

*Joe Bunting*

## 305: Adventure, Awe and Writing Practice: The Art of the Crowd-Sourced Memoir

**Gabriela Pereira:** Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at [diymfa.com/305](http://diymfa.com/305), because it's Episode 305. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please, subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, and you know, all the usual places where you might listen to podcasts; and leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there, discover the show as well.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Joe Bunting. Joe is a bestselling writer, novelist, and a dad. He leads The Write Practice community, an award-winning community of creative writers.

And he lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with his wife and three kids. He enjoys coffee and Corpse Reviver No. 2s – I have no idea what that is, so maybe Joe can explain that to me. Welcome, Joe, it's great to have you here.

**Joe Bunting:** It's great to be here, Gabriela. Thank you so much. And as a fellow teacher of the writing craft, thank you for the work you do, inspiring writers. I think it's really important.

**GP:** Absolutely. I see what we do in the world is like letting people unleash their stories into the world has that ripple effect, right? Because then they share their stories and then other people share their stories, and it can just keep growing things. So yes, thank you for being here; and thank you for the awesome work you do at The Write Practice as well.

**JB:** Thanks.

**GP:** So, we're going to be talking about your book, *Crowdsourcing Paris*. And I kind of got to know, I mean, you sort of shared the story behind the story in the book itself, but like for the benefit of our listeners, what inspired you to do a crowdsourced memoir? I mean, that is kind of a peculiar idea, so could you just give us that backstory?

**JB:** Yeah, no, the book came out of panic, honestly.

**GP:** That's like the best source of writing inspiration.

**JB:** [laughs] Right, exactly. Always. So, I had wanted to travel the world and write for as long as I remember wanting to be a writer, you know, to live that kind of Hemingway lifestyle of like living in other countries and writing.

And I had done a little bit of that, you know, before I got married; and I mentioned this idea to my wife when we were still dating and said, "Hey, would you ever want to do this with me? Like just go



travel the world for three months; and we both work remote, and we could live this great lifestyle – this great creative lifestyle?"

And she looked at me and she said, "I never want to do that." And it was like, 'Okay, I need to rethink this.' But I kind of wore her down slowly over time. And in 2014, my grandma was turning 85, we were trying to get her to get married to her boyfriend who was 75 at the time in Florence.

And so, we were all planning this huge family trip to Florence for my grandma's wedding, really, and birthday. And I said to my wife, "You know, the most expensive part of this trip is the plane ticket – we could just, you know, stay for longer and maybe go to Paris."

And I said "Paris" very strategically because it's my wife's favorite city of all-time. And I said, "We could go live there for a couple of months, it would be great." And she's like, "I hate that idea – that's a terrible idea, but I do love Paris."

I think it was actually later that night we were at a dinner party and I'm talking to someone else and she's talking to someone, and she just starts like telling them about this idea that I had as if it was her own idea. And you know, that's when we kind of, I guess, decided we were going to try to do this.

And so, you know, she was working – I was doing my 'writer thing' at the time, still very early. I wasn't making a ton of money, but we were planning to go-- You know, she was going to quit her job, and we were going to go live in Paris for a little while.

We had a 10-month-old son, at the time. It felt very exciting and adventurous. And then we booked our plane tickets, and we got a house, an Airbnb apartment to stay at in Montmartre.

And then they canceled the apartment, and we had already had our tickets; and we looked frantically around, and we couldn't find anything that was like in our budget that was not horrible. And we were panicking and we found this great apartment in Saint-Germain in The 6th and we asked them, "Hey, will you take \$1000 less for your apartment?"

And for some reason they said, yes. But I looked at the budget that I had set for the trip, and you know, even if we spent no money on food – like, didn't go out to eat at all – we were going to be \$600 short. And I'm like, 'How do I make \$600?'

And, at first, I was going to sell all my stuff, and then someone suggested, 'Why don't you write a book?' And so, I decided, 'Oh that's not a terrible idea – I'm a writer – I could like write a book and probably make \$600, right?'

And so, I pitched this idea of like, going and sitting in cafes, and writing about it, and just like the experience of being a writer in Paris to a few writing friends; and they hated the idea. They were like, 'That sounds like the most boring book of all time.'

[laughter]

**GP:** And they challenged you to do something a little bit more interesting--

**JB:** Right, exactly.

**GP:** -which is where the rubber meets the road.



**JB:** Yeh. So, I had some friends, like several friends, again and again told me, ‘This needs more adventure, how can you add more adventure?’ And I was like, ‘We’re going with, you know, my 10-month-old son to live in Paris for several months. How do we need more adventure than that? That sounds pretty adventurous to me.’

