

Robin Hemley Live Discussion

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Thurs, June 11 at 1:00 p.m. CST



Robin Hemley was online Thurs, June 11 at 1:00 p.m. CST to take your questions and comments about literature and writing.

Hemley is a faculty member of the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

Moderator: Hi! Welcome to the first online discussion in our new [Writing University](#) 'Live Discussions' series. Today we have Robin Hemley, professor at the University of Iowa's [Nonfiction Program](#), online to answer your questions about a variety of literary topics, including his new book '[Do Over!](#)' and his McSweeney's article '[The Great Book Blockade](#)'. Feel free to submit questions during the hour.

Robin Hemley will also be reading from [Do Over!](#) tonight at Prairie Lights Bookstore in Iowa City at 7pm. If you are unable to attend the reading you can listen to it [live](#) at the [Writing University website](#).

We will be posting the responses as they are answered, therefore there may be some delay between answers. Thanks, and enjoy!

Cheyenne, Iowa City: Hello. My question has to do with the adage "There's nothing new under the sun" to write about... that all topics and themes have been addressed in literature... as Janet Burroway says, there are only so many themes, or stories. How do you navigate this question in terms of your own writing? Do you feel pressure as a writer to consciously try to "Make it new" in any way, whether via original language, unique framing, experimentally-driven narrative, etc? I often wonder whether writing that isn't striving for at least one new or different aspect in some sense is worth writing or reading. It seems like so much out there sounds the same. Thank you.

Robin Hemley: Hi Cheyenne:

Sure, there's nothing new under the sun in certain ways, but the adage 'make it new' is something I try to follow without being overly self-conscious about it. Although I certainly have played with form in much of my work, such as my memoir NOLA, essentially a pastiche or collage kind of memoir, I let each work I'm writing reveal its form to me, whether traditional or experimental. But I don't try to make some new simply for novelty's sake. Publishers and editors treat the

subject of "newness" in an intriguing way. You might write a story about a goldfish but if the publication you've submitted it to has run something within the last year with anything that vaguely resembles a goldfish, they will certainly reject the piece no matter how different the pieces are. Broadly stated, you're writing about the same thing, but if you read the two goldfish pieces, they might be nothing at all like one another. That's all to say that yes, in a broad sense, nothing is new, but most writers know that their perspective is going to be different from anyone else's -- if they have strong imaginations among other writerly necessities. Personally, I don't worry about it much - part of the fun of being a writer is NOT being completely new, but imagining yourself as part of an ongoing conversation with other writers, past and present. When I was in graduate school, my classmates were always talking about "finding your voice." This always made me a little nervous because I hadn't known it was missing until I reached graduate school. Happily, it was still there waiting for me when I graduated. In other words, sometimes self-consciousness about "finding one's voice" or "making it new" actually do more harm than good.

Elizabeth, North Liberty IA: Mr. Hemley, I have question about your book "Do Over": I was wondering if the process of going through your childhood experiences again helped you understand what the world is like today for your own children?

Robin Hemley: Yes, it did. For me, that was a central part of the book, one of its joys. I as able to get a fresh look at childhood by stepping back into the world of childhood, and the project sparked many conversations between myself and my daughters. There are a lot of things that are different now for children, and many are well-documented: children are over scheduled, over protected, sometimes over praised. I certainly found this with my daughters. They were in so many activities that it seemed to stress them out. I don't remember feeling an iota of the stress my older daughters feel. This concerns me a bit because I always want my children to have some outlet for relaxation -- for them, it's reading, which of course, I approve of. I wrote a piece for The Wall Street Journal recently called "Things That Could Have Killed Me," all about my own hypocrisy as a parent. I was always getting into mischief when I was a boy. I even built a bomb when I was nine. While not quite a helicopter parent, I do tend to hover more than my own parents did. Yet I'm not convinced that the world is appreciably less safe than it was when I was a kid. I can list a hundred things that were much more unsafe when I was a kid, starting with no one using safety belts. Anyway, my bottom line is that the world has always been a dangerous place for kids and adults and always will be.

Rick, Chattanooga: DO OVER starts off very comically, and then, while the comic aspect remains, there is an undercurrent that is hard to pin done -- not anything like melancholy, but a more serious sense of how we are what we are and get to be that way... did you have a sense of that as you were working your way through the do overs and through the book?

