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IN  
PERENNIAL

FOER'S MENTOR, JOYCE CAROL OATES, IS AN INSPIRATION IN HIS TEACHING.



PHOTO © ADAM BERRY

creative writing

# Wunderkind in the Classroom

**NOVELIST JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER DISCUSSES FICTION—AND HOW TO TEACH IT**

by Catherine Fata / CAS '09

**J**onathan Safran Foer went from receptionist to best-selling and critically acclaimed author with the 2002 publication of his debut novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Harper Perennial), when he was just 25 years old. Praised by the likes of Francine Prose and John Updike and winner of the Guardian First Book Award, the National Jewish Book Award, and the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award, the novel announced the arrival of a brazen new talent to be reckoned with. The responses from critics were polarizing—everything from hailing him as a genius to calling his work gimmicky.



With a second novel under his belt (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Mariner Books) and a work of nonfiction due out next year, Foer has joined the faculty at NYU as a professor in the Graduate Creative Writing Program. And it turns out that his pedagogical philosophy is as unorthodox as his literary style. David Grumblatt, an MFA candidate, recalls assignments as varied as oral storytelling, eulogy writing, and singing karaoke. “[Foer’s class] was much more focused on the process of writing, rather than the creation of a finished piece,” Grumblatt says. “We were encouraged to experiment, to be playful, and to question how we approached our own writing.”

During his first semester on campus last fall, *NYU Alumni Magazine* caught up with Foer,

who is now 32 and, dressed in jeans and sporting a close-cropped haircut, can easily pass for one of his students.

**AS A TEACHER YOU MUST BE REMINDED OF HOW MUCH EFFECT ONE OF YOUR TEACHERS—JOYCE CAROL OATES, WHOSE CLASS YOU TOOK AS AN UNDERGRAD AT PRINCETON—HAD ON YOU.**

I would not have become a writer if I hadn’t met her. She encouraged me when there was very little to encourage. Really. I didn’t know I wanted to be a writer. I didn’t think that I was particularly talented. I wasn’t producing work that was great. But she felt like she saw something that was worth, you know, fostering. And one lesson she helped me learn is that at that age, most

people are very impressionable. A few kind words or a few unkind words can really send somebody into a different orbit. And she did that for me.

#### HOW CAN WRITING BE TAUGHT?

What people are born with, more than any talent, is stories: where their families come from, how they talked around the dinner table, or didn't talk, the conflict of their childhoods, things like that. In terms of my approach, it's not to perfect pieces of writing but rather to encourage students to think about writing in ways they might not have before.... There's plenty of time to perfect your craft, whereas when you're a student, it's a good time to have your basic notions of writing changed. So a lot of my assignments test the boundaries of fiction.

#### WHAT'S YOUR WRITING REGIMEN?

That's like saying, "What's your regimen for getting out of a burning building?" I mean, stop, drop, and roll is generally a good idea. Be close to the floor is generally a good idea. Don't breathe smoke. Don't catch fire.

Writing is a kind of emergency, it's kind of a horrible thing to have to write. But I think ultimately each person finds his own way or her own way out of it. My regimen has changed a lot since I started. And I don't really even have one now. I like trying to start in the morning, and I like trying to spend three or four hours a day doing it, but it doesn't always happen like that.

#### AND WHEN IT'S A STRUGGLE?

It's really always a struggle. And I don't say that flippantly. It really is always a struggle. And how do I work through it? Sometimes I just work through it. Sometimes I just put it down and go away and come back. Sometimes I have to put it down for a really long time, like weeks or months, and come

back. And sometimes things have to fall apart in order to come back together in a way that's good. But it's hard. And not only does each writer face these problems differently, but each project presents different problems.