**GP:** I think anyone who’s never had kids, does not understand what an adventure it truly is to get on an airplane with a, you know, less than, well, less than like 10-year-old – and, you know, be in a foreign country. Yeah, clearly, your friends did not have children.

**JB:** Yeah. So, some of them did and some of them didn’t; and it was bad, I had to figure something out. And so, I had this idea to send it to my audience and say, “Hey, do you have ideas for adventures for me to do in Paris while we’re there?”

And thinking, you know, hoping that they would say, “No, I mean, your original idea sounds so great, just go with that.”

[laughter]

**JB:** And they didn’t say that, and they sent over a hundred ideas for adventures to do. And from those, I picked the Top-12; and I kind of committed, ‘Okay, I don’t want to do this – but if we’re going to do it, we’re going to do it right.’ And that began very uncomfortable – but also, really exciting and, kind of, becoming season for me and for my writing.

**GP:** So, there’s so much in there that we need to unpack. But one of the things that drew me to this book is that you were also resistant to this idea. Like it wasn’t like the minute people started saying, “Yes, here are all the adventures,” and you were like, ‘Yeah, let’s do this thing’.

Like there are many points in this book where you’re just like, ‘Oh my gosh, I really have to do this now.’ To me, it’s interesting as a writer because often that’s how writing works, right? Like we are often resistant to the very projects that are the juiciest, that are the most interesting, that are the ones that people want to read about.

So, can you talk about that resistance and how you grappled with it through writing this book; and also, how you overcame it because, you know, the book is now coming or out in the world – so clearly, you overcame that resistance at some point?

**JB:** Just barely. Yeah, I often feel like, you know, I would like to be more like Hemingway – but in reality, I’m probably a lot more like Proust. You know, I don’t love adventures. I hate truth-or-dare.

I’ve done some of these adventures, and always reluctantly and always kind of forcing myself to do it rather than jumping head first in. And so, this process was really me becoming more comfortable with myself, becoming more comfortable with my marriage, my son; you know, my life as a dad and my life as a writer. And it was constantly kind of overcoming that more desire for safety and comfort, and pushing myself to get into the adventure.

**GP:** So, in the process of grappling with this resistance, what were some of the things that you did? Because I think a lot of writers deal with resistance.

You know, it may not be, ‘Wow, my whole audience is sending me out on these crazy adventures,’ kind of resistance – but it may be like, ‘I don’t know why, but this project is so hard.’ What advice do



you have for writers to help them, sort of, steal themselves against this feeling of, 'I really don't want to do this, but I have to'?

**JB:** Yeah, yeah. And I was feeling it from both sides, honestly – both from not really wanting to do these adventures and live this adventure, but also not really wanting to write about it. Because during this time, I probably had one of the hardest bouts of writer's block that I've ever experienced. I got extremely good at Sudoku, when I was living in Paris.

[laughter]

**JB:** And it's so sad and embarrassing because you're in Paris, you're in this incredibly beautiful and inspiring city. You know, you sort of expect that when you walk into a café, it's just going to be like a download of inspiration and your hands are just going to be flying across the page or across the keyboard or whatever – and you're going to come out with this like magnum opus.

And for me, it was almost like the opposite of that, where I felt the inspiration all around me – but inside, felt like I was like the worst writer ever. And yeah, very good at Sudoku, but very bad at writing.

And I don't really have great advice for what to do when you're in that place, except to lower your expectation, honestly. I follow this psychologist who wrote a book called *The Tools*, which is really great; and he is a shrink to the Stars. And he gives feedback to some of the best screenwriters in the world – people who have won Academy Awards, and kind of these amazing people.

And he had this one guy who was a screenwriter who was struggling with writer's block, and he was on the hook – like he had to finish this film that was due; and he had already been paid for it, and he had to get it done and he couldn't write a single word.

And the psychologist looked at him and said, "I want you to, every day, before you sit down to write, to kneel in front of your keyboard and pray to the gods for you to write the worst sentence in the world."

And I thought about that a lot while I was in Paris and afterward, while I was working on this novel – this memoir – because I think, you know, it's so easy as writers, for us to think that we're caught up in this really inspiring thing, that the work that we have to do has to be the best thing ever.