Robin Hemley: I'm glad you noticed that. I think that setting the tone of the book was one of the big challenges, but that also reflects the changes in my attitude toward the project in the beginning versus my attitude towards the end. At first, I thought of the project as a bit of a lark, a kind of Billy Madison romp through childhood. Of course, I wanted that to be a big part of the book, but I also didn't want to write a book that was total fluff either. As the do overs progressed, I found that the memories being called up were quite powerful and often took me by surprise. Likewise, I wanted to include my daughters in the project, too, because from a very early stage, I saw this as a book about parenthood and specifically fatherhood. I'm divorced from the mother of my two older daughters, and so part of my story in Do Over also involves my attempt to explore my relationship with them as well as my relationship with my other younger daughter, Shoshie. I wasn't only doing over my past, but trying to learn from my mistakes as a parent so I wouldn't have to do over my present. Is it possible to live a life without regrets? That's sort of an unstated question in the book. And do we really learn from our past mistakes? So these are serious questions that hopefully inform a comic and ironic look at foibles and embarrassments.

Susannah in Dallas: Is there anything you would do over about the process of writing this book? Any hard-won knowledge to share with others approaching immersion memoir?

Robin Hemley: I think right now the answer is "no." I might like to do over a couple of interviews I've given for the book, but as far as the process goes, it went surprisingly smoothly. Still, such a book is frightening to contemplate in that so much depends on setting out to do something and hoping that interesting things happen as a result. I think some editors are wary of backing such a project if the results seem too difficult to predict. What helped with this project is that it didn't depend on things always working out. If I failed a do over (and I'd say I only failed one), that in itself was inherently as dramatic and potentially funny as succeeding in one. So my advice would be to make sure as much as possible that whatever you immerse yourself in is something that you can make a story from whether your endeavor is successful or not.

But as far as doing over the process or the writing of the book, I can't think of anything. It was really the most fun I've ever had writing a book.

Oh, there IS one thing! This time, I would bring along a documentary filmmaker perhaps! I'm glad I had photographs at least.

Thomas Vakulskas Iowa City: Did the WSJ solicit your recent article or did you submit it?

Robin Hemley: They more or less solicited it, though I had been asking to something along these lines for them. I've been writing for them for a little while so I have a working relationship with them.

Chris J. Chicago IL: I recently read your article in McSweeney's about the book blockade in the Phillipines and it seems like it was a very touchy topic to report on. Did you encounter any obstacles in writing the piece? And after it was published, was there any backfire, politically or socially?

Robin Hemley: Wow, was there EVER a response to that. You might want to take a look at my follow up article in the FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW (FEER.com): "Notes from a Blockade Runner" in which I detail the response. I wrote the piece because I was in the Philippines and when I found out that the Philippines was violating an international treaty by taxing imported books, I was shocked. At first, I contacted five of my Filipino writer friends and suggested they should investigate and perhaps protest to PEN International. Two of my friends never responded. Two said they knew nothing about it. But one said he knew about it and introduced me to a book store owner who started to fill me in on the sordid details. This began my investigation. I thought when I wrote the piece that no one would be interested except for my small following on McSweeney's. I was wrong. Within 24 hours, the story had gone "viral" as they say. To make a long story short, within a month, the president of the Philippines had reversed the illegal tax thanks largely to the mobilization of thousands of book lovers in the Philippines. I found the whole thing quite inspiring.

The response to the article was overwhelmingly positive, but at first I wondered whether I should even write it. Now I'm glad I did.

Bee Bee Rabozo: Your writing, especially "Do Over" made my sides ache with laughter. When I write and try to be funny, it doesn't bring that sort of reaction. How do you do it?

Robin Hemley: Thank you! Frankly, I just see the world in an absurd way, I guess. I remember that Stephen King once said that he writes to frighten himself. When I write I try to make myself laugh. It's not always easy to make me laugh, so I'm a tough audience. I've always loved to make people laugh, from when I was a kid and used to entertain my family with absurd anecdotes rather than eat.

Rick, Chattanooga: Sorry, this is my second question. Obviously you can't put everything that happened to you in any of do overs into the space of a chapter. So I was wondering what process you went through in selecting specific things, and which chapter was the most difficult to write about.

