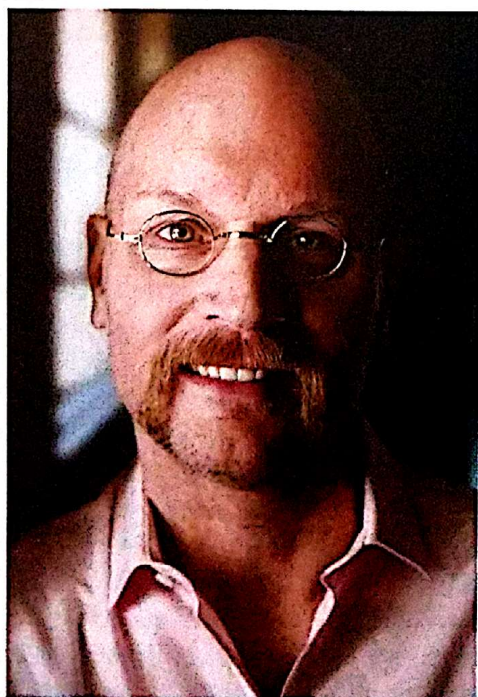


# DON'T FLINCH

Augusten Burroughs is bold, frank, and fearless in his search for personal truth. Aspiring memoirists, take note.



BY JACK SMITH

**N**ew York Times best-selling author Augusten Burroughs has written nine books – four memoirs, three essay collections, a self-help book, and a novel. His most famous memoir, *Running with Scissors*, chronicles growing up with a mentally unstable mother and an alcoholic father before being forced to move in with a wacky psychiatrist and his oddball family. The memoir was published in 2002; in 2006, the book was made into a movie, starring Joseph Cross as Burroughs, Annette Bening as his mother, Alec Baldwin as his father, and Brian Cox as Dr. Finch, the psychiatrist with off-the-chart clinical theories.

In his 2008 memoir, *A Wolf at the Table*, Burroughs revisited his childhood, focusing on his father in a way we hadn't seen in *Running with Scissors*.

The book is very dark at times, as we watch young Burroughs trying to connect with a father who wants no part of him, eventually becoming a danger to him and his mother. In one passage, Burroughs even fantasizes about killing his father, a man he was convinced was utterly evil.

As he got older, Burroughs continued to struggle for his father's affection, trying to puzzle out the man who was always too busy for him. He ultimately concedes: "I knew the truth. I knew that my father was not a nice man. He was just very good at creating an external identity, a mask to show the world."

Burroughs's most recent memoir is *Lust & Wonder*, published in 2016. The book chronicles his romantic relationships leading up to his marriage to Christopher Schelling, his longtime literary agent. Like much of his work, *Lust & Wonder* tends to go right for the jugular in its unflinching honesty. When Burroughs discovers that Schelling was HIV positive early in their relationship, he admits he immediately began looking for reasons not to like him: "From this moment forward, I would take a careful inventory of all of Christopher's flaws, shortcomings, and abnormalities and create my own virtual catalogue of deal breakers." Who hasn't engaged in rationalization of one kind or another, however ignoble? We tend to want to hide these things, secret them away, but not Burroughs. He brings these rationalizations to the clear light of day.

As with his memoirs, Burroughs's essay collections demonstrate his astute understanding of himself and others, delivered with incisive wit. In *Possible Side Effects*, Burroughs presents himself as flawed, needy, insecure, and at times clueless. He revels in witty juxtapositions and surprises. We learn, for instance, that he's been "smoke-free" for many years. Yet he's been upping his chewing of Nicorette: "And it's expensive stuff. I pay – in an average Upper West Side pharmacy – \$85 for a box of 165 pieces. I buy two boxes a week. Which works out to about \$680 a month."

Burroughs's debut (and only) novel, *Sellelevision*, published in 2000, is an unmitigated satirical romp. An exposé of the home shopping phenomenon, the novel is populated with characters who are brand-conscious and vacuous, yet alarmingly real, for Burroughs humanizes them at the same time he ratchets up the bizarre.

He lays bare any pretensions of humans being more than what they are – himself included. Like all great humorists, his work includes a mix of moods, genial at times, raw at others. His work reaches readers because it is highly personal yet always accessible.

