

**INTERVIEW  
WITH**

*Meghan Down*

**Meghan Daum** is the author of four books, most recently the collection of original essays *The Unspeakable: And Other Subjects of Discussion*, which won the 2015 PEN Center USA Award for creative nonfiction. She is also the editor of the New York Times bestseller *Selfish, Shallow & Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not To Have Kids*. Her other books include the essay collection *My Misspent Youth*, the novel *The Quality of Life Report*, and *Life Would Be Perfect If I Lived In That House*, a memoir. Since 2005, Daum has been an opinion columnist at The Los Angeles Times, covering cultural and political topics. She has written for numerous magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, and *Vogue*. She is the recipient of a 2015 Guggenheim Fellowship and a 2016 National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and is an adjunct associate professor in the MFA Writing Program at Columbia University's School of the Arts. During her visit to Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Daum took the time to speak with Manuscripts staff member Julian Wyllie.

*In an age with accessible social media, what are the challenges for a writer at a big newspaper competing with the blogging world?*

Increasingly there's less difference between those two things. A columnist at a newspaper still has an online version of their columns and that's built on the same search engine optimization factors playing in, meaning it's still a matter of how many clicks you're going to get. One thing we know is that the metabolism for news and for content is in hyperdrive and editors demand think pieces and hot takes turned around in an hour and that creates a lot of half-baked ideas. It's a little bit of a dangerous situation sometimes because that's how misinformation and reductive interpretations of events get out

there. Because of this, I know my approach as a columnist is not about telling my audience what to think, but I want them to think alongside me as I explore different ideas.

*Let's expand more on your approach. How did you get to this method of writing columns?*

Ultimately an essay and a column is a suggestion to me. I'm just suggesting to my readers "Hey, what if we think about it this way!" I'm not somebody like a Paul Krugman of *The New York Times*, for example. Those kinds of big-named columnists have a reliable brand and you know what they're going to say because of the audience they attract. But I personally didn't come from a newspaper background so I didn't cut my teeth on that style of writing.

*So you didn't major in journalism in college at all?*

I majored in English. We didn't have journalism majors at [Vassar] college but I did take some classes, one of them being a favorite taught by a former *New York Times* reporter. I just thought I was going to be a fiction writer. In 1992 the idea of creative nonfiction wasn't in the vocabulary as far as class work, so my perception was that writers were either newspaper reporters or they become novelists, and I was too chicken to become a newspaper reporter. I'm not that person who's going to knock on doors or do that sort of thing.

*In that case, you focused on fiction first?*

From there I was an editorial assistant at a magazine while writing stories on the side. I didn't have any family money so I needed a job because I was living in New York City. Then about halfway through my MFA program I discovered the essay form. But again, as a writer, I had to become versatile to survive so I wrote for various magazines like *Self* and others. It was

really silly now that I think about it.

*I can tell it's difficult to afford living in a big city and still pay for your career when you're just shopping magazine pieces around without a day job.*

I would say it's become harder to do that too. I mean it was hard enough then.

*Really?*

At least back then when you finally did get an assignment it was going to pay pretty well. All those glossies paid the best. There was even a joke that the highest paid magazines were *Playboy* and *Cosmo*. Those two had the best word rate. Even really serious writers would write for those places. But I was also signed up for temp agencies to work for, mostly office stuff. I had a gazillion temp jobs. I don't think there's a block in midtown Manhattan that I didn't have a job for. I also had to have roommates and one of the people I lived with for a couple years is now "Flo" from the Progressive insurance commercials.

*No way.*

We're still very good friends in L.A. She was even more impoverished than me. But yes I think it's even harder now because all these places don't want to pay anybody anything. Now I tell people to just get a job if you really respect your art and your creativity. Don't let yourself starve. Go for a job, hopefully one that doesn't have anything to do with writing, then you can save your intellectual energies for your real work.

*From that perspective, you have written essays about having to afford life in a city and how it's portrayed on tv and movies. One New Yorker piece you wrote about the movie "This is 40" talks*

*about the house in the movie as a joke because based on their jobs they would never be able to afford a home of that price.*

And they would never be able to have that kind of money with kids those ages.

