

## Q&A

# The WRITER'S STUDIO with Richard White

*Ralph Ellison listened carefully to how people talked. John Steinbeck read his dialogue out loud. Joan Didion confessed to sleeping in the same room with her nearly completed drafts. Historians, too, have special ways of working that are worth sharing. In February 2020, Thomas Andrews and Brooke L. Blower asked the distinguished and wide-ranging scholar Richard White to talk about writing habits, life with books, and arguments with friends.*

*Richard White is a MacArthur Fellow, recipient of the Mellon Distinguished Professor Award, and Emeritus Margaret Byrne Professor of American History at Stanford University, CA, USA. He is the author of numerous award-winning books, including *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (Oxford University Press, 2017); *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011); and *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past* (Hill & Wang, 2003). His most recent book, built around photographs by his son, Jesse White, is *California Exposures* (Norton, 2020).*

### **Tell us about how you usually write. Do you have any special techniques for getting words onto the page?**

I formed my writing habits when my son Jesse was three. I was a single parent and too busy teaching to write during the day and too exhausted to write after he went to bed, so I began getting up early—5:30 or 6:00—and writing for an hour or two before I had to get him ready for daycare and later school. I kept this routine up when Jesse was with his mother during the summers, and later when I no longer lived alone with him.

I still write every day, except weekends, and these days sometimes even then. The early morning hours alone in my home office with the sun rising have remained my favorite time of the day. These old habits make my writing incremental. I might only spend an hour or two putting words on the page, but once the process starts, ideas constantly percolate in the back of my mind. They come to consciousness throughout the day and night, and I keep a notebook to jot them down. When I go back over these notebooks, I discover that most of my ideas are god awful, but it doesn't matter. If 2 to 3 percent are workable, I am in business. This incremental writing means I do not write quickly or in large chunks, but I do write methodically and usually well ahead of deadline.

I rarely start a piece at the beginning. My initial goal is just getting something on the page to which I can react. My first drafts are just a catalyst for new thoughts, which are usually criticisms of my initial thoughts on a topic. I revise endlessly, and I am willing to throw everything out and start over.

I used to write in longhand. I have been going back over old papers that I am giving to the Stanford archives, and I discovered that my cursive was once clear and legible. Now I can barely read my own handwriting. I moved to a typewriter—an old big black Royal—and then to computers.

At the final stages of a project, I print out my drafts to correct by hand. I read them out loud. I think good prose has a cadence and rhythm. When read aloud, sentences that either lack that cadence or make no sense slap me in the face.

This stage is not proofreading (at which I am horrible). I have become too familiar with the rhythms of my own prose and I often fail to detect missing words. I mentally insert words that are not on the page.

The final step of correcting my drafts takes place outside my usual writing time. In the early evening on days when it is not my turn to cook, I pour a glass of wine. The wine does not heighten my acuity; it lessens it and thus causes me to pause over patches of work which demand attention.

One of the things of which I am proud in my own books and articles is that I try never to skip the hard stuff. My goal is to make what is difficult to understand as clear as possible. A glass of wine slows me down, makes me feel all the bumps and recognize all the wrong turns in my writing. I recognize what I need to revise, not by dumbing these sections down but by making them more direct—clearer and simpler.

My attempts to clarify difficult topics and concepts have contributed to my use of analogy and metaphor. I, for reasons I do not know, think by analogy. If something does not make sense to me, I try to make it analogous to something else. As a way of thinking, this can be dangerous, and I try to be careful when using it, but when it does work, it can be a good way to explain a difficult concept.

### **Did you grow up with lots of books? When did you start writing?**

My father was a voracious reader. He was not an easy man, but he would take me into New York City with him. We would go to used bookstores. I could buy whatever I liked. The books cost a nickel or a dime, sometimes a quarter. I think this began when I was in the second grade and went on until we moved to California when I was in the sixth grade. He told me I had to read whatever I bought; we would not come again until I had finished them. We went into the city, as I recall, once or twice a month.

My father never censored what I read, nor did he tell me something I selected was too hard or unsuitable. He believed, and he was right, that if I had to read things I did not understand, I would not buy anything like it again. Among the purchases I remember were Landmark Books, historical novels by Kenneth Roberts and Harold Lamb, Bruce Catton's histories, Jules Verne novels, and books about baseball.

Outside of playing baseball, the thing I wanted most in the world to do was read. My *bubbe* believed I should be playing outside, so when we visited my grandparents, I would take a volume from the collected works of Mark Twain that my *zayde* owned and go hide, reading in peace until my grandmother found me.