And it can totally freeze us up, just that need for perfectionism; and it feels like our whole career and our whole life and our whole identity as writers is carried in this moment of staring at the blank page. And that's a lot of weight, you know, to be carrying. And a lot of times, all you have to do is just to write the worst sentence in the world and get it out there, and let the work kind of work for itself.

**GP:** I love, love that idea. And in a way, it taps into a couple of different things. I mean, first, it lowers expectations, right? Because it makes-- Like 'writing the worst sentence in the world', that is a goal that I can most certainly attain.

It makes it so that everyone can actually knock that one out of the park. But the other thing that I think is really interesting is that it also brings humor into it. And I found that like when I'm struggling with any sort of resistance – with the wall, as it were, you know, writer's block, whatever you want to call it – if I make myself laugh, it breaks that wall down.

So, like, one of the things I do instead of like writing the worst sentence in the world, I have a little totem that's like my little inner critic – it's this alien dude that a friend of mine from design school made for me – and I put a dance cap on it and I put it in the corner, and I give it a timeout.



And I'm just like, 'All right, critic – you're in the corner,' and it's like this weird little alien that's picking his nose with his tongue, and he's wearing a dance cap, and he's sitting in the corner.

And like, that just makes me laugh. Like the minute I do that, it's like, 'How can I be so serious and be so hung-up on writing this great thing if I'm making myself laugh?' I think there's definitely something to that though, like this feeling of the imposter syndrome. I definitely go through that when I'm working on, especially on a deadline.

My husband calls it 'the freaking out phase' of my creative process', which does not make it any less bad. Like just to know that that's part of my creative process, doesn't make it any easier.

**JB:** Right. And I think when you've gone through these cycles enough times and gotten through them, you start to build some resiliency in yourself. And I was still sort of in that process of building resiliency in my own kind of writing; I had written kind of four or five books, by that point, mostly as a co-author and ghost writer.

So, you would think that I would like have internalized that, 'This is the work' – you know, 'This is how it goes'. And for some reason, I just totally forgot; and now, I've finished like 13 books, and it's a little bit more in there. But even then, you know, we forget that this is the process, this is how it goes, and everyone deals with this.

You just have to keep showing up and doing your work, and there's a level of professionalism that it takes to be a writer and kind of a doggedness to just show up – even when you don't feel like it, even when actually your feelings are telling you like, 'You're the worst person ever, you're the worst writer ever.' And kind of saying, "Thank you, feelings – I really appreciate that, now I'm going to go do my work."

It's hard to do, and I don't think we always get it right, but I think it's important.

**GP:** You know, it's funny too because you say, 'building resilience', but there is also a side to it, at least what I've experienced, is that; when you're in that moment of despair – when you're like staring at the screen or the blank page and you're just like, 'I am the worst person ever' – you forget that you've done it a whole bunch of times.

Like there's that moment where you're in that echo chamber of horribleness that it just escapes your mind that like, 'Oh yes, I know how to do this.' And that happens to me every single time. My husband, literally – every single time I have a deadline – will like pat me on the head and be like, 'Honey, it's part of your process... go have your freak-out, and then come back and write.'

And I forget that the freak-out will eventually end, and I'll start writing again because when you're in that moment, it feels like it's forever.

**JB:** Yeah. And it's so important to have people around you like that who can kind of help you see that you're in it again. And you know, whether that's a spouse or a family member or a friend or a writing community, whatever it is, I think it's so important to have people around you that you can talk about your work and where you're at – and can give you some perspective because we do lose perspective when we're in the midst of these projects that to us are so important and we can lose focus so easily.

So, having that kind of level of outside perspective, I think, is so crucial. I mean, I had several friends during this writing process who just encouraged me and even just asked me, "Hey, whatever happened to that book that you were writing?"



And I would say, “I’m working on it,” when I wasn’t really working on it; I was like kind of just mostly feeling bad about myself. Having a community like that, I think, is really important.

**GP:** Yeah. Even if, in the moment, you kind of want to smack them upside the head, like it’s still, I think, ultimately for the greater good of the project to have those people around you.

Another thing that you mentioned when you were first talking about how this book came to be, is that idea of, you know, sitting in Paris in cafes and the inspiration, and like--

I think a lot of us have this idealized view of what it means to be a writer, particularly a writer in Paris, but just generally, what it means to be a writer. You know, this idea that you’re in some beautiful inspiring location; and you’ve got this perfect parchment and, you know, gold ink that you like dip your pen, your quill into as like, you know, pearls of wisdom spill onto the page.