#### DOES WHAT YOU READ INFLUENCE WHAT YOU WRITE?

Everything influences what one writes—everything interesting does. I'm rereading a book, which is maybe my favorite of all books. It's called *Life? or Theater?* by a woman named Charlotte Salomon. I only know about it because I happened to walk into a museum in Amsterdam where I saw it. It's halfway between paintings and a book—just a total work of art. Every time I open it, it inspires me but also totally debilitates me because it's so good.

#### BOTH OF YOUR NOVELS ARE STORIES FROM DIFFERENT TIME PERIODS INTERTWINED INTO ONE. IS THERE A REASON YOU CHOSE TO DO THEM THIS WAY?

Sometimes there's no reason for things in writing. That's what's nice about writing, nice about art. It's not responsible to reason in the same way that everything else in life is.

#### YOUR BOOKS HAVE BEEN HIGHLY PRAISED, BUT ALSO HARSHLY CRITICIZED. WHAT IS THAT LIKE?

It was just, like, a matter of fact. It didn't hurt my feelings or anything like that. I'd rather people like what I do than dislike what I do. But as long as people are having very strong reactions, then I'm happy. Because what I don't want someone to say is, "It was a nice book." I want someone to say that I really connected with it or I really hated it. And I would prefer the former, but I would take the latter over a lukewarm response. ■

## ■ bibliofile

### PET FOOD POLITICS: THE CHIHUAHUA IN THE COAL MINE (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS)

MARION NESTLE  
PAULETTE GODDARD  
PROFESSOR OF NUTRITION,  
FOOD STUDIES, AND  
PUBLIC HEALTH  
STEINHARDT



In her latest book, nutritionist Marion Nestle chronicles how what started with a few telephone calls about sick cats snowballed into the largest food recall in American history. Using official U.S. government documents, interviews with doctors and researchers, and Internet blog chatter, the best-selling author tracks contaminated ingredients from China to Canada's Menu Foods company pet food—and eventually into barnyard feed and the human food chain. Though investigations by the FDA and USDA eventually uncovered a lapse in oversight, the episode is a cautionary tale about the food-safety hazards of globalization. As Nestle notes, "Even our most skeptical colleagues could see that pet foods were the proverbial canary—in this instance, the Chihuahua—in the coal mine."

—Kevin Fallon

### OUT OF THE BLUE: A HISTORY OF LIGHTNING: SCIENCE, SUPERSTITION, AND AMAZING STORIES OF SURVIVAL (DEACORTE PRESS)

JOHN S. FRIEDMAN  
GSAS '74



Steve Marshburn Sr. sat at his bank-teller window clutching a metal date stamp when a lightning bolt suddenly zapped the bank's drive-up window microphone, which, by chance, was pointed at his spine. "It felt as if someone had hit me with a baseball bat," Marshburn tells John S. Friedman in *Out of the Blue*. Tracing the history of lightning through Greek mythology, scientific study, and even the *Harry Potter* series, Friedman, a contributor to *The Nation* and an Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker, unearths some of the mystery surrounding this natural phenomenon. Most gripping are the stories of survivors, such as Marshburn and a mountaineer group struck while climbing the Tetons in 2003, which underline the fragility of human life and how—out of the blue—it can be ripped from our grasp.

—Jackie Risser

# WHAT CAME BEFORE

**FOLLOWING AN ACCLAIMED MEMOIR AND FILM ADAPTATION, JAMES McBRIDE PENS A HARRIET TUBMAN-INSPIRED SLAVE NARRATIVE**

by Adelle Waldman

**F**or James McBride, an old-fashioned aesthetic is no mere decoration. The vintage typewriter that sits on his desk could well be the one on which Ralph Ellison toiled away in a Harlem basement in the early 1950s, but it's where McBride works, often after penning a first draft in longhand. The typewriter—like the man himself, who is often dressed in suit, tie, and fedora—may seem anachronistic in the sleek, new of-

his childhood in Brooklyn as one of 12 black siblings raised by his white, widowed, Jewish mother. He followed that up with the 2001 novel *Miracle at St. Anna* (Riverhead), made into last fall's film by Spike Lee (TSOA '82, HON '98). The story, which the author himself adapted as a screenplay, follows a small group of soldiers from the U.S. Army's all-black division during World War II who are stranded behind enemy lines in a remote Italian village and become objects of fasci-

“The minute you start to judge people as a creative writer, you are dead creatively.”

fic at 20 Cooper Square, where McBride is a distinguished writer in residence at NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. But a classical elegance is appropriate for a man who keeps turning his eye to the past.

