always a special moment for a writer, when they hold in their hands the first copy of their book.

I am so, so glad that I had that extra time. Publisher's deadlines, when you're on the road 300 days a year, as I am—they're very difficult to meet. Going through this book with my co-author, who is a truly wonderful person. She did a lot of the nitty-gritty. But I am really really happy not for the way it happened, but that I had the time to go back through the book and get all the references right. I need hardly say what a shock it was when these accusations came pouring in. I mean, oh gosh. But all's well that ends well.

Describe your morning routine.

My biggest problem—I'm not quite answering the question. The only time I have for writing is when I'm back home in England, in the house I grew up in, where all my things are, my books. Many times, I've got to try to get a lot of writing done in just, maybe, five days. That means setting the alarm for five o'clock. Desperately writing until breakfast, going back to write again. Always taking an hour off to spend with the dog. And in the evening I spend time with my sister—we own the house

together and she lives in it with her family. Then I sometimes have to go back and write late into the night. It's a very stressful way to write, high and edgy.

Is there anything distinctive or unusual about your work space?

All the writing is done at home, in my bedroom, up under the eaves of the house. It's got all my things in it, from all over the world. Lots and lots of books—as many as will fit in such a small space. I write on a laptop. My best position for writing is sitting on the bed, with my legs stretched out in front of me. I can write all day like that!

What is guaranteed to make you laugh?

Well, hm. What is guaranteed to make me laugh? Something funny, I mean...

What is guaranteed to make you cry?

There are so many moving stories about amazing, inspirational people, inspirational moments with chimpanzees.

Do you have any superstitions?

Only silly little things we've done all our lives. If you drop a knife you mustn't pick it up. If you pick up someone else's knife, you must say the name of a poet. If you spill salt you must throw it over your left shoulder.

If you could bring back to life one deceased person, who would it be and why?

This is so challenging, because there are so many people I want to bring back to life. The one person I really want to bring back is someone I never met. My grandfather. I heard so much about him, and everyone says that I inherited a lot of characteristics from him. And I've heard that he was completely wonderful. I'd love to actually meet him. Gosh, if I could bring back anyone else—it would take all day! So many people I wish I could bring back to life.

Tell us something about yourself that is largely unknown and perhaps surprising.

The problem with this is I've written so many books about secret parts of myself, and most people don't talk about themselves. Most things I do everybody knows about.

What would you like carved onto your tombstone?

No one's ever asked me that before. I'm not going to have a tombstone, but that's beside the point. I'm going to have my ashes distributed throughout the countries where we have youth groups. Each one will throw a tiny pinch of me, and I will grow into a tree all over the world! ■

Laura Accerboni: Playing the Drowned

Coldness
is rather unpleasant.
If you tremble
your credibility
turns to nothing.
That's why I've learned
to plant nails
in my hands.
I am now
a steady person.

Vlada Urošević

Born in Skopje in 1934. Studied literature at Skopje University, where he worked as a full-time professor at the Department of General and Comparative Literature. Author of numerous volumes of poetry, short stories, and literary criticism. His works have been translated into Serbian, Croatian, Slovene, French, and Polish. He has translated over 30 titles from Macedonian into Serbian and Croatian and some 20 from the other languages of former Yugoslavia and from French into Macedonian. He has won many prizes.

Full name:

In literature it is Vlada Urosevic. In my official documents I am Vladimir, but in the time of my early childhood there was one man in the neighborhood who people called "crazy Vladimir" and with whom my close ones were not in good relations. Because of that my name was cut to Vlada.

Where were you born?

I was born in Skopje (Republic of Macedonia). At the beginning of the Second World War my family was deported from Skopje. The cause was eternal national and nationalistic misunderstandings.

Where do you live now?

I came back to Skopje after Second World War and have lived there since 1947.

What is your profession (in addition to poetry)?

When I was young I worked in movie production and also as TV and newspaper journalist. When certain democratization came, after 1980, I was invited to teach at the university. I finished my working career as eminent professor at the department of comparative literature. Despite my retirement, I sometimes have lectures there.

What was your earliest encounter with poetry?

In the early childhood I didn't like poems for children – I thought that they were stupid. I think when I had 8 years I read that horrible poem by Goethe "King of Alders". I was horrified by the darkness which was coming out og the poem, but in the same time fascinated by it.