Although my father was Jewish, when we moved to California my mother talked him into allowing me to attend Catholic school because I was in so many fights at the public school I attended. Catholic school meant confronting the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, or "list of forbidden books," produced by Vatican censors until 1966. It was the first time anyone had ever tried to prevent me from reading anything. With my father's encouragement, I began treating the Index as if it were a recommended reading list. It was full of wonderful books, many of

which we already had at home. The Index led me to read the *Three Musketeers* and to try Zola. It got me to attempt Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which I don't think I ever quite finished. My father had copies of these from the Heritage Press, which would send a new volume every month. I own them still. I also read Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was a wonderful respite from a Catholic education.

Long before I started writing, I began telling stories—serial stories. I had three brothers and a sister, and my brothers and I for a while slept in a single room. For reasons I understand all too well now but did not then, my parents would insist we go to bed by eight. It seemed horribly unfair; I could hear my friends playing outside in the summer. They could make us go to bed, but they could not make us sleep. I began telling my brothers stories—I can't recall them now—but I told them in installments, which forced me to think of the next installment before bedtime.

I did not start writing seriously until I went to college. In the process of giving my papers to the Stanford archives, I have rediscovered short stories I wrote then, and what I called a novel that I wrote just after college. I was deceived by winning a college literary prize for one of the stories. They are all horrible. The novel was about a summer and fall I spent on the Nisqually River in Washington at Indian fishing rights encampments. A friend and I had started out to Chicago for demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic convention, but one thing led to another. My friend, who was a Yaqui Indian, took acid at the Sky River rock festival and talked to Rolling Thunder, who was briefly a famous Shoshone shaman, who told him to go to Frank's Landing on the Nisqually River because his people needed him. I was along for the ride. The novel was a *roman à clef*; all I did was change the names.

I discovered that I could not write dialogue to save my life. What surprises me now is how earnest all this early writing was. I can't believe I wrote it.

During these years my friends and I also wrote a set of chronicles about an imaginary place called Oscillia (we had various spellings), told from the point of view of various characters—Baron Vasil Konstantly, Roary Roberts, Full Bore Sloth, Brother Bernard the Beautiful Benedictine, and more. Some of these pieces have not aged well, but at least they were not earnest. We were trying to entertain each other rather than impress each other. Some of this work is still pretty funny and revealing about life in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But I will probably seal these until I die. I don't want to be a guy in his seventies explaining what I had in mind at nineteen. I certainly don't want anyone thinking all these letters described actual events, or, for that matter, that all they contain was fictional. But I am too busy to explain the difference on the longshot chance that anyone cares.

My breakthrough as a writer came when I realized that historians not only didn't have to write dialogue, but they weren't allowed to do so. I had found my niche.

### **Which writers do you most admire and why?**

This could go on forever, so I am going to leave out historians. I have too many friends who are historians. And I am going to leave out Western writers I admire but know or knew—Ivan Doig, Bill Kittridge, James Welch, L. Scott Momaday, and others. I will concentrate on people I know largely on the page.

I will narrow it further by focusing on authors who excel at what I regard as the key to good historical writing: the ability to imagine past worlds. Novelists, essayists, and memoirists can do this. What historians add is degree of difficulty. We cannot invent stuff.

So, in no particular order:

