

ADAM HOCHSCHILD, A FINALIST FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD, THE NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD, AND ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF *MOTHER JONES*, HAS WRITTEN SIX BOOKS AND NUMEROUS ARTICLES FOR THE *ATLANTIC*, THE *NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS*, AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS. HE HAS SAID, "NEVER BELIEVE A WRITER WHO CLAIMS TO HAVE CHOSEN A SUBJECT PURELY FOR ITS INTRINSIC IMPORTANCE. THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING MORE." THAT "SOMETHING MORE" IS A DRIVING PERSONAL INTEREST, WITH WHICH HOCHSCHILD HAS GRACED SUBJECTS AS DISPARATE AS CONGO UPRISINGS, ABOLITIONISM, AND SOVIET GYPSY COMMUNITIES FOR OVER 30 YEARS.

## Interview



ADAM HOCHSCHILD

# Raising the Trapdoor: Adam Hochschild on the Art and Craft of Writing

by Aaron Cutler

## ■ Why do you write?

Because it enables me to peer into other people's lives—whether those of people long dead, who've allowed me to enter their lives through their own letters and diaries, or the recollections of those who knew them, or those still very much alive, who've allowed me to sit down with them with a notebook and tape recorder or, better yet, to follow them around or travel with them. I get to imagine myself inside someone else's head as he or she confronts some great moral dilemma: how to act when face-to-face with slavery, or apartheid, or Stalinism. What could be more interesting than that?

## ■ One could also imagine oneself inside someone's head as a fiction writer. Why journalism?

I love reading fiction, but I'm not sure whether I'm cut out to write it. I do enjoy taking some of the techniques fiction writers use—scene-setting, suspense, telling a story through the relationships among characters—and applying them to reportage or history. Except that the rules of the game are that you can't invent anything: every episode or quirk of someone's character has to be factually accurate. But if you look and select carefully, real history and real people are often more fascinating than what any but the greatest of novelists could invent.

## ■ You've written about the importance of including rich, vivid characters in history writing. How do you write them, especially without the aid of dialogue or scene?

Actually, sometimes history provides you with dialogue. Some things were recorded

verbatim even a hundred or more years ago: trials and court hearings, for example, or debates in legislative bodies or testimony before them. Sometimes a journalist was present at a scene and wrote down what people said. And sometimes a person remembers, or claims to remember—some skepticism is always a good idea!—what he or she said on a particular occasion, as in “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?”

There are many paths to setting a scene. Sometimes you can find a picture. Sometimes people remember things. Sometimes you have neither, but you can still reconstruct it. In *Bury the Chains* I wanted to give a picture of the London printing shop where twelve abolitionists gathered in 1787 to start what became one of the great human rights movements of all time. There are no pictures and no written data except the minutes of the meeting. First I went to the spot—something I often try to do. The printing shop is long gone, replaced by a skyscraper, but a few of the surrounding streets are surprisingly unchanged. Then I studied paintings, drawings, and descriptions of British printing shops at that time. So when I got to that part of the book, I was able to give a half-page description of what the place was likely to have looked like and smelled like.

### ■ What do you find most beneficial about visiting historical sites in person?

Imagining the event that I’m writing about. Right now, for example, I’m finishing a book about the First World War, so I’ve visited some of the battle sites in France and Belgium. One episode I’m writing about took place at a French battlefield, where the survivors described the fearsome casualties suffered in trying to capture a ridge or hill held by the Germans. But when my wife and I actually walked around there, the rise in the ground was no steeper than the slightly sloping field where I used to play soccer in school. It’s nothing you would normally call a hill. That makes you realize that these soldiers were describing how it looked when they were peering out of a trench, or pressed close to the earth in no-man’s-land, trying desperately to avoid the bullets flying overhead, with their eyes at ground level.

When I was writing about British slavery in the Caribbean, a Jamaican friend and I walked around in the backcountry, far off the tourist track, looking for ruins of old

plantations. We found a rusted old sugar boiler overgrown with forest and brush. How many slaves had been worked to death cutting cane and bringing it to this boiler? It's haunting to think about that. I like to think that going to such places can help you, even if only slightly, imagine yourself into the experience of the people you're writing about.