And of course, this is not realistic at all. Can you talk a little bit about that harsh reality-check that we all, as writers, go through? Like, at some point, we realize that is not what writing is about. When did you realize that, and how did you cope with that realization?

**JB:** Yeah, so I thought a lot about vanity when I was in Paris and when I was working on this book; and I had this friend, who was kind of our only friend in Paris, and she was there studying at a cooking school. She was working on being a chef in Paris, which sounded like the most idealistic thing ever.

And you know, she had been there for 10 months; and I read her blog, and it was just like incredible. She had this view overlooking Notre-Dame; and she would sit there with her guitar, and she would paint – and it was like, ‘Wow, you are living the dream.’

And about a month-and-a-half, at the time-- Like we were in Paris for a month-and-a-half and I was kind of in the midst of this very difficult period; just feeling really sad and really lonely, and having a really hard time with my writing – and just life, in general.

And we got a call in the middle of the night that this friend had just tried to commit suicide, and she was in a French hospital.

**GP:** Oh my gosh.

**JB:** And my wife went off to go be with her, and we both went to see her the next day. And it was this kind of wake-up call; you expect these things to sustain you, you expect to be sustained by the culture and the amazing views and the atmosphere – and it just doesn’t... you know, it just doesn’t.

And I think that I was, you know, not in the exact same place – but like, if I had been there for another eight-and-a-half months, you know, I would be in a similar dark place because I had been chasing something that didn’t exist.

We want to go to Paris and to live this writer’s lifestyle, in general, for the sake of awe because we want to be awed by our work and by the city that’s so inspiring – that all these amazing artists have lived in.

And the reality is, is awe doesn’t really work like that all the time. You know, awe usually comes in these little moments of just waking up to the beauty of something or, you know, being surrounded by friends and realizing, ‘Oh, I’m so happy right now,’ and you didn’t even realize it.



It doesn't usually happen when you're chasing it in some city by yourself – trying to be an artist and feel like an artist; that's not really how it works. And so, we go to Paris and we pursue this writer's lifestyle hoping for awe, but we end up settling for vanity.

And I had done that, and I had been doing that for a long time and, you know, I had to realize, you know, 'What do I really want here? You know, what does being a writer really mean to me? Is it really just about people seeing me in a certain way or is it about helping people, and inspiring people, and connecting with people to tell stories that make them feel better about their lives and about the world?' Maybe that was a better thing to work toward.

**GP:** You know, it's so interesting while you were talking about awe; I definitely have gone through that. I mean, I've spoken a lot about, sort of, the dark moments that I've had and whatnot, that I've grappled with throughout my life.

But one of the things I've noticed is that those moments really are like, 'The more mundane my life gets, the better my writing gets and the better my happiness level gets.' Like, it's really not about the spectacular stuff. Yesterday, I had this wonderful moment where, and my daughter and I were reading because she's in kindergarten just learning how to read.

So, like, that was really exciting to see her like reading a book, and my son is reading a chapter book lying on the couch on his stomach with his feet in the air reading a chapter book. My husband's sitting in this, you know, on the other side of the couch reading his like New Yorker or whatever.

And it's like, all of a sudden, I look up and I'm like, 'It's just like we're hanging out as a family, and we're reading.' And my heart was like glowing. I was like, 'Yay, this is that!' And that was one of those moments. So, I feel like we often chase these like, awe – like, you know, that grand sunset or whatever – but really, it's like the awe is right in front of us, we just have to look.

**JB:** Yeah. And there's a level of smallness that you have to allow yourself to get to that place because I think, you know, we can get it in our own way when we're trying to experience awe.

But you know, when you think about awe, the image that I have in my head is like a little kid or a little figure – maybe not a kid – but looking up at the sky or at Notre-Dame... or at something huge and grand and beautiful.

And to be that, you have to be small; you have to be little. You can't be vain, you can't be trying to make yourself bigger because then how can you see that amazing thing above you? And so, there's a level of humility, and just making yourself kind of small that you have to have to experience that.

**GP:** I love that. That is such a great point. So, I wanted to circle back to actually talking about the book itself because you touched on the idea of like sort of how it came to be in the first place – but now, I'd love to hear a little bit more about like the mechanics of how you actually did it.

You said you got hundreds of suggestions, but you narrowed it down to 12. So, I'm curious, like how did you choose which ones you did?

And then when you went about doing these adventures, like did you pre-plan, like did you have an adventure schedule – or was it just like, 'Oh, today we're doing this one', or 'Oh no, we're only here for three more days, I better get on that other one'? You know, like, how did that work logistically?



