

Q&A

THE WRITER'S STUDIO with Michael Kazin

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E. P. Thompson once declared, “We must not look at the past with the enormous condescension of posterity,” a charge to which all historians should adhere. Thompson, we know, had a knack for generating memorable quotes, as well as other rules for historians to live by, with supreme concern for the history of the worker and average citizen—and for the protection of history itself against “half-truths” and “disinformation”—always in mind. In sentiment and scholarly focus, Michael Kazin’s career has been driven by these shared concerns. In May 2023, Thomas G. Andrews and Darren Dochuk asked the acclaimed historian of modern U.S. politics and social movements to answer questions about his work habits and writing strategies, and his desire to write with empathy as well as conviction and moral purpose.

Kazin is professor of history at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. He is an award-winning author of several books about labor, politics, and social movements in the modern United States. His most recent book is *What It Took to Win: A History of the Democratic Party* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2022), which was named an Editor’s Choice by the *New York Times Book Review* and one of the best ten books published on U.S. history in 2022 by Kirkus Reviews. His previous book, *War Against War: The American Fight for Peace, 1914–1918* (Simon and Schuster, 2017), generated similar accolades and awards, including the Elise M. Boulding Prize for the best book in peace history by the Peace History Society. He has written widely in leading magazines, including *Dissent*, which he edited for a time, and has taught and lectured all over the world. The recipient of numerous fellowships and recently elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Kazin is now at work on a history of labor leader Samuel Gompers.

Tell us about how you write—your schedule, strategies, and tricks for getting words down on the page.

I began my career as a labor historian. And when I started drafting my dissertation, I decided to adopt a nine-to-five schedule, to emulate the actual wage earners I was writing about (well, most got to the job site earlier than that). I still try to be at my desk during those hours—with time off for lunch. But life—and my dog lobbying for an early afternoon walk—does sometimes get in the way.

I have no tricks, but there is one motivator that nearly always gets me going each day I plan to write: GUILT. “Kazin, you are an extremely well-paid professor who teaches just two days a week and gets his entire summers off,” I tell myself. “And you have a book contract with a firm deadline. Why are you wasting time on Twitter or reading things you don’t need for that book?” If I don’t write at least 600 words on writing days and have nothing else to do, I don’t sleep very well that night.

Has your routine changed over the years? Do you outline or organize your preliminary thoughts in any particular fashion? And what do you do when you get stuck?

My routine has changed very little since 1980 when I began writing my dissertation on a manual typewriter: I still print out all my notes and scanned documents. I jot down a general outline for each chapter or review or article I'm working on. But then I write notes to myself as I write and rarely follow the original plan.

When did you start writing? Were there writers that inspired you, and if so, how and why? Do they still inspire you, or have others become your inspiration?

I guess I've considered myself to be a writer since I was about fourteen: I contributed a lot of articles to my middle school and high school newspapers—and wrote a column about my school for a local hometown weekly. The editor paid me all of 20 cents per column inch.

I've always admired the writing of certain journalists as much as that of historians. In his *New Yorker* pieces on baseball, Roger Angell evoked the drama and significance of historical events as well as any scholar I know. And although Garry Wills is not just a journalist, his observations about contemporary politics in *Nixon Agonistes* remain among the wisest commentaries on the long 1960s that I know.

When I started studying history in college and grad school, I got entranced by the works of Richard Hofstadter, E. P. Thompson, and Eric Hobsbawm. Although they wrote about different subjects and had different styles, each had the knack of capturing something essential and provocative, in the best sense, about pretty much everything. I still turn to their books and essays both to remind myself of what they argued and as exemplars of splendid prose. They all avoided jargon like the plague, had a knack for the telling quotation and anecdote, and sprinkled wit and irony rather liberally through their works. And I am still grappling with the profound arguments they made.

Of course, it is also inspiring to read essayists like Baldwin and historically minded novelists from Eliot to Wharton to Proust to Le Carré to Zadie Smith. I read a lot of fiction and urge grad students to do the same. Historians can benefit greatly from learning how fine novelists create characters and plots and embed them in contexts of their choosing.

How did your upbringing in suburban New Jersey shape you as a writer?

The spatial demographics of my hometown, Englewood, just a few miles from Manhattan, helped spark my interest in social history. There were four wards in the town, each with a distinctive population. Wards One and Two sprawled along a hill above the railroad tracks that ran through the middle of Englewood. The residents of each were overwhelmingly white and economically comfortable; some lived in mansions with horses and swimming pools. But more Jews lived in Ward Two than One. Ward Three, where I lived, was mostly white, too—but had a mix of middle-class homes and low-rise housing projects built for working-class war veterans and their families. Nearly everyone who lived in Ward Four was Black and pretty poor. Each ward had an elementary school restricted to kids from that ward. When I was in high school, there was a sit-in at City Hall (located in Ward One) to protest the system, which was de facto segregation but sharply divided by race nonetheless.

My mother, father, and stepfather often talked about matters political and historical when I was growing up. But thinking about my hometown as a microcosm of American society in the mid-twentieth century amplified those discussions.

You regularly thank your family for their impact on your work. What did your father, famed writer and critic Alfred Kazin, mean to you as a young reader and writer and budding intellectual? What elements of his writing did you admire and adopt, and which did you jettison or avoid in developing your own style?

