

What does it mean to you to be a writer?

A well-crafted article or book imparts knowledge, entertains or is thought-provoking—sometimes all three at once. It's a privilege to be involved in spreading the word—literally—to a broad audience.

Member since?

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What prompted you to join ASJA?

I was seeking a writers' community where I could learn, commiserate, and trade ideas. Damon Brown told me about ASJA, and the more I learned, the more I knew I had found my community.

Was there a particular moment when you knew you were a writer?

My early career was a mix of writing, design, and computer geekery. In 1998, I took a year off to travel. When I returned, I resolved to turn down all nonwriting work. Years later, I relaxed that restriction, but since then, I've known I'm a writer, first and foremost.

Career high point and career low point?

High point: In the 1990s, Conrad Black launched a Canadian national newspaper. The paper had big resources and very little advertising, which afforded lots of space to experiment. I combed peer-reviewed journals for obscure ideas, transforming them into quirky newspaper-compatible stories. It was a blast, and an opportunity I doubt will come again.

Low point: I spent a year as a producer on a news-channel TV show about the media. We had great subject matter, but I found the medium unsatisfying. I was offered a contract for another season, but declined.

From what work would you most like to remove your byline, and why?

In the (thankfully) pre-Internet days, I wrote an advice column in a British gossip magazine. My job was to explain men to the female readership in a feature entitled "The Male Bag." I took on the persona of a British lad, peppering my writing with Anglicisms like "mate," "wotcha," and "Phwoarr!" I still have photocopies, but cringe at the thought of even peeking at them now.

And...if you volunteer for ASJA, please tell us what you do/what committees you're on, etc.

I have just agreed to serve on the finance committee.

Patchen Barss

What have you read recently that you couldn't put down?

Nonfiction: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by [ASJA member] Rebecca Skloot. She merits every award and plaudit she has received.

Fiction: *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. One of the most powerful, freshest voices I have read in a long time.

What did you do when you received notice of your first publication?

It was a personal essay in the *Montreal Gazette* about living with my then-partner who suffered from an eating disorder. She was on board with the piece, but apparently her parents were not. So, I don't remember celebrating so much as being held to account at the dinner table for divulging so much personal information.

What's sitting in a drawer?

About six book ideas I'm dying to write. The one I'm thinking about the most right now is a cultural history of yeast, and its relationship to hunger, thirst, health, the environment and genetics.

What does it mean to you to be a writer?

I once struggled with a Remembrance Day speech for a politician. It had a physical effect on me: tight gut, sweatiness, squirming as I wrote. But every sentence that landed on the page felt powerful. It felt less like I was crafting a speech and more like the words were being yanked out of me. The speech got great media coverage, but it was the process of writing it that gave me satisfaction. That's the quintessential writer experience for me.

What's new and/or upcoming (writingwise)?

My book, *The Erotic Engine*, which chronicles how the pornography industry has hastened the advance of mainstream mass communication, arrives in the United States this June. The book garnered a lot of media in the countries where it has already been published, so I'm trying to block off as much time as possible for the US launch. Then there are those other books to be written ...



Visit Patchen's website at www.patchenbarss.com.