*Precisely. How do you think that affects a viewer or reader's perception of living in cities?*

I think it's always been that way but we notice it more now. *Sex in the City* is the ultimate example because it shows this woman who is a freelance writer living in a fantastic apartment with all this stuff. It's called shelter porn, which is the aspirational idea, image or fantasy of living in a beautiful house. The reality is that it's harder to live in a city now. Look at New York in the 70s. It was relatively cheap and dangerous but there was a genuine bohemian way to live there. And now it's this international city of wealth.

*And the wealth seems concentrated in certain areas.*

Right, but there's no such thing now as an affordable apartment. Even in Bed Stuy, Brooklyn now it seems like you can't get anything less than a million dollars. The good news now is that with the internet and the dispersion of media it's easier to live in a place like Indianapolis and be apart of the conversation. You don't have to live in New York and go to cocktail parties and network that way. That used to feel more urgent and people still do it if they want to do it. But I don't necessarily think people are getting assignments and book deals because they're mingling around at parties in the cities. They're getting other things, but not necessarily that.

*And for you at least you write about leaving New York because of the affordability issues.*

Oh yeah, I was \$80,000 in debt!

*Exactly, so you went to Nebraska? Tell me how you got to that point.*

Well, I had been to Lincoln doing a magazine story, and I always had a thing about the prairie. I loved Little House on the Prairie when I was a kid and I just liked the aesthetic and the stark landscape. So I went there and it was really cheap I noticed and I was in this pretty desperate financial situation in New York at that time, so I kind of just dared myself to move to Lincoln, Nebraska. I didn't think I was going to last more than a year but I ended up staying four years. I wrote a novel inspired by that experience and the irony was that as soon as I got there every editor in New York wanted me to write for them because it was so "exotic" to them.

*So they wanted you to bring that experience back and write about it?*

Yes and now we would call that cultural appropriation but that concept did not exist as much then.

*And with the internet age things are different with appropriation rhetoric too.*

Yes, yes, and that kind of saved me, in a way. It definitely saved me monetarily. In New York I just felt myself becoming incredibly stuck in a bubble. I didn't know anybody outside of my world, I barely knew how to drive anymore. There's something very infantilizing about that.

*One thing I've thought about too is that people think that just because you live in a big city you supposedly have all this culture around you, but you've said you found a lot more of the culture*

*while living in Nebraska as opposed to New York.*

Yes, and that's because in a small town everyone has to kind of get together. It might be looser in some ways but if you go to the bar in Nebraska there will be the politicians and factory workers and farmers and everyone else sort of together. In New York, however, it's just so big. It's so big that you have this luxury of only hanging out around people in your intellectual circle. And everyone in New York thinks that because of the subway they think that they're so diverse and everyone is interacting. Really? Would you have that same range of people invited to your dinner party? I doubt it. Sometimes New Yorkers think they have it all covered.

*From another city aspect, one funny thing you've said about Los Angeles is that it's similar to New York but the difference is they have yards. What other contrasts have you seen as a writer living in New York to Nebraska and now Los Angeles?*

In L.A., a lot of the people I may come across are actually from New York, so it comes down to the people. Even I pretty much still go back and forth. L.A., however, is a place where there is a wildness to it. That is one thing I love about it. I have a neighbor who's had coyotes sleeping in her lawn chairs. Every morning it would just be lying there. You have this kind of collision of urban and wilderness that you don't really see in a lot of cities. There's something amazing about the lights too. No wonder the movie business is there, that's why cinematographers called it the "magic hour." It's incredible in the late afternoon heading into twilight in L.A. So yes, everyone's relationship to the outdoors is greater and people are hiking all the time in California. Also, what you get for your money in Los Angeles can be bigger than in New York.

*I can understand that. On that end, shifting focus from your background to your writing, being an essayist requires writers*

*to give some piece of their self to readers, but is there an art to omitting details? How much of yourself do you give readers?*

I think every writer has to make that decision for himself. Everyone has a different kind of threshold for what they're comfortable with. My attitude is that the job of the writer working on an essay in particular is to establish a rapport with the reader and have an intimate conversation with the narrator, but not necessarily everything or anything about the writer. You're essentially setting up a persona, and that's not to say it's a fake thing or related to fiction, but you want to establish a voice that's probably a bit more intense than your own voice. And there's also a level of drama. You know, I'm really not that interesting enough to sustain an entire book that was written with no embellishments and no stylistic choices. That would be incredibly boring. The distinction is between confessing versus confiding. You want to confide. You don't want to blab it all out.