**JB:** I mean, it was probably a little bit of a horrible mash-up of all of those things.

[laughter]

**JB:** I had a lot of great strategies that didn't actually work out to do all of these adventures – and, you know, for some of them, I had people vote on which ones they wanted me to choose. And that worked pretty well until we got towards the end of the trip, and I was like, 'Okay, I just got to do them all.'

You know, like, 'Just got to get it done.' You know, I think the best example of how these adventures actually worked was the adventure in the catacombs. So, most people don't know that there are over a hundred miles of catacombs beneath Paris, and they were originally limestone quarries that go back as far as the Romans.

And now, these a hundred miles of tunnels-- And in the 18th Century, they started collapsing. And so, you know, would be walking down the street in a CD side of town – and all of a sudden, this street would collapse into the ground into this huge hole.

And people were really suspicious at the time, or superstitious at the time and they thought, you know, 'God was punishing these really wicked people.' And then a church fell in and they thought, 'Okay, maybe not, that's not it.'

And they worked really hard to build this kind of system of tunnels that could withstand Paris collapsing into the ground. And so, they're actually, now, they're illegal; you can't go in them. There's actually a catacomb police.

There's one small section, the catacomb museums that you can visit for like €15 – but the rest, the other 98 miles or so, you can't, unless you have a Cataphile. And a Cataphile is someone who knows the kind of how the caves work, how do this system of tunnels work?

They've been in there a bunch, and they're part of this kind of secret society of people who know the entrances and exits and have kind of mapped everything out. My challenge, one of these adventures was to explore the catacombs, and I had no idea how to do that.

So first, I asked my audience, "Hey, can you find me a Cataphile because I have no idea how to do that?" And so, they did. They actually came up with someone. I was emailing back and forth with a guy, and he said he would take me into the catacombs; and then every time I said, "When," he would be like, "Oh, soon, I'm moving right now". He would give me some excuse.

And that went on and on for weeks, and I was starting to get really desperate because this was the most adventurous of all of my adventures. This was like the best one, and I knew I had to make it happen. And so, I wasn't having any breakthroughs.

And then, I ended up randomly going to this poetry Meet-up in Paris; and I read a poem, and I met the co-founder and I told him about my adventures, and he's like, "I have the guy."

And he wrote down the name, an email address of this guy, and he passed it across the table; and I looked at it and I was like, 'I know that guy, I know who that name is.'

And it turned out to be probably the #number-1 Cataphile in the world. He had been featured in National Geographic, and the Wall Street Journal, and NPR, and all the things. And I emailed him, and he agreed on my very last night in Paris to take me into the catacombs.



And it was probably one of the most exciting and terrifying moments of my life. I got lost from him at one point; I thought I was going to die. I actually only had the smallest flashlight in the world.

It was literally called the smallest flashlight in the world on the packaging because I was trying to save money, and that's-- It was like the cheapest one, and it was still like €20. So, that's the one I had, and these French guys laughed at me. These French Cataphiles laughed at me when I was down there. It was a little terrifying.

**GP:** You mentioned that-- You were telling us the story about the catacombs as, sort of, a framework for how you organized the various different adventures. It sounds like this was more like an epic journey to get this one adventure off the ground. Some of the other adventures maybe weren't quite as complex.

Can you talk about how you, sort of, figured out how you were going to execute some of these, like, maybe less-spectacular adventures?

**JB:** Yeah, and it was complicated because, you know, I had my wife who is watching our 10-month-old son; and we were living in a very small apartment, and we were trying to figure out how to do this, you know? And, it wasn't always easy.

So, for example, one of my adventures was to go eat tripe, which is the stomach lining of a cow; it was not one of the ones I was excited about. And so, then we had to find a restaurant that served tripe, and then we had to go to the restaurant and eat there with my 10-month-old.

And anyone who has a 10-month-old, know that they are the worst at restaurants – or, at least, ours was. And so, that was-- And the French are very quiet, like especially Persians, they are very quiet. So, we were so self-conscious about him making any noise and making a mess too.

We got through the meal and I ate the tripe, and then we went home; and yeah, that was another example. One of the fun ones was we had to do singing of in the rain in front of the Arc de Triomphe.

And toward the end of my trip, my grandma joined us – my 85-year-old grandma – and my mom and dad joined us. So, we were kind of going to see all these museums; that was part of one of my adventures, to visit 10 museums and talk about what it was like to be at all of these places.