- John McPhee, for the clarity of his voice and his ability to explain how he writes. He more than any other writer I know has solved the dilemma of being in a book without dominating it. He gives his characters room. He is the best writer on writing.
- Henry David Thoreau: I would hate him if I had met him. I disagree with much of what he says, and I am pretty sure he was a horrible human being. But this is why I like him as a writer. Nearly two hundred years later his writing can not only enrage a reader but give a clear sense of his persona, if not his actual self. I have never gone back to the text of *Walden* without not only being surprised but also realizing that the man has made a fool of me in my previous readings. It is the most difficult book in the classic American canon.
- Edith Wharton: For subtlety, creating a large picture through an accumulation of details, and for conveying a sense of social mores, there is no one better.
- Mark Twain: Anyone as prolific as Twain had to be uneven, but at his best he both touches deep and persistent American traits and is hilarious. There are parts of *Roughing It* that I still cannot read to classes without cracking up. A man who describes a steamboat as so slow it raced islands is hard not to like.
- Joan Didion: Her short pieces in particular are as near perfect as anything that I have read. Again, she is someone whose politics—at least her old politics—and her sensibility are foreign to me, but her prose seduces. I do not share her opinions of it, but she captures the California world that produced me perfectly.
- J. D. Salinger: Some years ago, I was teaching a summer class at the Buffalo Bill Center in Cody. I was staying in the guest house where the bookshelves had not been altered since the 1960s. There was a copy of *Catcher in the Rye*. I had not read it since I was a teenager. I read it again in a sitting. The book was as compelling as when I first looked at it. I had forgotten what a great writer he was.
- Raymond Carver: For a long time, my highest aspiration as a writer was to write as simply and cogently as Carver. For pure writing, I don't know anything better than his best stories.
- Ralph Ellison: The 1940s through the 1960s were a golden age of American fiction, but *Invisible Man* was in my reading the best of them. Ellison opened a window on a world and a sensibility that I had seen only from the outside.
- Molly Keane: Her *Good Behaviour* raised the level of difficulty in narration as high as possible, and then she nailed it. It is a model of using the unreliable narrator so that the reader knows more than the narrator who is telling the story.
- Margaret Atwood: I admire her craft, her productivity, and while I don't appreciate everything she has written as much as others do, I find her best work, such as *Alias Grace*, remarkable. She can imagine past worlds.
- James Baldwin: I inordinately admire his essays.
- Italo Calvino: Many writers pretend they can create self-contained worlds. Calvino could, and he did it with amazing economy.
- George Saunders: *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a remarkable book. In making his characters ghosts and spirits, he manages to evoke a nineteenth-century world I recognize.
- Derek Walcott: His *Omeros*, an epic poem, may be my favorite twentieth-century book. It is a thing of beauty and quite moving. It reduces me to awe every time I read it.

- Charles Portis: Probably the least known great writer of the twentieth century. People mostly know him through the movie version of *True Grit*, but his novels are a wonder. He could do what I could never do—write dialogue and plot. His books are laugh-out-loud funny. When I discovered he had written things beside *True Grit*, my wife and I read all of them in a week.
- Richard Powers: I admired him before *Overstory*, but I didn't think anyone could write a good environmental novel. He wrote a great one.

There are others that I am leaving out, Richard Ford, Don DeLillo, and more, but this list is too long already.

### **What writing practices have helped you to be such a productive historian? What do you do when you get stuck?**

I read somewhere that Ernest Hemingway said always stop writing for the day when things are going well because it will be easier to resume again. This usually works, but inevitably I do get stuck. When I can't figure out how to move forward, I work on something else.

People mistake my productivity for working fast. My books take years, usually around eight to ten years, from conception to production. I have more than four because I am usually working on two, occasionally three, at once. When I get stuck on one project, I switch to another project. I usually find that even if I am not consciously working on a book, it is percolating somewhere in the back of my brain.

The solutions to the problems that stymie me are, when they come, usually embarrassingly simple.

### **Do you outline before you write?**

No. I start in the middle with something I think I know. I have had some ex-students and other friends—Jared Farmer is one—who can plan a book or article in their head, outline it, and then write to the outline. I am incapable of doing that.

My ideas are all born prematurely. They can do nothing until I have lavished attention on them. As they grow, they reveal themselves to me.

### **What role do your research methods and techniques for organizing data play in your writing process?**

I research as I write. Until I begin to write, I do not know what I need to know. I don't know what all my questions are. As the questions arise, I do research to try to find the answers.

I have massive files of notes and xeroxes for my early books, but for the last few books I have gone digital with mixed results. I find it very difficult to keep track of scans that I take on my cellphone and file on my computer because inserting the citation material is so clunky. I tend to group them by source, which makes it harder to reorganize them topically.

There is a silver lining to bad organization. I am forced to go through my notes constantly with resulting serendipitous finds. On a second or third reading, things jump out that I missed the first time around.

I had a disaster when I used a footnoting program on *Republic*. It scrambled everything, so I avoid such programs like the plague. I have gone back to Microsoft Word.

**Your voice stands out as witty, incisive, and perhaps even quarrelsome. Does this come naturally, or have you had to cultivate it?**

I cultivate it. I do not have a single voice. When I lecture to a class, I have a different voice than I use in print. When I give an academic lecture at say Harvard, my voice is not the same as when I give a radio interview.

I may sound contentious in print, but I have usually toned down what I have first written. I edit out my junkyard dog tendencies. In early drafts, for instance, I often have sections attacking interpretations I disagree with, but I drop them. I am more interested in sketching out my own position.

