

Read the following interview.

After reading it: What is the mental image you have of the author?

Jot down at least five questions you would ask him yourself.



p a u l ? a u s t e r

The author of the recent novel "Timbuktu" and the screenplays for "Smoke" and "Blue in the Face" discusses cynicism, sentimentality, Brooklyn and the strange things he creates.

By Chris Colin

July 23, 1999 | In "Timbuktu," Paul Auster's new novel, the setting moves from Brooklyn, where I used to live, to northern Virginia, where I used to live. This is a coincidence, and coincidence is no coincidence in an Auster novel. In an Auster novel, characters meet characters named Paul Auster, detectives spy on writers who are already spying back and chance encounters govern the universe. I am prepared to believe this afternoon's interview may yield anything.

I first read Auster when I was living in Brooklyn. It was "City of Glass," the first novel in his "New York Trilogy," and my ex and I took turns reading chapters aloud. We both found that the other read at once too fast and too slow: Something funny happened on the pages, a tide rushing you to the next sentence and an undertow sweeping you back to reconsider the previous one.

After the "Trilogy," I got to work on the rest of his oeuvre. The 52-year-old has written more than a dozen works of fiction and nonfiction, as well as a considerable body of poetry and the screenplays for the films "Lulu on the Bridge," which he directed, and "Smoke" and "Blue in the Face." His most recent novel, "Timbuktu," came out this past May. "Timbuktu" is the famously dog-narrated tale of a hobo poet and his canine companion, Mr. Bones. The novel wanders -- sometimes more than a lot -- with its itinerant protagonists, who trek down to Baltimore for the poet's last day on Earth. Auster keeps busy.

The appeal of Auster's work is that of watching a good detective movie that knows it's a detective movie: self-conscious plots that cook. Narrative structures meander like their occasionally transient protagonists. Or they explode laterally like their New York City setting. Or they fold in on their genre novel conventions: a private eye's search for his private "I" contracting upon itself in a climax markedly beyond genre. It is not inappropriate to use the term Austerian in those moments when paranoia, fate and a man with a mysterious briefcase collide.

I get to the Stanford Court Hotel in San Francisco early and poke around. The cheery lobby gives way unceremoniously to a dim, faux-old hotel bar. It's California riffing on oak-and-brass New York, and not to unappealing effect. What the place lacks in smoke and moody pomp it makes up for in comfortable chairs. I sit, then get up, then go to the bathroom, then pace around the lobby.

I get bored in the lobby and peek back in the bar section. A woman has recently taken a seat at a small table where a man is staring down a laptop. They exchange stiff greetings and bend over the computer screen. "Is it accurate?" I hear her ask. "Yes."

They glance at me and I duck behind a corner. That's when I imagine I've wandered into the meta-maze of a Paul Auster novel: As the laptop couple whisper, then nod in my direction, then lean back to the keyboard for a burst of typing, it becomes perfectly clear that they have my life on their computer screen: "He waits for his interview with writer Paul Auster. He wonders how the writer will respond to his questions: *Will Auster turn that intense stare of his on me?* Colin wonders if he's missed his mark with the writer altogether, if Auster will prove slicker than the smart but ultimately Brooklyn guy he hoped for."

I forget about the computer and its whispering operators. It's five minutes until I call Auster; to my surprise, I'm not nervous. His intense, somehow intimidating reach into Borgesian labyrinths of mirrored identity gets eclipsed by an even more intense compassion. He does his characters gently, does not condescend. They are beyond sympathy -- one simply admits them and invests in their spirit. When Glass, in "City of Glass," assumes the persona of Paul Auster, detective, one cares only that he find what he's looking for. Even the confused and misled are sympathetic, as with occasionally homeless Willy Christmas of "Timbuktu," who wanders America, sleeping on grates and rambling to Mr. Bones about Spandex. I think Auster will be nice.

At 3:10 p.m. I use the courtesy phone. Auster says he'll be right down. "How will I know you?" he asks. "You'll know me." "OK," he says and we hang up. I straighten the yellow carnation pinned to my sweater.

A minute later he steps into the lobby and looks around. He spots the flower, smiles gently. He's tall and handsome and not at all the Mr. Intense of his book jackets. He's wearing black jeans and classic Converse tennis shoes. We find a table out of the way.

The chatting comes easy. Auster is relaxed and salt of the earth; he's people. We agree we don't want to eat and we don't want to have cocktails. We have to do something. We shrug and get \$4 Cokes.

He's in town for a couple of readings, promoting "Timbuktu," and we start talking about places. He admits to having lived in Berkeley briefly.

"I must say I enjoyed the time very much, but I felt that the tug of New York was too strong," he says. "I haven't really thought about living here again, but every now and again, I pass through and I always enjoy it. It's a beautiful city, and it doesn't feel like any other place."

tell him I'm an East Coast transplant, that I feel the tug daily.

"It's not as stimulating out here, is it?" he asks.

"Now I didn't say that."

"It *is* beautiful," he concedes.

"And the people are creative and kind." We're having my favorite ridiculous discussion -- which coast is better? -- and it seems a guilty indulgence for Auster, too.