And while we were kind of visiting Arc de Triomphe, and like, 'Okay, we're going to do it, we're going to do singing in the rain in Front of Arc de Triomphe.' And it was this actually kind of amazing thing because I had been so self-conscious for this entire trip. And the French are very proper – for reasons, especially – are very proper, and I was always terrified of being like the one sticking out.

And I don't know why, because I've been there long enough or had learned some courage, or because my family was there, or maybe because my grandma was there who was very not proper, who was very adventurous – and I was like, 'Let's do this.'

And so, we did this choreograph dance in front of Arc de Triomphe; and we sang singing in the rain, and we put out a hat and someone threw money in; and it was amazing. And kind of this coming 'full circle' moment of kind of the whole story, I felt like, was finding my way in Paris and finding my way as a writer really through a lot of really uncomfortable adventures.

And in that moment, I felt like, 'Okay, I finally made it here.'

**GP:** I love that. And I mean, if you think about it, writing itself can often be an uncomfortable adventure. So, it's sort of like a meta, meta-scenario as well. So, one of the things that I thought was really



interesting was that you start with the prologue, which we know right away, this is that moment in the catacombs where you got lost from the Cataphile, and we end with a cliffhanger.

Clearly, you have lived to tell the tale because you published the book. So, in one hand, it's a cliffhanger – but on the other hand, as a reader, we feel safe – we don't worry that you are potentially in peril because we know that you've written the book.

At the same time, it also is like, as you describe it, the last adventure that you had, and we know that in the prologue that you mentioned in that scene that like, this is your last night in Paris. Like we know that this is also sort of the end-cap.

What made you choose to start with that prologue? Because it could have just as easily started with Chapter 1, but it would've been a very different book. Did you have the prologue from the get-go? Was that something you restructured down the line in revisions? I'm just curious.

**JB:** Yeah, no, that's a good question. And I went back and forth on that prologue. I sort of had it in my mind at the beginning, when I was first sitting down to write the book. Even when I was in the catacombs living out that moment, I was like, 'Okay, this is an amazing adventurous moment, I need to talk about this.'

And then, I got really terrified and forgot all about that. I probably wrote like 20 different first chapters for this book, as I was trying to figure it out. And I think one of the breakthroughs I had was really how to structure a story and, kind of, learning how to tell a story in an exciting way; a story that is really about my internal journey as a writer and a person and a husband and father, but also kind of this external adventure story.

In the middle of all of this, as I was writing it, I had finished the first draft and I read it and I was like, 'This isn't working and I don't know why, but I know that there's something missing.'

And then I started learning from Shawn Coyne and Story Grid; I'm sure some of your listeners are familiar with him and their work, and ended up going with Tim to the Story Grid workshop in New York.

And Sean actually gave me some feedback about my story, and said it was really at its heart, an adventure story – this kind of spiritual life and death situation, and I needed to highlight that in the first chapter. From the very beginning, I needed to highlight that it was a life & death kind of thing.

And so, I sort of dusted off this prologue that I sort of, you know, had trashed like four drafts before, and was like, 'Oh, this is what I always planned on doing – I need to go back to this original framework that I was thinking and had sort of over thought my way out of, and work it back in.'

And, you know, I don't know if I-- I mean, it was an adventure story. It certainly was for me, maybe not like life & death stakes all the time. It's sort of hard to have life & death moments in Paris, in one of the most comfortable and beautiful cities in the world. But it definitely felt like an adventure to me. It definitely felt uncomfortable a lot of times.

**GP:** I think what the prologue does for me as a reader is that it lets the reader know that all bets are off in terms of stakes. Like if we had started with Chapter 1 – as it is Chapter 1 now – the stakes aren't quite as dramatic in that first chapter.

And so, to ramp up to a point where the stakes literally become, for at least a compressed period of time, life & death, that would feel like foreign. But because we know from the get-go that like, this could become a life & death scenario because, 'Oh look, the scene happens at some point in the story,' it reminds me of the first season of the TV show, 24.



And I think the statute of limitations on spoilers for that show was long since passed, so I'm going to give away the ending of that first season – but they kill off the main character's wife. And what that did for the rest of the seasons that came after, was that we didn't think any particular character, even the main character wasn't safe.

And so, because of that, it raises the stakes because now we know like, 'Whoa, this could happen to the second most important character in the book, it could happen to – or in the TV show – it could happen to anybody.'

And I think in the same vein, the prologue does that in this memoir – that it creates that feeling of like, 'Whoa, anything could happen here,' and that is what raises the stakes. That emotion is what raises the stakes rather than the individual stakes of each adventure.