## Q & A

**We tend to link the imagination to fiction, poetry, and drama – forms of imaginative literature – and the memory to memoir. Is there any room for the imaginative faculty in the writing of memoir as long as the basic story details are true?**

**What about the role of interpretation: A memoir isn't just "facts only," is it?**

Memoir is not court stenography. But neither should it be fiction. My process of writing memoir is often really a kind of private time travel where I mentally glide backwards into the past and encounter an experience – one that I'd often forgotten about entirely until the writing process – and then try to report what I experience. And because I experience the world through all my senses, my writing about the past doesn't include just what happened or what somebody said but how the prickly popcorn ceiling felt when I stroked it or how the air had a metallic smell, almost like it had rusted. Writing about the past is, for me, a process of digging and recovery, and trying to really nail with great specificity the way I felt or what I thought at the time. But when I'm writing a memoir about something current in my life, it's a completely different process. I'm not sailing backwards in time but rather scrutinizing my present with as much specificity, as much honesty, as possible.

**How do you reconstruct dialogue in your memoirs and yet keep the work nonfiction?**

Some of my memoirs (like *Dry* and *Lust & Wonder*) were largely written in real time, as it happened. So I'm recalling dialogue from five minutes or an hour ago, and not a decade ago. But at other times, like with *Running with Scissors*, I am recalling dialogue that happened many years before. And I never experience "creating" dialogue but rather "hearing" it spoken and then writing down the words. It's very much like watching a movie and taking notes at the same time. But everybody's memory is different, and some people won't recall whole conversations a decade or more after they happened. A psychiatrist once told me I had a "sensory processing disorder" where old memories were retained for much longer than is common with most people. Perhaps this has something to do with my recall.

**What sources besides memory do you rely on for your books?**

I've been keeping diaries all my life and have used these. I also have lots of photographs, which spark memories.

**Your dysfunctional childhood has given you plenty of ore to mine. What would you tell an aspiring memoirist whose adolescence was much less interesting or compelling? Would a so-called "normal" childhood be worthy of memoir?**

I don't think one has to have a "dysfunctional childhood" in order to write a fascinating memoir, but there definitely needs to be something. And that "something" could even be a gift for the observation of tiny, daily life. There's a scene in an Elizabeth Berg book which I love where two women are having a conversation at the kitchen table and one of the women is pressing her finger against the table and pulling up crumbs. This sort of tiny detail is exquisite because it's something we've all observed and have all forgotten we've observed until we encounter it in a book. As

thrilling as it may be to read about something extraordinary and entirely foreign to our own experience, it's also wonderful to encounter ourselves on the page, to feel the rush of "that's me, exactly!"

**How do you determine what to include in a memoir and what to exclude? Do you work to have one major idea running through a book?**

My books are always a process of discovery. I almost never have any idea what I'm doing until I'm actually doing it. In fact, I think every time I've had a plan or an idea, it has been entirely sidelined by whatever I uncover while writing. In terms of what I keep and what I cut, I have a lot of help. My first reader is and has always been my literary agent (and now husband), Christopher Schelling. He has a sharp, unsentimental eye and a very high threshold for amusement. I cut a lot of stuff that's just... boring. Or perhaps I've covered it in another book previously. Or sometimes there's a legal issue and my publisher isn't comfortable with a certain piece. As a general rule, I won't ever cut anything because I feel it makes me "look bad" or is personally humiliating. I am impervious to those considerations. I lack a sense of personal discretion or protection in my work because I feel like, if this is what I do for a living, I have to do it 100 percent or not at all.

**Who are your literary influences as a memoirist?**

I just wasn't very well-read when I began writing about myself. In fact, I started writing before I started reading at age 24. So I can't say I have any influences with respect to memoir – and to this day I very rarely read memoirs. But I have been enormously inspired by my entire reading life by Edith Wharton (of all people) because of her astonishing descriptive abilities. She writes with such beautiful specificity.