■ **In *King Leopold's Ghost*, you say, “In writing the history of powerless people, drawing on conventional published sources is far from enough.” What made you realize this?**

Well, it's easy enough to see, because when you go looking for such people's voices, they're often hard to find. Between 1880 and 1920, which included the heyday of the forced labor system, the Congo's population was cut roughly in half: it dropped from an estimated 20 million to somewhere around 10 million. Yet we don't have a single autobiography or full oral history of a Congolese man or woman from this period. There are two collections of short oral testimonies: one taken by an investigative commission, and one gathered by two priest-anthropologists who questioned people about their memories years later. So I used some of those voices. But sometimes the voices of the conquerors tell you a great deal. I quoted one of Leopold's officers who rejoiced, in his diary, that he didn't flinch when he ordered an African hanged. “I could now walk into fire,” he wrote, “as if to a wedding.” Here is someone celebrating his own brutalization. Inadvertently, he tells us a lot, and lets us imagine the fear Africans must have had of such men.

■ **Circling back to photographs: The biographer/historian Laurence Bergreen also likes to visit sites for research, taking photographs so that he can refer to them later. Is that something you do, or do you simply keep the image in mind? Aside from visiting locations, do you conduct any other extra-textual research?**

In writing history, you can pick up a few details from visiting sites—I use a notebook rather than a camera, because it helps me think of how I will describe the place in what I write.

But in using non-documentary sources beyond that, it's easiest, of course, when you're working with a piece of history that's recent enough so there are still people alive who experienced it. When I wrote my book on South Africa, *The Mirror at Midnight*, I talked to a man who had been in prison with Nelson Mandela, and to many people who took part in activist politics in the decades leading up to the first democratic election in 1994.

For working with various kinds of sources, no book was more deeply fascinating for me to research than *The Unquiet Ghost*, which is about Russians coming to terms with the Stalin years. I did my field work in 1991, when there were still many people alive and willing to talk to me who had been in Stalin's prison camps. Also a couple of secret police types from that era—both repentant and unrepentant. Through a sheer accident of being in the right place at the right time, I was the first American journalist to see the inside of the Moscow secret police archives from the 1930s and be able to look at and quote from files on their shelves. And through another lucky break, I arrived in Russia the month they lifted all the restrictions on where foreign journalists could travel—and that included parts of Siberia and the Arctic where the old prison camps were. A profoundly moving experience to go to some of these spots; it felt like stepping sixty years into the past. Those were the final chapters of my book.

■ **How do you know when to bring the “I” into your books (aside from your memoir)?**

My rule of thumb is to use it when I'm legitimately a part of the story and to avoid it otherwise. My own experiences or feelings don't belong in the narrative when I'm writing about things that happened almost a century ago, or several centuries ago. Hence, except for introductions, acknowledgements, and the like, there's no “I” in my last two books or in the one I'm finishing now. And it's often not there in my essays and book reviews.

In *The Mirror at Midnight* and *The Unquiet Ghost*, however, the “I” is there because both books are structured around journeys I took. Sometimes people's responses to the writer are a legitimate part of the story. When I was researching *The Unquiet Ghost*, the Russians I interviewed were always asking me—often the first American they'd ever seen—

“Why are you so interested in all this?” On the day that was really the climax of my journey, a pilot shouted this question in my ear over the roar of the engines in the cockpit of a helicopter taking us to the ruins of some gulag prison camps in Siberia. At that point I knew I had to make the question a recurring motif in the book, and to try to answer it.

■ **You take care to remind readers of present-day conditions in your books. In the introduction to *Bury the Chains*, you start at the site of that long-gone printing shop and then move into the past. Elsewhere you compare past trends and incidents to present ones—in that same book, for instance, you draw comparisons between the gin epidemic in England a few hundred years ago and the American crack cocaine epidemic in the 1980s. Why is it important that modern readers have something to compare the past to?**

First, I think it simply enlivens the past if you can describe it in terms of concepts from today. That’s why, for instance, I talk about King Leopold being brilliant at public relations, or King Affonso of the Kongo kingdom of the early 1500s being a selective modernizer—even though neither phrase was in use during those respective times.