**JB:** Yeah, and that's something I really learned through this writing process. You know, I had been telling this very internal story, kind of a coming-of-age, really, story. And I learned through this process that that's not quite enough.

Like, you also have to have stakes. You also have to have risk; and you have to have more adventure, exactly what everyone was telling me from the very beginning. Without those things, the story feels – can feel like it's missing something.

You know, I think there's a lot of room in the world for the coming-of-age memoir without an adventure. I just knew that I wanted my story, and the story I really needed to tell was more than that; it had to have kind of those high stakes for the reader, you know?

**GP:** Absolutely. So, shifting gears a little bit, at the end of each chapter, you chose to add like a little mini assignment to your readers to-- Just like, you received the adventures from your readers, you're now sort of giving them back an adventure.

What made you add that little piece to the end? Because the chapters, would feel different if they didn't have that little, sort of, handing back, gifting back the adventure to your readers?

**JB:** Yeah, I mean, I think that's just from The Write Practice. I have this bad habit of giving people assignments at the end of every lesson, and from the beginning--

You know, we started The Write Practice in 2011; and from the beginning, I wanted it to be about practice – about taking what you learn in Creative Writing, taking some kind of lesson and then applying it immediately to your life and to your writing.

And so, I think I was just bringing that from that other medium into this medium and saying, "Hey, you can go on adventures too. Like this doesn't have to be just a story you're reading – this can be an adventure that you're living personally."

And I've had a lot of people tell me, you know, they've done the adventures or send me pictures from the adventures. You know, people who have planned trips and who have--

One of the adventures is to go into a pitch-black room like a closet or something, and just kind of put yourself into that darkness like I was in the catacombs for a minute; and just talk about how you feel in that space.

And so, I've had a lot of people do that and just tell me, "Wow, that was totally weird," you know, because we're used to the light, and having that kind of sensory deprivation is really a unique thing.



**GP:** Yeah. I love that you mentioned The Write Practice because I wanted to ship gears and also ask you about that. I mean, I'm a firm believer in practice; DIY MFA is all about practice, but for me, practice also goes to like; building that muscle memory, building that intuitive sense for what is going on in either your writing or whatever practice you do.

I studied Suzuki violin as a child; and my kids do Suzuki music now. So, the idea of practice is very from, like, the Suzuki mindset. So, I'm curious like, how do you see practice?

Like for me I see it as breaking things down into micro moments – the page – and understanding how each micro thing works and then practicing that micro moment so that you can then apply it to the whole piece of writing or piece of music. That's a very different version of practice than what other writers might consider. So, I'm just curious what your version of practice looks like.

**JB:** Yeah, I mean, I think there are so many things that as writers we need to be practicing. I mean, like you talked about breaking things down into smaller skills, smaller moments, smaller techniques.

The world of writing is so vast, and there's so many things that you can do with it. You can't just always intuit your way through those things; sometimes you'd need to practice them a little bit. So, we have exercises that are focused on individual techniques on story structuring, kind of thinking about story structuring on just finishing something.

You know, I think writers need to practice finishing things. It's something that we're not always very good at, and we need to have like the muscle memory to finish a lot of times. And you know, there's so many things. And I think the important thing is that we need to have the mindset that we have not arrived, and that we don't even really need to arrive.

You know, there's this myth among a lot of writers – and I had it too, and studied Creative Writing even in college – and thought that, you know, I needed to be a genius. If I was going to make it as a writer, I needed to be this genius; and if I was still learning something, then I hadn't made it.

If people didn't love my writing, it was either their fault or I wasn't actually a real writer; it was their fault for not understanding it or I wasn't a real writer. And instead, I think we need to have the mindset, that we are practicing – that we are getting better. And with that, that anyone can be a great writer if they do the work and if they practice and get the feedback that they need to get better.

And that took me so long to just change that mindset, but it really has changed everything for me, and transformed my writing and my life and made me a much happier person – and less-stressed about my own ego and need to make everyone happy. It's been really important for my work, and I think it's important for the work of so many writers who are really trapped in that mindset.

**GP:** Absolutely. You know, it's interesting when you were talking about the different types of practice, it reminded me; so my daughter just played the Suzuki Twinkle fiasco, that's like a bazillion different versions of Twinkle Twinkle Little Star all in a row.