**THE AUGUSTEN BURROUGHS FILE**

- Burroughs worked as an advertising copywriter from age 19, first in San Francisco, then in Chicago, and finally in Manhattan.
- He is a prominent American humorist. In 2005, *Entertainment Weekly* ranked him No. 15 on its list of "The 25 Funniest People in America."
- His most famous memoir, *Running with Scissors*, was a *New York Times* best-seller for over three years.
- He was a contributing editor for *Details* magazine from 2003 to 2008.
- The Lambda Literary Foundation honored him with the Trustee Award in 2013.
- He received an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Savannah College of Art & Design in 2013.

**Your memoirs are highly confessional, frank, honest, and bold. To what extent should memoir be so unflinching, in your opinion? What would you tell beginning memoirists about portraying the "truth" about themselves and others?**

You can't lie to yourself if you're going to be a memoirist. Our personal failures and limitations and weak or fragile spots are the most interesting things to read about. Again, it comes back to telling the truth as opposed to the thing we wish were true or ought to be true or assume at first glance to be true. I think a memoirist really has to be willing to – not necessarily comfortable with – revealing their deepest emotions, motivations, and actions on the page for anyone to view and judge. A memoir that holds back or refuses to "go there" is an insult to the reader, really. If I've paid to read your story, I want to experience it fully. Not some airbrushed, stiff-upper-lip version. An

emotionally dishonest memoir is nothing more than a tedious infomercial for the author.

**A memoirist always faces the prospect of angering readers who disagree with the facts or the interpretation of the facts. This happened to you with *Running with Scissors*. What do you recommend the writer do when faced with readers who will take exception to one's account – or even launch a lawsuit?**

Reader reactions are entirely out of your hands as an author, and this is just one of the dangers inherent in the form. A good publisher will have a legal department to vet the manuscript; an author might have to change names or physical descriptions or locations. But it's just impossible to predict how a reader is going to react or what action they will or will not take. I think the memoirist has to place these thoughts aside, write the book, and then work with the publisher to address any specific legal concerns that arise on a scene-by-scene basis. That's just the reality of writing memoir. There are some things you simply will not be able to say. And some things that you may say but not without risk. And it all comes down to how willing the publisher and author are to assume these risks.

**What are the ingredients of a good personal essay? What should the writer be looking for that makes the story worth telling?**

You know, for me it's very personal. Is this a story I want to even remember? Is the process of "re-living" this experience on the page funny or exciting or horrifying? If so, that's probably a good story for publication. I'm not sure I have a really good answer for you except to say that it often comes down to instinct.

**Are you planning to write another novel? If you do, would it be in the same vein as your darkly comic debut novel, *Sellevision*?**

Yes, I'm actually working on a novel right now, and it's such a different experience from writing memoir. There's infinitely more freedom for one thing – literally anything can happen. I am not attached to the script of the past. But this freedom is also a limitation in a way. Because it's easy to then question absolutely everything. Because couldn't there always be something...better? So I'm not entirely comfortable writing fiction and feel somewhat "out of my element," but at the same time, I think maybe that's a good thing.

**What's the writing process like for you? Do you have a specific schedule, a specific place you write, and a particular goal for each day?**

My writing process is somewhat chaotic and irregular. I wish I was the

kind of writer with a little desk and process and all sorts of rituals, but I'm not. Right now I'm sitting in a leather chair with my legs crammed up beside me. There's a Great Dane snoring away on the sofa across from me and a Rhodesian Ridgeback on the chair beside me, and I'm uncomfortable, really, but [I] am not going to move until I finish this interview. Later I'll move into the other room and stretch out on the velvet sofa with my iPad – which has a keyboard hacked onto it – and do some writing. But I've also got to go get groceries and run a couple of errands and do some cleaning. So probably I won't do any real writing until late this evening. And late evening does seem to be when I'm most productive with my writing, whether I'm crammed into a chair, propped up in bed, or on

the sofa. I write in various spots all over the house at all different times. Sometimes I even sit at a table – but not often.

**What tips do you have for beginning writers setting out to write their first memoir?**

Stop thinking about all the reasons you have not to write your memoir and what people in your family might think and just get busy writing it. My writing advice is always pretty much the same: Stop thinking about writing, stop *reading* about writing, stop worrying about writing, and just actually sit in one place and write something. ■

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Jack Smith is author of numerous articles, reviews, interviews, three novels, and a book on writing, entitled *Write and Revise for Publication*.

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