Robin Hemley: I always had a little notebook with me, and I took copious notes in it. I loved these little notebooks because they invariably contained nuggets that I knew I was going to incorporate into the book long before I sat down to write a chapter. This had the effect also of jump starting my mind in terms of the narrative of each chapter so that by the time I sat down I had a pretty clear idea of what I wanted to include and what I didn't. I took many more notes than I could include in the book, and when I started to write I flipped through my notes of each do over and then found a place that seemed a natural beginning. Then I started to shape the chapter. Consequently, there were things that I knew would not fit the shape I had chosen. I found it most difficult to write about living in my old home again. My mother passed away two years earlier (though she hadn't lived in this home for many years) and this was the home in which my older sister had died. At first, I took the chapter out but my editor made me put it back in. I'm glad he did.

Sara, Middle Tennessee: How are you promoting your new book? What are the challenges to marketing such a book - well, any book for that matter?

Robin Hemley: Oh, these days so much of a book's promotion falls upon the author. As print reviews dry up at an alarming rate, word-of-mouth becomes ever more crucial and especially on the internet. Publishers are very wary about spending advertising money, too, and they consider most book signings a waste unless it's in your home town. So I'm doing a lot of radio, and that's both fun and nerve-wracking, especially the live shows. But I'm happy to do it. You spend a lot of time on a book and you want to make sure it has the best shot in the world possible.

cheyenne, iowa city: Hello. Did you find, while researching your book, and being at camp, and all the other things that went into writing it- that you were able to access childhood memories more easily? Can you recall any instances where you remembered things you wish you hadn't, that were a surprise to you- and the converse- things you'd forgotten you were pleased to remember? (sorry, i still have not read the book but will). --did you find any ways to access memories you'd forgotten or did or just happen organically for you?

Robin Hemley: Yes, as a matter of fact, I was constantly stunned by the memories being called up. Sure, there were some unpleasant memories, but I was able to examine them and come to some understanding of why a particular do over was important to me based on some of the memories being called up. But I've always had a good memory of my childhood and have been able to call up events from that time quite easily (I've had a lot of practice), so there were no dark secrets that were uncovered - more like associations. For instance, when my do over kindergarten teacher asked us to draw a pleasant memory, I drew a picture of my older daughters and myself blueberry picking on Mt. Baker in Washington State. It's the first thing that came to mind. I'm divorced and we haven't picked blueberries on Mt. Baker for many years so when I drew this

picture it floored me. That was perhaps the first time in the project that I was surprised by the force of emotion of something I hadn't expected.

Suzanne Z., Minneapolis: Is the gift of writing in one's DNA or can one develop the talent to write? I have an MBA in Finance, but want to escape from the travails of Wall Street, do you think writing can be taught, learned, practiced...Or should I just throw in the towel right here, right now.

Robin Hemley: This is an age-old question. The subject of can writing be taught was just written about in The New Yorker a week ago. The standard answer is that craft can be taught but genius can't of course. Still, there are so many reasons to write and to pursue it. Obviously, not everyone is going to become a James Baldwin or Flannery O'Connor, but there are plenty of people who have taken up writing later (who weren't born to it) who have done quite well as writers. Frank McCourt had an entire career as a teacher (though I know he wrote as well during this time) before he wrote a book at age 62, I believe. There are scores of examples of writers who are wonderful who came to it late. It takes passion and persistence and happily, there's no sign posted anywhere in the writing world that reads, MBA's need not Apply. Yes, it can be learned and there are plenty of places where you can learn it. How far you go with it is to a certain extent up to you.

Vivienne, Dallas: Which of the do overs was the most difficult to write, whether from a technique or personal point of view, and why?

Robin Hemley: As I mentioned, I think the most difficult one for me was visiting a childhood home. This was logistically difficult to begin with. I moved around a lot when I was a child and so I had a number of homes to choose from. Still, would you let a complete stranger live in your home with you for a week simply because he says he's writing a book? I hit upon the idea of sending FEDEX letters to the occupants of my various homes so that they might open the letters and read them at least. I wrote my letter on university stationery and included my proto do over article from NEW YORK MAGAZINE so they would know I was legit. Still, I only heard from one person who was wary of me. She eventually said "no," and I was going to give up on the do over when about five months later I received an e-mail out of the blue from a woman who lived in another of my homes. She said she would agree if I kept her anonymous, which I did. It worked out just fine, but it was an emotionally difficult chapter and I wanted to remove it but my editor talked me out of it.