The only valuable advice I have ever given my children and grandchildren is don't be an asshole. Don't be that guy. In the current moment, this seems like bad career advice, but I still have hope. I try not to be an asshole, even when I have serious disagreements with people.

Anyone worth disagreeing with is worth taking seriously, and to take them seriously is to confront their strong arguments. I try not take cheap shots. I try to train my graduate students to do the same. Don't make the easy attacks. Don't complain about what an author didn't do; concentrate on what they did do. Find the strongest part of your opponent's argument and go for the heart.

I find much of the history that I write about quite funny. It took me years to realize that when I had dinner with friends who were historians, the conversations could be hilarious. The past was as full of fools, blunders, and "what-were-they-thinking" moments as is the present. Historians share all this in conversation but usually edit it out of their published work. We want, I guess, to be seen as serious people. I just stopped editing those elements out.

Over the course of my career, I have found that graduate school often strips historians of their voice. Many students are accepted because they can write, but then we turn them into bad writers. This is not inevitable. Kate Brown is a writer of enviable skill. I served on her dissertation committee, and I remember other committee members wanting her to eliminate the first person from her dissertation manuscript. I and another committee member successfully opposed it, but the attempt was revealing. The ideal was bland academic prose.

There is also, at least in my experience, pressure on assistant professors to make sure their first book is "academic," which means the writer does not try to attract a broader audience. Popularity is suspect.

I have been remarkably lucky to be a Western historian. It has shaped my work. There are superb writers in other historical fields—Jill Lepore, David Blight, Paul Johnson, Walter Johnson, David Kennedy, and more—but I think the concentration is greatest in Western history. To cite only my cohort, Elliott West, Marni Sandweiss, Johnny Faragher, Patty Limerick, Virginia Scharff, Bill Cronon, Don Worster, Bill DuBuys, Paul Hutton, Neal Foley, and Ramon Gutiérrez can not only write wonderfully, they are also people of strong opinions. When I regularly argue with my friends and colleagues, how can I avoid arguing with my enemies?

I have had a second gift as a Western historian. Because the cohort of historians who have followed mine are as good or better writers, it is not a field where you can rest on your laurels.

One of my complaints about much but not all popular history (I very much admire the work of Geoff Ward and Ron Chernow, for example) is that they provide a version of what amounts to a national bedtime story. We get the same characters, the same incidents, the same reassuring endings over and over again. Reading most popular history is like reading a book to my granddaughter, Sofia, who is not yet two. When we reach the end, she always says “again.” In popular history, Sofia’s wishes come true: someone will write the same story again and again and again.

Reading over this answer, I guess I am quarrelsome.

**You have published a textbook, trade books, traditional monographs, and a memoir. Do you think there are themes or threads that run through this diverse body of work?**

I don’t plan these books. I joke about being a short attention span theater historian who is never able to stay with the same topic, but there is some truth to it. Life is too short to do the same thing over and over again. I move from topic to topic and from century to century, usually from curiosity, sometimes from opportunity, and sometimes from necessity.

One of my favorite lines from the movies is when the Wizard of Oz explains how he came to be the Wizard. “Times being what they were, I accepted the job.” This explains a great deal of what I do.

I wrote *Its Your Misfortune and None of My Own* because my daughter Teal was going to college and I needed the money. I wrote *Remembering Ahanagan* (which is an anti-memoir) because my mother, after trying to read *The Middle Ground*, said, “I am more interesting than this, why don’t you write a book about me?” My mother, who had a third-grade education, was proud of my books but never read them. My brother Stephen is a successful mystery novelist. Any one of his books has sold more than everything I have ever written put together. As my mother explained to my son, Jesse, “Your Uncle Stephen writes real books, not like your Dad. People read them.” I wrote *The Republic for Which It Stands* because my mother, who had dementia, was running out of funds and I needed the money.

I wrote my most recent book, *California Exposures*, because of a bet with my son Jesse, a photographer. I lost the bet, but I ended up with what I think is the most original and unusual of all my books.

I have learned to try to think about audiences when I write. Years ago, I was talking with Bill Cronon and Patty Limerick about how you know when a book was done. I said, “It’s done when I am sick of it.” It is the only time in my life when I silenced them. After a while, Bill asked if I thought that was a good practice. I had never considered that. And on reflection, I had to admit that it probably was not. It was better to think about what I intended the book to do and whom I intended to read it. It was not done until I could get no closer to my goals.