*Is that one of the differences you see with modern essays?*

Yes, that's certainly stuff you see on the web all of the time on so many websites!

*Do you think that comes from the titles of essays? Sometimes maybe the essay is fine but the titles are clickbait. One example I can think of was one called "I'm a white woman who dated a Black Panther. I could have been Rachel Dolezal." But I'm also guessing you usually don't get to pick the titles for your columns in the L.A. Times.*

I never pick the titles. Never. People need to understand that. People will get upset for the headline but often it's not the writer's fault. That's especially the case with print because they choose titles at the last minute. This is an art layout copy editing thing. Oh, God, I can't tell you how many times I've

been screwed over by a headline.

*With your political columns I didn't see wacky titles but for some people who side with one political party or another they might read one and then scroll to the bottom and angry comment. In one case I remember when the New Yorker Magazine got rid of the comment section for that reason and I think everything flows better now.*

That may be true but you know where the comment section lives now? It's on their Facebook page and it's scary to see some of the comments people leave.

*I agree. Big picture fifty years ago the only way people had their voice was to call the columnist or write letters.*

Not even fifty, that was fifteen or ten years ago.

*So, in the present, where do you get your praise and critique from? Do you read the comments?*

I don't read them as much anymore. I used to though. I think right now my readers are used to me. I used to get more pushback but I've done it for a long time, eleven years, and when I started I was neither fish nor fowl. They weren't always clear what I was saying because I'm not a completely predictable liberal and I'm not a conservative. I'm much more likely to entertain all sorts of ideas. Maybe in the beginning they were thinking "what the hell is going on, what is this person like," but I think people that don't like me have sort of just given up on me. And the ones that do are more accepting.

*Well, now people are sort of being trained to skim too so maybe that matters.*

People are reading what they are already inclined to agree with. You can select your filters for your whole life. *But people think they're not being filtered.*

It's true though. One of my closest friends is a conservative Christian who voted for Trump and her sources of information are entirely different from mine and neither of us had any idea that was the case until we talked for hours. Overall the internet and social media is in its infancy. It's very upsetting what's happening now but it's important to remember that this is a crying child. The internet is a two-year-old having a tantrum. Hopefully in fifty years it will be a middle-aged person with some kind of seasoned sensibilities.

*Then where do you think your place is as a writer? You have the professional background in the older model of newspapers and magazines and essay collections and you are having to transition into the newer model as well. Right now there are many writers who only know how to get a blog, type a lot, tweet and build a brand.*

I'm working on another book but I won't say too much about it except that it's a little more political. All I can do as a writer is be as honest as possible and call things as I see them which is increasingly harder to do. I think with what has happened now with this new administration I'm still figuring it out. But I want to look at the nuances and take small things and dissect them while everything else is going to be done with a sledgehammer, and rightfully so, but that's just not my instrument. I'm in a moment where I'm thinking about how I want to proceed. But for writers starting out now who have to cope with digital media, I hope being in the conversation for them is its own reward, because there are few others.

*With that in mind the election was divisive for some and people had very one-sided opinions on all sides so it must be difficult*

*for a columnist speaking on behalf of others. Is that challenge worthy to you?*

Honestly, I can't sleep at night unless I'm being intellectually honest with my writing. I would feel gross to write something I didn't really believe or to pander to the masses of politically correct opinions. I have friends that are screaming on things that are "problematic" but I'm also fascinated by the identity politics and the way it's useful and not useful. No matter what it'll be hard because this is a moment where we'll need all hands on deck and we don't need to be fighting. The liberals are fighting with each other, for example, over who is "properly outraged," or that they're not doing their outrage right.

*I've seen that on both sides as well, like the separation of alt-right from regular right.*

Right, but you know something? The best art and thinking has come out of terrible times. So we're lucky in a way because this is huge history. This is probably the biggest event in modern American history and we're relatively young and engaged so if we survive it things can be great!