I also hated my attempt to take the ACT test, for a variety of reasons, some of which should be self-evident!

Susannah, Dallas: Second question -- You mentioned you'd do-over some of your recent radio interviews. Since radio has become so frequent a promotional tool, what about those interviews would you do over? Approach, length of responses, yay or nay ahead of time on particular shows or broadcast times? Something else entirely?

Robin Hemley: Most of the shows are just fine but I think it's important to screen the show and get a sense of what the show is about. The Talk Radio Shows are the ones I'm most wary of. I agreed early on to be on a silly show from Austin whose name I've blocked. But it was moronic. As soon as I was patched in, it became clear that they were going to simply riff on my title and do a really stupid schtick on "Do over." I tried to undermine them as much as possible but I would have preferred not going through it in the first place. I was also on a syndicated radio show in Philly done by a conservative talk show host after my WSJ article appeared. The problem with such hosts is that they have most often some social agenda they're touting while you're hoping to say at least something about your book. So that was a bit of a wash. On the other hand, there are a lot of radio hosts who do their homework and ask bright questions . . . I'm happy to do these. Basically, I think it's important not to ramble and also to have a few key anecdotes that you think exemplify your book. But also, keep your cool and don't necessarily answer every question -- like a politician, answer the question you wish you had been asked.

Michael; Des Moines: Robin - I enjoyed meeting & talking w/ you the other night @ Beaverdale Books. My question: how do you learn to trust an editor?

Robin Hemley: I love working with editors. I've had very few bad experiences. They are really on your side and while you don't have to agree with everything they suggest, there's definitely going to be some give and take. That said, in every book of mine there's always something that's taken out that I fight for (and usually lose), generally something to do with my bizarre sense of humor. Sometimes my editors think I go over the top and want to rein me in. I don't always agree, but they have the power. As a writer, you have to learn to compromise. Hemingway made fun of John Dos Passos saying once, "You can turn him on the rack, but that comma stays in!" I was once told by an editor that she loved to deal with experienced writers because they understood the process much better than green writers who were often way too full of themselves when it came to the editing process. Again, it's mostly a matter of compromise.

Jennifer, Detroit: Robin, Can you talk a little bit about how it felt to live out moments you knew you would write about? Did you hear yourself writing as you were running on the playground, for instance, almost as voice-over? I guess I'm wondering how you managed to experience your Do-overs authentically before crafting them. Thanks.

Robin Hemley: Good question. I felt that I was three people at once half the time as I was experiencing my do overs. I was remembering the original experience. I was living a new

experience. And I was the writer observing it all. I had no trouble keeping all three of these "selves" in my head at once. Although I was taking notes, I was very much into the experience and of course I couldn't always take notes. I did that after the fact sometimes. It's kind of like a photographer who takes thousands of photos. At first, his/her subjects are wary and stiff around the camera, but then they stop seeing it almost. For me, it was similar as a writer. I rarely thought I was hamming it up, and I rarely thought anyone else was hamming it up. If they did, I certainly didn't include that scene in the book. Mostly, the kids seemed quite relaxed around me.

Rick, Chattanooga: How does your writing affect your teaching, and how does teaching affect your writing?

Robin Hemley: I'm affected variously by my teaching. I never would have written *Do Over* if not for my teaching. It came directly out of a brainstorming session I was holding with my grad students here in Iowa. I truly love teaching and I love writing and I find the enthusiasm of my students rubbing off on me. But like everything, teaching should be done in moderation!

Moderator: Well, we have reached the end of our time with Robin, thanks to everybody who submitted questions! Any questions submitted during the hour that were not posted here in the 1 p.m. - 2 p.m. time frame will be posted later on the Live Discussion archive. And remember to check back for more upcoming Live Discussion in the future. Robin Hemley will be reading from [Do Over!](#) tonight at Prairie Lights Bookstore in Iowa City at 7pm. If you are unable to attend the reading you can listen to it [live](#) at the [Writing University website](#).

Editor's Note: The Writing University moderators retain editorial control over discussions and choose the most relevant questions and can decline to answer questions.