McBride, who is also a professional jazz saxophonist and award-winning composer, first gained literary fame with his best-selling 1996 memoir, *The Color of Water* (Riverhead). Published in more than 16 languages, it chronicled

nation to the townspeople. With prose that gains force in large part because of its restraint, the author rarely comments overtly on the potent injustice that underlies his story.

McBride stepped even further into the past for his most recent novel, *Song Yet Sung* (Riverhead). Released in paperback in January, it tells the story of slaves living on Maryland's Eastern shore in the 1850s. The haunting and complex portrait teems with a sense of un-



easiness as whites, aware of the tenuousness—both morally and pragmatically—of their dominant position, live in fear that their slaves will revolt, or escape to freedom in neighboring Pennsylvania. “How close it all seemed,” one widowed slave owner thinks. “Just eighty

miles.” McBride also depicts a society riddled with tensions between not just white and black but also wealthy plantation owners and struggling oystermen, and he captures the lawlessness of life in this remote, swampy, and superstitious region, a peninsula isolated from

JAMES McBRIDE HAS WORN THE HATS OF MEMOIRIST, NOVELIST, JAZZ SAXOPHONIST, COMPOSER, AND SCREENWRITER.



PHOTO © SARAH LEEN

the rest of the East Coast by the Chesapeake Bay.

It was the place itself that originally attracted McBride. Feeling stuck in his writing, he set off one day from his home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to visit Ford's Theatre, where Lincoln was shot.

But on the drive to Washington, D.C., something came over him. "I just went to the left," he says. "I was trolling for ideas." He knew that Harriet Tubman was born on the Eastern shore, but when he got there he was struck by the palpable history of the region. "You can smell it, you can feel it when you are down there," he says. "You learn silence. You learn to listen to the land."

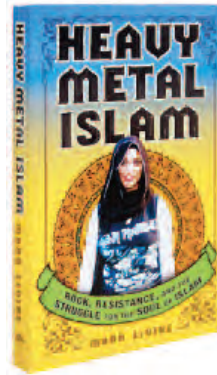
The story that emerged was loosely inspired by Tubman herself. McBride's protagonist, Liz Spocott, is a beautiful slave who escapes from the plantation owner who has been raping her since she was a teenager. Liz, like Tubman, suffered a head injury, and it leads her to have prophetic dreams, one of which enables her to free 14 slaves trapped in an attic. Their escape sets off a chain of events that endanger all the blacks in the area, including those vital to the operation of the "gospel train," as the Underground Railroad is called. What follows is both a suspenseful chase and a meditation on what it means to be a good person in a society riddled with moral contradictions.

McBride says that he is interested in bringing out the humanity in all of his characters, even the ones whose livelihood is derived from chasing down "human chattel." "The minute you start to judge people as a creative writer, you are dead creatively," he says. "Judgments are the cork stops of ideas, and if you are a person who lives by his wits, then you'd be foolish to put a cork stop in the bottle."