Please recommend a "must-read" book by one of your countrymen, that we might not have heard of.

At the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century a tailor who was collecting folk tales lived in Macedonia. His name is Marko Cepenkov, he was not only writing, but also finishing them. He was remaking folklore as Janez Trdina in Slovenia, V. B. Yeats in Ireland, Lafcadio Hearn

(alias Yakumo Koisumi) in Japan. His stories about vampires, witches and ghosts have a lot of charm and I think that those stories would be interesting for European readers, if there will be someone to translate it.

What book is on your night stand right now?

On my night stand, now, there are some books from the German writer W.G. Sebald, who is, for me, a big discovery. Otherwise, the book which is often at that place is: "Cornet a des" ("Box for dices"), collection of ultra short prose whose author is Max Jacob.

Tell us about your routine when writing poetry? Any quirks, habits, eccentricities?

On my working table I have, always, a couple of stones from the sea shore. They are always a challenge – oh if I only can make something so perfect and hermetic!

Where do you find poetic inspiration?

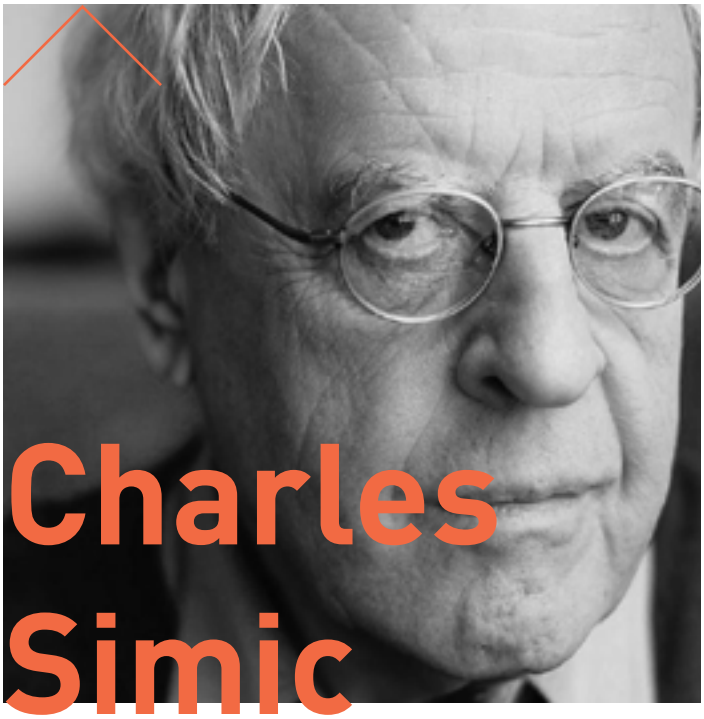
Every day there is lots of information coming to us. When, in that string, I notice some similarities, it is a moment for making a poem, all the same in verse or in prose.

What is your favorite (non-literary) artwork?

I have been attracted to painting my whole life. From all painters that I admire I will mark off Giorgio de Chirico. Mysterious atmosphere which is on his paintings (from his metaphysical period) is something that I would like to achieve in my poems.

What single line of poetry would you want carved onto your tombstone or recited at your funeral?

"Use secret passes today, tomorrow already they will became public" ■



Charles Simic

Charles Simic is widely recognized as one of the most visceral and unique poets writing today. Simic's work has won numerous awards, among them the 1990 Pulitzer Prize, the MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," the Griffin International Poetry Prize, and, simultaneously, the Wallace Stevens Award and appointment as U.S. Poet Laureate. He taught English and creative writing for over thirty years at the University of New Hampshire. Although he emigrated to the U.S. from Yugoslavia as a teenager, Simic writes in English.

You've been writing poetry for 55 years. What makes poetry so compelling? You are one of those authors who rarely deviated into other genres.

It is a kind of obsession. It is mostly connected to this feeling that one has never quite done it as well as one has hoped for. It is certainly connected to a sort of an ambition to write better poems. But none of this is really conscious, it becomes a form of compulsion. Some people have been playing an instrument their whole lives and they are still struggling with some tunes sometimes.

Margaret Atwood once said that if she would strive for perfection in writing, she would never write a word.