More broadly, I tend to get interested in moments in the past when people had to make moral choices that prefigure the sorts of moral choices people have to make in our own time. This is why I found the early British abolitionists so profoundly interesting and admirable. They were outraged by something—slavery—that 99 percent of the people around them simply took for granted. I’ve seen firsthand similar moral choices being made by people in my own lifetime, like opposition to legal segregation in the American South and to apartheid in South Africa.

■ **You make an eye-opening argument throughout your work that genocide is a historical constant; the way you compare slaughter in the Congo to the Holocaust, or to Stalinist purges, helps bring it into focus. What first compelled you to write about atrocities?**

Strictly speaking, neither the mass murder in the Congo nor Stalin's purges were a genocide, in that neither aimed at wiping out most or all members of a particular ethnic group. But each certainly produced deaths in the millions and horrendous suffering. I think what is constant in history is the tendency of human beings to inflict cruelty, suffering, and mass death on each other—and to claim that it's all in pursuit of some noble end: bringing civilization and Christianity to the savages, purging foreign spies and saboteurs, or—in the case of our own cruelties against those who were on this continent for thousands of years—the “manifest destiny” of American immigrants to take over whatever land they coveted. I'm drawn to write about such moments because I'm fascinated by evil, and by the lies people tell to convince themselves that their actions are not evil. But I'm equally intrigued by the all-too-rare human beings who have tried to combat evil while it was happening, sometimes successfully and sometimes not.

■ **Do you feel a moral duty in writing? If so, how would you characterize it, and how has it changed over time?**

It would feel too pompous to claim that I felt a moral duty to write. I write because I find it more satisfying and challenging than anything else that I have the ability to do. Certainly there are some kinds of writing I've done that don't seem to have a strong moral dimension: a children's book I published a few years ago, book reviews, and the occasional humor or travel piece. But for any work I really want to dig into for a few years, I just can't imagine having the necessary energy unless I'm writing about people who are wrestling with some kind of moral or political question. Should you resist evil—slavery, apartheid, Stalinism—even if it means enormous risk to you? To your family? Should you refuse to fight in a war, even when people all around you accuse you of being a traitor for doing so? What if acting on your beliefs causes pain, suffering, risk, the loss of a job, to someone you love? And so on. To me that's twenty times more absorbing to write about, and always has been, than most other subjects I can think of. Although I'd make an exception for certain

things, such as if they have a writer-in-residence on the first manned spacecraft to Mars.

■ **Primo Levi wrote, “No one ever returned to describe his own death.” Whether you’re covering apartheid, Stalinism, or slavery, you are accounting for people whose names might otherwise be lost. You said you write these stories because you find the questions they raise compelling. Do you write them for anyone else’s sake?**

Indirectly, at least, I think one source of my interest in such stories came through what I wrote about in my first book, *Half the Way Home*. Part of my own political education consisted of gradually realizing that many of the good things in my own life—comfortable surroundings, a nice summer home, money for college, and more—were in the long run due to the labor of African miners, working far under the earth for very little pay, for the company where my father was an executive. That showed me something about how the world worked. When, decades later, I was writing about the British public in the 1790s beginning to understand what it meant that the sugar and coffee they enjoyed came from the labor of slaves—a stunning moment of mass moral awakening—I felt some echo of my own experience.

On top of that, I’m very much a child of the 1960s. For so many of us who came of age politically then, it was a time of waking up to the fact that the splendid, free, democratic country they were always telling us about in school was in fact waging an imperial war in Vietnam and denying the vote to most of its black citizens in the South. Equally interesting to me is seeing how hard people try to deny such contradictions. Denial has always fascinated me, whether it’s a matter of whites in apartheid-era South Africa having no idea of the living conditions of people in shantytowns a mile away, or eager Western idealists flocking to the Soviet Union in the 1930s without realizing there was mass murder under way. Illusion and reality: certainly a subject that has been interesting storytellers for several millennia, so it’s not original to me!