And for McBride, his bottle of ideas is full of the past: neglected corners of history rife with human drama on both the internal and societal levels. It's no wonder, then, that the man himself—with his typewriter and fedora—pays homage in his person to what came before. ■

## ■ bibliofile

**HEAVY METAL ISLAM: ROCK, RESISTANCE, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF ISLAM**  
(THREE RIVERS PRESS)  
MARK LeVINE  
GSAS '99



In *Heavy Metal Islam*, Mark LeVine canvasses much of the Muslim world, from Morocco to Pakistan, to examine a burgeoning—and potentially democratizing—movement of young metalheads. Here metal, as well as hip-hop, punk, and reggae, is used not so much as an anthem of teenage angst but to protest authoritarianism (as in the case of an Iranian rocker) and to celebrate Islam (one Turkish band recorded the Muslim testament of faith over a "driving hard-rock groove"). In detailing this subculture, LeVine, a guitarist and professor of modern Middle Eastern history at the University of California-Irvine, paints a picture rarely seen by outsiders: a generation impassioned by their love of both Islam and the secular music of the West.

—Rhett Bixler

**ONLY LOVE CAN BREAK YOUR HEART**  
(THE NEW PRESS)  
DAVID SAMUELS  
ADJUNCT ASSISTANT PROFESSOR  
ARTHUR L. CARTER  
JOURNALISM INSTITUTE



From college kids sloshing through raw sewage at Woodstock '99 to a company charged with demolishing a landmark Las Vegas casino, David Samuels' collection of stories paints brief portraits of the relatively unexamined lives of a wide-ranging cast of Americans. The essays, each previously published in magazines such as *Harpers's* and *The New Yorker*, combine animated reporting, personal reflection, and social analysis, harkening back to New Journalism greats such as Joan Didion. Although individual characters—from environmentalists celebrating the destruction at the Seattle WTO protests to workers at a Nevada nuclear test site—get limited page time, Samuels writes with a compassion that gives readers just enough information to care about them, if only for a moment.

—Padraic Wheeler

# Diagnosis

by Sharon Olds

Erich Maria Remarque Professor at NYU

*By the time I was six months old, she knew something  
was wrong with me. I got looks on my face  
she had not seen on any child  
in the family, or the extended family,  
or the neighborhood. My mother took me in  
to the pediatrician with the kind hands,  
a doctor with a name like a suit size for a wheel:  
Hub Long. My mom did not tell him  
what she thought in truth, that I was Possessed.  
It was just these strange looks on my face—  
he held me, and conversed with me,  
chatting as one does with a baby, and my mother  
said, She's doing it now! Look!  
She's doing it now! and the doctor said,  
What your daughter has  
is called a sense  
of humor. Ohhh, she said, and took me  
back to the house where that sense would be tested  
and found to be incurable.*

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# AMERICANS ABROAD

**IN DAPHNE BEAL'S DEBUT NOVEL,  
AN ADVENTUROUS YOUNG WOMAN  
COMES OF AGE IN NEPAL**

by Eryn Loeb / GSAS '07

In 1989, eager for a break from her theory-obsessed, hyperpolitical college campus, Daphne Beal (GSAS '98) spent a year living in Nepal and quickly fell under its spell. Ending up there, she says, was “a bit of dumb luck,” but as she studied and trekked through the mountainous country, its beautiful landscape and suffused sense of spirituality began to ease her restlessness. “And I really loved that it had a stronger oral tradition than a literary tradition,” Beal remembers. “Even then I knew that I wanted to be a writer.”

After she returned to the United States and graduated from Brown University, the experience kept a tight hold on her. Over the years, as Beal pursued a journalistic career, she thought about it all the

her time there and to untangle some of her thoughts from that early trip, as well as subsequent visits to the region. The result appeared last summer: *In the Land of No Right Angles* (Anchor), Beal's gorgeous, stirring first novel.

At its center is Alex, a 20-year-old Midwestern woman traveling through Nepal on leave from college, and the prickly, intense friendships she forms with a young Nepali woman named Maya and with Will, an older expat American on an endless quest for enlightenment—which he seeks mostly through a parade of young, attractive women. The three conspire, dream, and drift apart over a period of eight years, culminating in a fraught reunion in Bombay.