This, of course, does not mean that my intention is to please my audience. A book that does not arouse argument and opposition is probably not worth writing.

**Of all your books, which one was the hardest to write? Which one did you enjoy the most?**

*The Republic for Which It Stands* was the most difficult book because I had to write within constraints that did not arise from the material itself. Because it was part of a series, I had to start at a certain point and end at a certain point. That I was also writing about an era that has become the flyover country of American history didn't help. The Gilded Age eventually fully engaged me, and having David Kennedy as general editor was a great help, but I knew the volume would be an odd fit with the Oxford series whose volumes usually have themes of progress, improvement, and overcoming adversity. They end on a triumphant note. Still, I think of *Republic* as perhaps the most hopeful of my books—a story of struggle and reform under difficult circumstances. But it is not celebratory in customary ways, and those looking for celebratory books certainly don't read it as the kind of history they desire.

The books I enjoyed writing the most were those I wrote collaboratively with my mother and my son. *Remembering Ahanagran* went to places my mother did not want to go, but eventually she became the book's advocate even though it outraged relatives on both the Jewish and Irish sides of my family. The old joke about Irish Alzheimer's—"you forget everything but the grudges"—could just as easily be a Jewish joke. I have relatives who went to their graves without ever speaking to me again. Fair enough, I come from the same family and can hold a grudge, too. Working with my mother was a wonder. She taught me a lot about history, memory, and how people make sense of their lives.

I anticipated that working with my son Jesse on *California Exposures* would be fraught, and sometimes it was, but most of the time I enjoyed it immensely. He taught me how to see. I really had no knowledge of how photographers work. He saw photographs where I saw nothing. Once he made the photograph, I saw stories. I was sorry to see the project end. I hope I live long enough to do another one with him.

**Do you share your drafts with anyone? What is your revision process?**

Before multiple sclerosis hurt her eyesight, my wife Beverly read everything I wrote. She was ruthless. She is not a good writer, but she was a wonderful reader and an editor with an unerring eye for what was unclear, flabby, and unnecessary. I miss her help.

I send drafts to friends, particularly good friends who do not hesitate to tell me what is bad or inaccurate. Most recently, Jenny Price was invaluable in critiquing the early drafts of *California Exposures*. Hollywood has script doctors. Jenny is a book doctor. Her solutions were elegant and clear.

I have also had a series of good editors, some of them legendary—Arthur Wang and Betty Ballantine, who recently died. I gather that a lot of historians do not like to be edited, but I appreciate all the help my current editors, Steve Forman at Norton and Susan Ferber at Oxford, can give me.

**Have you tried to teach your students—especially your graduate students—about writing and, if so, how?**

I teach writing by cruelty. My dissertation advisor, Vernon Carstensen, critiqued me mercilessly as a graduate student, and I appreciated it so much that I replicate it now. I am not proud of being cruel, but I have found that the best way to teach is by detailed and very direct criticisms of multiple drafts. I recognized a long time ago that to become a professor is to

consign yourself to a lifetime of reading bad prose. I find much academic writing—and a lot of popular writing—almost physically painful to read. When my graduate students give me such writing, I get irritable. I don't want my graduate students producing more of it. I want them to become their own toughest critics.

What I want them to do is fairly simple. I want an argument. I want only relevant details: “Why are you telling me this?” I want clear topic sentences and transitions. I want signposts to remind readers where they are going and why. I want like material grouped with like material. I want active verbs. My colleague, Marni Sandweiss, once told me of her pride in having written several pages without the verb to be. This made me envious and amazed. I often cannot do that for a paragraph.

I am forgiving of mistakes the first time a graduate student makes them, but I do not want to see the same mistakes a second time.

**Would you change anything about the books you've already written if you rewrote them now?**

Of course I would, and of course I won't. Life is a litany of mistakes and failures. You do the best you can and move on. I would never go back and rewrite earlier work. I am too interested in what I am doing now—and at my age there is a growing sense of desperation—not enough time to finish what I have started.

If I did rewrite, I would cut, cut, and cut some more, taking out inessential material—no matter how much I am interested in it—to allow what is left room to breathe. I remember Arthur Wang telling me that since people read less these days, he would make the books he published shorter.

**If you hadn't become a historian, what do you think would you have done instead?**

I have no idea. Once I realized that I was not going to be a major league shortstop, life reduced to a list of second bests. I wanted to be a novelist or short story writer, but I was horrible. Historian was next. Thank God that mostly worked out.