## ■ Do you hope to make your readers more conscientious?

Of course! Sometimes, particularly if you're writing about an injustice that's happening today, you can hope to stir at least a few of your readers to do something about it. That has applied more to my journalism than my books, and applies still more to some of the fine investigative reportage published by other writers today.

What can you hope to stir readers to do when you're writing about injustices that are one or two hundred years old? People working to make the world a better place today can still take inspiration from similar struggles in the past. One recent example: *King Leopold's Ghost* includes an illustration of a poster announcing a huge "Congo Reform" protest meeting at the Royal Albert Hall in London; the meeting was held on November 19, 1909, with various luminaries in attendance, including the Archbishop of Canterbury. Then, last fall, some women in England emailed me to say that the poster had given them the idea to stage a similar meeting at the Royal Albert Hall on November 19, 2009, also with the Archbishop of Canterbury, to draw attention to the horrendous epidemic of mass rape in eastern Congo today.

Another example of an unexpected leap across time: I really think of *Bury the Chains* as the story of how early antislavery organizers forged the template for the way citizen-activists can light a moral fire under reluctant governments. Often when I give talks about the book, there are people in the audience who are activists on one or another issue: stopping the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, torture, immigrants' rights, and more. To my delight, the book was reviewed recently in a scholarly journal for scientists who study climate change. Quite far afield from 18th-century slavery, but the reviewer's point was that the abolitionists woke a sleeping world, morally speaking, and that global warming researchers today need to figure out how to do the same thing.

## ■ How do you find the structures for your books?

Structure is everything. None of us could stand up without a skeleton, and no piece of writing, long or short, can work without one either. The same applies to movies,

symphonies, or anything else to which you want people to pay sustained attention.

Several times I've been able to use a journey as a book's structure—a storytelling strategy at least as old as *The Odyssey*. People always wonder how the journey is going to end. *The Unquiet Ghost* is structured around my journey across Russia and Siberia to Kolyma, the most notorious corner of the old Soviet gulag. *The Mirror at Midnight* is structured around two interwoven journeys in space and time: that of the Boers and Zulus of South Africa toward the Battle of Blood River—the crucial confrontation in 1838 that determined who would dominate that part of the world—and my own journey as a reporter toward the 150<sup>th</sup>-anniversary commemoration of the battle, a day everyone knew would be emotion-laden and probably violent.

In *Bury the Chains*, I faced, as anyone writing history usually does, the challenge of readers already knowing the story's end: slavery, after all, has been legally abolished. So then you have to build suspense around just how this happened, after showing a world where almost everyone takes slavery for granted. Conveniently for my storytelling purposes, abolition in the British Empire was not a simple, steady, upward progression, but rather a process of fits and starts and moments when the abolitionists were deeply discouraged. That sort of story provides wonderful material to work with, because you can end a chapter with an event inspiring great hope, leaving the reader anticipating victory, or you can end at a low point, leaving the reader wondering: how are the abolitionists going to get out of this hole? With my memoir, *Half the Way Home*, and with *King Leopold's Ghost*, I had the advantage that almost no readers knew the story, since King Leopold II is little known in the U.S., and of course my own life even less so. So then it's easier to generate suspense, because you have the reader wondering: how is this story going to end? People always wonder how a conflicted relationship is going to be resolved. And with a world-class villain like Leopold, I tried to keep people wondering: is he going to get away with it? Are the people who are trying to expose him going to be successful? And of course you never want to give away the answers too soon, since suspense is at the core of storytelling.

### ■ How extensively do you outline?

Very! There are some writers who can keep track of everything in their heads, but not me. The outline for an article I can usually fit on one page, but for a book, I generally find myself taping several pages together to make enough space. I'll usually have a span of years marked across the bottom, and then horizontal lines showing when different characters come in and out of the story. I also like to use rising and falling lines to show the rise and fall of suspense, and then notes to myself to remind me where I've got enough information to be able to construct a scene. It looks like quite a mess, and no one can read it but me (and sometimes not even me). But it provides a road map. I then do an outline for each chapter when I reach that point in my first draft.