And like, this was a big deal, you know, they have like a little special performance; and we actually had to do endurance training. Like part of practicing was helping her build up the actual strength of her muscles so she could hold her violin up for that long.

And often, we forget that as writers, we need to do endurance training. Like writing a novel is not just something you wake up and do; it's like, just like you wouldn't wake up and run a marathon.



But we forget that because writing is like a sort of introspective thing that there is that, there's lots of different training that needs to happen. We have to train technically, we have to train for endurance – like there's a lot of different things that we as writers have to train, which I think is really important to know.

**JB:** Totally agree.

**GP:** So, shifting gears again, what is next for you? What have you got coming up on the horizon?

**JB:** Yeah, so right now I'm working on a book – a nonfiction book now – about story structure, and how to think about story structure. I think, you know, there's so many good frameworks out there about story structure, and it's hard to kind of figure out where you are in the midst of them.

I mean, some of them have different terminology, and it can be very confusing. Like for example, a lot of people talk about Freytag's Pyramid, for example. And kind of this very basic story structure that we get taught in middle school, of all places.

I was, you know, working on this, and while I was thinking about doing this book, I was working on a post for this book about Freytag's Pyramid, and went back and I read Freytag's Technique of the drama, which is this book that Gustav Freytag – who's this German novelist, very famous during his day – wrote in like 1850-something.

And I realized reading it, you know, this sounds totally different than how I've ever heard anyone talk about Freytag's Pyramid, what is going on here? I'm either not understanding here because it's in German – it's translated from German, maybe I'm just missing something – or maybe we are just totally have misunderstood Freytag's Pyramid for 100-plus years.

And I got through the book, and I was like, 'I don't think I've misunderstood it – I think we have completely misunderstood Freytag's Pyramid, and we've been teaching it wrong for like however long we've been teaching it,' and it was shocking to me.

But I think we make these, kind of, confusing mistranslations that leave people lost in story structure and not really sure how to structure their story.

And I just want to give people a very simple practical way to think through their story structure that isn't about like coming up with a whole new set of jargon – but it's just about, you know, how does this actually work in story structure in a way that's very intuitive and simple?

So, that's something I'm working on right now – hopefully, it'll be out pretty soon. And then I have a novel that I'm working on, and it's great to be working on a novel and not a memoir.

Memoirs are so fun, and it's so much-- It's so great to be able to write about your life, but it's also great to be able to invent things and start from a foundation of like, 'I don't need to like tell the truth while also telling a great story – I could just tell a great story.' So, I'm really excited about that.

**GP:** I love it. Yeah, for sure. Like if you need a plot, plot-wise, you could just make one up – like that's very convenient. So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

**JB:** Oh, I mean, I think we've covered so many of my favorites. You know, something I always come back to is, you know, just a level of professionalism.



One of the big lessons that I learned from this process is that we all need consequences. You know, it's not just about rewards. There are a lot of rewards for being a writer and finishing a book – both internal, intrinsically, and externally – but we also need consequences.

And so, when I was in the middle of failing to finish this book, probably for the fourth time, I was talking with a friend and he told me, you know, "Here's what you need to do. And he asked me, "Do you actually want to finish this book?"

And I said, "Of course, I do." And he's like, "Okay, here's what you need to do – you need to write a check for \$1000 to a charity that you hate, and then you need to give it to a friend and say, If I don't finish my book, by this time, you send that check."

And I was like, 'No, that sounds like a gimmick – I don't need that – I'm a professional, I'll be fine.' And then a month went by and I hadn't made any progress on my book, and so I did it. And this was in 2016, right?

It was during the presidential election and, you know, I wrote a check for \$1000 to the presidential candidate I most disliked – who shall remain nameless – and I gave it to a friend and said, "You have to send this if I don't finish my book by X date." And, it was the most focused I've ever been.

[laughter]

**JB:** And I finished my book, just a time; and it was great, you know? And I think-- I looked back and, you know, a lot of my professional writing work has been as a co-writer and ghost writer; and if I didn't write, I wouldn't get paid, you know?

And I realized like, 'I need that – I need some kind of consequence to keep me focused.' And there's a level of professionalism to that. Like it's either write or not eat, you know? And it needs to get to that point sometimes – just so that you can get past all of the insecurity and self-doubt, and just do the work.

**GP:** Yes, that totally resonates. Thank you so much for sharing that, and for sharing all of your insights on this interview; and also, for just being here. It's just so great to chat with you.

**JB:** It's so great to chat with you. Thank you so much, Gabriela, for all the work that you do.

**GP:** All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.