Throughout the book, Alex wrestles with what it means to be an outsider in the place that's

“There's a great kind of narcissism to being 20 that's fun—and also fun to grow out of.”

time. “It was almost like being obsessed with someone you'd once been in love with,” she says. While some of her journalism work focused on the region, Beal felt she could engage more deeply with her own understanding of it through fiction. Writing a story based in Nepal seemed a good excuse to dwell on the memory of

captured her heart. It's a struggle that Beal based largely on feelings of her own. “I never would have written the story from the point of view of Maya,” she says, conjecturing that Alex is about “40 percent me and 60 percent everyone I ever met there.”

Nepal's landscape is a character in itself, and as Alex, Maya, and



DAPHNE BEAL CREATES RICH CHARACTERS WHILE CRITIQUING THE EX-PAT EXPERIENCE.

Will climb mountains, bike around Kathmandu, and hike through pouring rain, Beal renders it vividly, detailing the intoxicating sensations of exploring a faraway place. “There’s a great kind of narcissism to being 20 that’s fun—and also fun to grow out of,” Beal reflects, describing both her characters and the spate of Western students who come of age in foreign settings.

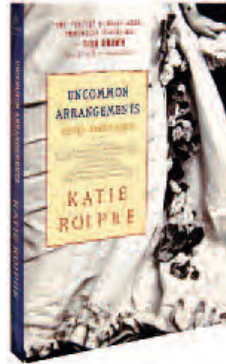
In the mid-1990s Beal worked at *The New Yorker*, an experience she credits with honing her attention to detail. Her journalistic work proved an easy complement to writing fiction—an essay she reported for *McSweeney’s* about Falkland Road, Bombay’s notori-

ous red-light district, provided plenty of fodder for her novel. “I’m happy, in my late thirties, to figure out that what makes a good story in a fictional narrative also makes a good story as a nonfictional narrative,” she says. “I don’t really think of myself as either a novelist or a journalist; I think of myself as a writer. It’s all much more melded than I once imagined it was.”

As for her next book? She’s still circling around the exact story, but it will be set in the Midwest, where she—like Alex—is originally from. “The setting of rural northern Wisconsin is something that I think about when I’m daydreaming,” she says. ■

## bibliofile

UNCOMMON ARRANGEMENTS:  
SEVEN PORTRAITS OF MARRIED  
LIFE IN LONDON LITERARY  
CIRCLES 1910-1939  
(DIAL PRESS)  
KATIE ROIPHE  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR  
OF JOURNALISM  
ARTHUR L. CARTER  
JOURNALISM INSTITUTE



Social critic Katie Roiphe casts an eye on seven “marriages à la mode,” the unconventional, fashionably experimental relationships that proliferated among some British literati and artists from 1910 to WWII, and which helped to redefine the rules of matrimony. Using memoirs, letters, and personal accounts from a pantheon of writers, including a biting Virginia Woolf, Roiphe dissects the less-than-holy unions of, among others, H.G. Wells and Rebecca West, and Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry. Though many of the partnerships could seem outré even today—open marriages and love triangles abound—they wrestle with the perennial tug of an idealized equality between the sexes and stiff traditional roles. In a starred review, *Publishers Weekly* called it “provocative, dishy, substantive, and fun.”

—Christiana Molina

THE GOOD THIEF  
(DIAL PRESS)  
HANNAH TINTI  
GSAS '97



In her fanciful debut novel, Hannah Tinti follows the fate of Ren, a one-handed orphan and natural pick-pocket in 19th-century New England, after his greatest wish—to be adopted—comes true. But his idyll of family bliss is quickly dashed by his new father (a charming con) and a growing circle of misfit friends, from a drunken onetime teacher to a chimney-climbing dwarf. As their adventures careen from fraud to grave-robbing and worse, Ren’s sense of morality—beaten into him over 12 years in a Catholic orphanage—is tested and amended, even as the mystery mounts over his true identity. Though the premise recalls Dickens, Tinti’s yarn, at times violent and bizarre, is thoroughly original.

—Nicole Pezold