"Oh, absolutely, there is a lot going on," he says. "But I guess you get used to some kind of a dense, frantic pace to things. And it doesn't feel that way here."

"But then I worry that the reason we feel the tug east is that maybe people don't think they deserve this kind of peace."

"Yes, yes, I understand."

Auster's chuckle is more California than New York, I note. And his formal "yes, I understand" -- somehow European. We continue, at my insistence, to talk geography. It's discovered that we once lived a couple blocks from each other in Brooklyn.

"When I was there, I found myself looking for those other, mythical Brooklyns," I said.

"You know, looking for the cigar store Brooklyn from 'Smoke,' the 'French Connection' Brooklyn. But I was living in a stroller and croissant Brooklyn."

"Well, it's true -- there are a lot of babies in Brooklyn now," he says, unperturbed. "Because there are a lot of families living there, which I think is a healthy sign. One thing I like about Brooklyn is that there are so many old people around, too. When you have old people and babies in the same neighborhood, in America today, I think it's healthy."

"It's a very integrated neighborhood," he goes on. "On the street where I live, there are mostly houses, but there is one apartment building also. And that apartment building holds people from all over the world -- Indians, Cubans and black people and white people. And the individual houses are owned by white families, Asian families and black families -- just in one little block. I thought about trying to do an investigation of that block. You know, interview every single person who lives on it, just to get some kind of demographic profile."

Auster and I move on to books -- what he calls those "strange things" he does with his time.

"I just finished one of your strange things, 'Timbuktu,'" I say. "And it's so nice how the characters are likable. Or rather, their likability is not even an issue. And I felt that way in the books of the 'New York Trilogy,' in 'Mr. Vertigo.' You don't ask whether you like this person or not ..."

"You just accept them." He nods.

"And they're earnest and straightforward and direct. Is that something you work on, or does it just sort of happen?"

"I can't write about a person unless I feel a great affection for him or her -- even if the person isn't strictly an admirable person," he says. "There has to be that love. I think what happens in a lot of writing today is a very edgy, cynical feeling about the world and about people. And I'm not interested in that at all."

Auster goes on to explain that cynicism dangerously distorts reality.

"Just as a hundred years ago, you know, Victorian sentimentality is something we all sneer at now and find very funny," he adds. "But I think people will look back at us and sneer at the way we've looked at the world, too. Because cynicism and sentimentality are just two sides of the same distortion."

We talk about getting America out of this cycle of cynicism, what the country needs to undo the damage. Auster brings up a trip to Israel he made with his wife and daughter two and a half years ago.

"I waited all my life for the right moment to go, and this seemed to be it. And what I found there was a society that utterly lacks cynicism, in every way. You know, they're living under such pressure, the different groups within the culture are so at war with each other. And they live with such danger for so long that people don't have time to be either bored or cynical," he says.

"They're always asking essential questions about the world," he continues. "And it's an exhausting way to live, because you're on the edge of a nervous breakdown all the time. But it's also very stimulating and exciting."

I ask why America isn't asking essential questions. Are we so cynical we don't have to ask? Are we cynical because there's a reason to be? He doesn't know. But in a note of insistent optimism, he contends that America's foundations are "extraordinarily healthy."

We talk more about culture under capitalism. Not a particularly new subject, but it's refreshing to discuss it with someone who doesn't sigh. Auster, I'm certain, has never once considered throwing his hands up. There's some Horatio Alger in him, and I decide, briefly, he could have my vote in a congressional election, should the occasion present itself. What else could you want in a writer?

He offers the standard author's objection to talking about his work -- "the text speaks for itself" -- but I decide he can give the text some time off.

"You don't necessarily go for a strict realism," I say, thinking of the deliberateness that often steers his characters from adventure to adventure in a way I've never been steered. "Not to say the books aren't realistic. But the characters are so clearheaded -- even when they're not clearheaded people. They always know what they're after in a way that a 'realist' might not have his or her characters be. They don't have moments where they're just sort of staring at the microwave or dragging their sleeve through the coffee while they linger in some feeling or other."

"I think a lot of them *are* completely lost," he says, sitting a little straighter. "But, well, I'm interested in presenting cosmologies, a way of understanding, figuring things out through the stories. And yet always keeping it down to the ground at the same time."

Auster patiently suffers through a few more minutes of book talk. He describes his fascination with narrators and authorial voice, an interest he recalls having even as a child rummaging through books in his grandfather's attic. The conversation wanders from writing into something more casual. Still, I'm aware of something like ontological urgency in what we say; it is understood that one ought discuss the things that matter, no less.

We talk a while longer, a good 15 minutes after I stop the tape recorder. By the end we're joking and lounging, Auster draped gracefully over his chair like a sheet. Eventually I pay for our Cokes and we say our good-byes. I leave with the heady enthusiasm of someone who's just had soda with one of the world's good people. And if the couple with the laptop at the edge of the lounge

somehow implicate me in an existential conspiracy they've cooked up -- if my Coke with Paul Auster proves the doorway to a crisis of identity, chance and narrative -- I decide, in the true Austerian spirit, that I'm game.

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