### ■ What other strategies do you use to help you write the first draft?

The strategies I probably *should* use would include chaining myself to my desk and having my wife lock me into my study from the outside. Because first drafts are absolutely the hardest, and I use every possible excuse to avoid getting started. The difference between a first draft and a later one is the difference between cutting the first trail up a mountain, and later climbs where you're doing some work on the trail: widening it here, making a shortcut there, straightening out some unnecessary curves. So I find first drafts very tough, and can't do them at all without a map of the planned trail—my outline—in front of me. Above all, I absolutely have to know where the trail begins and ends, the opening scene and the closing scene, before I start writing. This applies both to a book or a shorter piece of writing. But if I have those two points in mind, then I can start working.

### ■ What happens during revision?

A lot of cutting, for one thing. When I was working on *The Unquiet Ghost*, I showed an earlier draft to several friends, and one of them said she was bored by a particular chapter about a

visit to a city in Siberia. I immediately said, “If you only knew how hard I worked to get that material! I had to take a plane in the middle of the night, they almost lost my bag, there was no hot water at the hotel and . . .” But the moment the words were out of my mouth, it suddenly hit me that all that made no difference whatever. A writer’s job is to keep readers from getting bored, and even if you caught malaria in the course of reporting that superfluous chapter, it’s still got to go. It was a good lesson.

When it comes to cutting, you can’t feel as if you’re reluctantly amputating a limb, but as if you’re losing weight you wanted to lose. In the book I’m working on now, I’ve cut more than seventy-five thousand words from my longest draft—and there are still more pounds I want to lose.

**■ You teach at Berkeley’s journalism program. How has teaching impacted your writing?**

I love teaching, and have been lucky to be able to do so both at Berkeley and in short-term writing workshops elsewhere, sometimes in university writing programs, and sometimes for working journalists. I recently did a two-day workshop at the BBC in London. When I was first invited I was rather intimidated, and explained to the organizer that I’d never been a radio or TV documentary writer—these were the sorts of people who had signed up for the workshop. She said, “Don’t worry about it; the next person I have coming in is a novelist.” I love that attitude about writing: that the particular genre you work in doesn’t matter, because the principles of good storytelling apply to them all.

Teaching has helped me as a writer in the same way that being a magazine editor for ten years did. When critiquing other people’s writing carefully, you are forced to articulate exactly what works and what doesn’t work. Sometimes an entire piece of writing falls into one category or the other; more often it has some elements that sing and some that fall flat. So, as a writer, I’m always making mental notes: Hey, here’s a trick I could try sometime . . . and here’s a reminder of something I should always avoid. Plus there’s pleasure in leaping genres. Two radio documentaries that the BBC scriptwriters brought to my

workshop in London were so good that I've since given them to my Berkeley print journalism students, as examples of particularly inventive structure.

■ **How do you feel about the future of print journalism?**

Not too good! Although I don't know that I've got much to say on the subject that others haven't said. I worry about the printed word in general, because we live in such an accelerated world these days. At the New York docks, crowds used to meet the ship bringing over the issue of a magazine with the latest installment of a Dickens novel, because people were so eager to find out what happened. Today they'd all have the news on Twitter.

Some of the worry about the loss of jobs in the field misses the target, I think. All too often, journalists are just duplicating each other's work, and you have a hundred people covering a press conference by the Secretary of Defense, say, or several dozen following each Presidential candidate. I've occasionally been in such herds myself, here and abroad. Far too much American journalism still consists of just reporting what public officials say.

Readers still do seem to have an appetite for investigative and narrative work, and to enjoy reading it the old-fashioned way, printed on paper. The circulation of *Mother Jones*, with which I've been affiliated in one way or another since its beginning, is near its all-time high—even though the articles all go up quickly on the Internet for free. The *New Yorker* is booming. So there are still print readers out there.

■ **What parts of the world are most in need of more coverage, and why aren't they receiving it?**

There's a huge imbalance in how we cover the news. If Somali pirates capture an American ship, that's front-page news for days. But if, not so far away, Democratic Republic of Congo government soldiers rape hundreds of women during a military operation that's indirectly partly funded by the U.S.—something that happened a few months ago—it barely gets

mentioned. The DRC is the scene of one of the bloodiest conflicts on earth in decades, but not a single American newspaper or TV network has a fulltime bureau there.