I can agree with her in a sense that writing is not about taking a piece of paper and saying »this either be perfect or I forget about it«. No, it's never about that. You write because of this compulsion I have mentioned earlier. Your eyes, your imagination have seen things you want to put down and that takes you places. In writing I revise a lot. To me a poem is a sort of a mistery. With most of them I had no idea where I would end. For instance, I thought I would be writing about my grandfather and his dog, but by the time the poem is finished, there is no grandfather and certainly no dog in it.

But you do have a poem with a cucumber in it, much like your contemporary Robert Hass. What is it with cucumbers and poets?

(Laughter) That is a kind of a joke poem. Sea cucumber is not a vegetable, it is actually an animal. The narrator of the poem is writing a love poem to somebody called Ellen.

What sort of a responsibility is it to be one of the most read and translated poets?

These things are a great compliment, but most of the time I don't know about that anyway. Very often I do not see the books in translation nor do I meet the readers. Once I was at an international poetry conference in Spain. I was sitting next to a guy and suddenly he exclaimed he translated my books into Romanian and I had to admit I never saw it.

He promised he will send me some of the books, but it never came to that. It's a typical Balkan thing, they would promise you everything, but they never do it.

Are you very attached to your work? Some of the poets I've met so far claim they used to or still have a problem with their poems in translation, because the translations change the meaning and the effect of their verses – even if they are made with diligence.

I can only judge the translations if the texts are in French, Serbian, a little bit of Italian, because I know these languages. But most of the time I have no idea what happens to my poems in translation. For instance, my poems were translated into German by a great poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger and over the years people have told me that he made a lot of mistakes in his translations.

Since you have mentioned the Balkans – how tied are you to the region today?

It's been 50 years since I've left Yugoslavia, very eventful years because of the WWII, the German occupation, the Italian occupation. All that made a tremendous impression on me, as it did on everybody. I spent many years translating poets from former Yugoslavia – I needed help with Slovenian and Macedonian. That sort of kept me in touch, but today I don't visit very often.

But you still made an observation about the Balkan people: they promise, but don't neccesarily hold their promise.

Oh, yes, people promise and they can be very loud in doing so. I don't get upset about it, but it is still very obvious. I think Slovenians are slightly different in this area. Anyhow, my brother was an European agent for jazz musicians, Miles Davis for instance, and he brought them to the Balkans and he once said that signing a contract with Slovenians was very secure, whereas signing a contract with Serbs or Romanians was like signing a contract with Sicilians. This is just the way it is.

Music seems to be very important to you, your family was musical, your poems are musical.

I was surrounded by music. My mother was a teacher of singing and students would come home to have classes. There was always someone singing – everything from opera to modern songs. My father had a beautiful voice, my parents even met in a music school. The radio was always on. As soon as we've moved to the US, my father took me to a jazz club. So, musicality derives from my family partly.

What sort of an environment do you need to be able to write? There is this general image of the lonesome poet locked up in a room somewhere far away.

Most of my life I've worked. My parents split up and united in the United states. At the beginning it was very hard, but then my father made a lot of money, but spent it all. He was one of those people who couldn't keep any money, which drove my mother nuts. But when I went to the university – they were in Chicago and I was in New York – I had to work during the day and study at night. I had a full social life and found time to write. I have no complaints about this. Once I finished school, my rhytm was similar, work during the day, writing at night. I don't need a kind of a special setting really. Me and my wife have a house in New Hampshire, it's near the lake, it's really picturesque, but I don't like my cabinet with that fantastic view, I can't write there, so my wife started using it and it turned into a storage place. ■

Andre Rudolph: Nocturne for Jesse Thor

I was in touch with a saint
in high, polished shoes

he let his feet carry him
***with dignity*,**
he cleared his bowels
at dawn *with dignity*

that's the kind of guy he was.

dead magpies fell from his
shoulders
when he shrugged

he rubbed his dick against the
walls
of buildings when it itched

and smelt of fresh sperm
and rosemary, like a king

that's the kind of guy he was.

the tame buildings whipped up
the parting of his hair
until he laughed

the sides of the triangles went
red
when he did it to them

that’s the kind of guy he was.

breakneck, insomniac
and expressive
as he hurried past me

and gave me his blessing,
  saying
“eat up your pizza, honey,
and die!”

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