Then there are other stories that the U.S. media has little interest in, because they seem too complicated or too far away, or no American is being held hostage. For example, my friend the Indian journalist P. Sainath has been writing extensively in his country's press about the fact that in the last dozen years more than 160,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide. Globalization means that their crops are undersold by subsidized agriculture from elsewhere in the world. They go into debt, they can't provide for their families, and they kill themselves. Why do we not read about that here?

■ **At the same time, Darfur has gotten much coverage. Why is the DRC being ignored?**

We all like stories—and I'm no exception—where there are clear villains and clear heroes or victims. The Darfur story appears to fit that mold, although I believe the real situation is much more morally ambiguous.

The DRC, on the other hand, clearly doesn't fit the traditional hero/villain mold at all, and I think that's why the media covers it relatively little. There are millions of victims, but the politics of this multisided war are bewilderingly complicated.

I spent a good part of 2009 trying to learn about the conflict, then spent several weeks there in June 2009, and then wrote several magazine pieces afterwards, for the *New York Review of Books*, the *Atlantic*, and *Mother Jones*. The more I studied it, the more complex it became. There are not two clear sides, as in most civil wars. Twenty-four different armed groups, for example, signed the latest of several shaky peace deals. A vast territory filled with mineral riches and with no functioning government has made for a multisided orgy of plunder and revenge, made thornier by the fact that Congo is home to brutal rebel groups fighting the regimes of several adjoining countries. And none of those regimes are very savory either. Although there is much more the U.S. could and should do, there isn't one

clear thing—such as the boycotts and embargoes against the apartheid regime in South Africa—that would bring effective pressure to swiftly end the killing.

■ **I'd love a solution if you have one.**

There's no quick fix to Congo's troubles. But some things the U.S. could do to help would be to support a larger U.N. peacekeeping force, demand far more accountability for, and set conditions on, the aid we pour into the country (the Europeans are ahead of us on this score), and stop unconditionally supporting Rwandan dictator Paul Kagame, whose multiple interventions have done so much to keep this terrible war going.

■ **What makes for a strong piece of literary criticism?**

Other than saying something nice about me, there are two criteria, in my view. The first is that the reader has to hear the sound of a human voice. It's what makes A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* such a great book, still in print after more than 100 years. It's a book I return to every time I reread *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. It's such a contrast to the academic, super-specialized nature of most criticism, where you have the sense of a scholar trying to outshine other scholars in charting influences, symbols, literary movements, and so on. Sometimes that human voice of a good critic simply acknowledges that, in the face of a great work of literature, there is not much useful that an ordinary mortal can add, something which, if memory serves, Lionel Trilling says about *Anna Karenina*.

The other thing I like in good criticism is someone who looks at the craft of a book. When I read something I really like, whether fiction or nonfiction, I always try to figure out how it worked its magic on me, and what I, as a writer, can learn from that. Was it the structural arc of the story? The kind of detail used in evoking characters and scenes? The play of different voices against one another? Or something else? So I like a critic who's engaged in the same quest.

■ **Do you have any advice for young writers?**

Well, to begin with, you can be happy that you've chosen a line of work where—unlike, say, being a quarterback or a ballerina—you never have to retire. Now, of course, most writers make so little money at it that they'll never be able to afford to retire, but that's a different question. You can be glad to be doing work for which you don't need an advanced degree—but you should be willing to enter a sort of do-it-yourself graduate school that lasts until the day you put your pen down for good, ceaselessly studying the craft of other writers and seeing what you can learn from them. And you should be happy to be doing work where you don't have to specialize. The novelist Kingsley Amis once said, "A proper writer should be able to write anything, from an Easter Day sermon to a sheep-dip handout." As a writer, the whole world is your territory. Whether journalist, novelist, or historian, you get to enter the lives of other people, real and imaginary, living and dead, and see how they have experienced life. What could be more fun than that? ■ ■ ■