Beginning around sixth grade, people started asking me if I were related to “the writer, Alfred Kazin.” My parents got divorced when I was just two, and my relationship with my father was strained until I became an adult, and we could talk about books and politics. So, by way of an answer, I used to joke that we were related “only by blood.” But of course, he affected my thinking and writing in significant ways and still does. I wrote about that influence in a piece that came out a decade after his death. “He taught me,” I wrote, “to be suspicious of every word I type. Have I used a cliché or a lazy term borrowed from social science? Does my narrative capture the essence of an event or an individual? Can I stand to hear it read out loud? His unspoken rule was: Write a sentence, mistrust it, revise the sentence, mistrust it a little less, then revise it again.”¹

But, like him, I am better at writing narratives than coming up with original ideas to drive them. The quality of his prose still stuns me; I do wish, though, that he had been born with a few more analytical genes to pass on.

Are there other ways in which your parents and family have influenced your craft?

My wife, Beth Horowitz, makes her living as an internist who is beloved by her many patients. But she also reads more novels than anyone I know and is a scourge of sloppy writing. So, of course, I ask her to read nearly everything I write in draft and ignore her suggestions at my peril.

I’m not sure if I would have written my last book, *What It Took to Win*, if my son Danny had not been, since his days in college, a Democratic activist, manager, and consultant. He has taught me a good deal about how the party, as an institution, works. My daughter, Maia, is an actor and sometime progressive activist. In fact, she’s on strike with the Screen Actors Guild as I type. Suffice to say, I learn about a different side of contemporary politics from both my children.

The New York intellectual milieu you were close to in your childhood and youth encouraged authors (such as your father) to write for impact in different genres—from traditional book-length texts to long-form journalism. Did that approach to writing at different altitudes for different audiences influence you as a writer?

Through my father, I did meet figures like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Edmund Wilson, Hannah Arendt, and Norman Mailer. And he considered Richard Hofstadter his best friend (though I don’t think the reverse was true). Though I didn’t realize it then, such figures led me to think that one should write for all kinds of publications, in order to reach as large an audience as possible. And to paraphrase Michael Walzer (my college professor and then co-editor at *Dissent*), brushing up against such writers persuaded me that I wanted to be an *intellectual* and not merely an academic. That meant learning what I could about the larger world of ideas and culture and seeking to infuse my work with the insights gained. The alternative would be to stick to “my field”—the history of American politics and social movements—and write primarily with my fellow professors and grad students in mind.

¹Michael Kazin, “Confronting a Father’s Legacy,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 21, 2007, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/confronting-a-fathers-legacy/> (accessed Aug. 15, 2023).

Some of your most influential pieces of writing have been long-form essays for leading political magazines. How has such work paid off for you—personally, professionally? Is there a genre from which you derive more energy and fulfillment? What challenges have you faced when trying to toggle between genres?

Like all of us, I like to see my writing in print (and pixels) as often as possible. And I have always loved to argue about politics. So, there are usually two or three ideas for opinion pieces swirling around in my brain. That was particularly the case when I was co-editing *Dissent* from 2009 to 2020. I can't deny the egoistical pleasure of having an article published in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* either.

I'm sure far more people have read one or more of my pieces than have read any of my books. For example, I still often hear or read comments about my critique of Howard Zinn's *People's History*, which *Dissent* published in 2004.² So thanks Howard.

But the challenge I face when moving from writing books to essays and book reviews is how to budget my time. When I'm at work on a book, I try to get assignments to write pieces that help develop my ideas about the larger project. For example, I recently wrote this review-essay on the Industrial Workers of the World for *The Nation* because I'm writing a book about Samuel Gompers and the rise of the U.S. labor movement.³

And as my father liked to say, "Writing is hard work. You should get paid for it."

It is clear that you have long sought to reach and impact multiple audiences with your prose. Your crossover work not only with different genres but also different types of presses has surely required careful maneuvering on your part. Are there choices you consciously make in your method, mechanics, and voice when shifting gears with the pen? Has your ability to navigate these different terrains changed over time?

My first book was published by the University of Illinois Press, in what was and remains the premier series in U.S. working-class history. Since then, with the exception of an anthology and an encyclopedia I co-edited, all my books have been published by trade presses.

One does have to approach a subject differently for the latter. My wonderful agent, Sandra Dijkstra, once criticized the draft of a book proposal I wrote with this terse line: "Michael, one cannot assume interest." But when writing for academic journals (or, for that matter, left-wing outlets), one can and should assume a common store of knowledge and some familiar references. When I've written a trade book—or a piece for a daily paper or even a magazine like *Foreign Affairs* or *The New York Review of Books* whose readers are quite well informed—editors have sometimes asked me to explain details like Joseph P. Kennedy's anti-Semitism and the Omaha Platform of the People's Party that nearly every U.S. historian already knows.

But I would much rather err on the side of assuming too little knowledge than too much. A good book or shorter piece about history, I think, is akin to a good undergraduate lecture: it begins with a provocative question or anecdote, then tells a story rich in both detail and context, and ends by giving readers/listeners a conclusion to ponder or, perhaps, an unresolved

²Michael Kazin, "Howard Zinn's History Lessons," *Dissent* (Spring 2004), <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/howard-zinns-history-lessons/> (accessed Aug. 15, 2023).

³Michael Kazin, "One Big Union: The Red Scare and the Fall of the IWW," *The Nation*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/wobblies-red-scare-under-iron-heel/> (accessed Aug. 15, 2023).

question worth pursuing. Whatever one writes: avoid jargon, clichés, overlong and/or confusing sentences—and don't be boring!

Who do you turn to and lean on most heavily for advice, editorial help, and encouragement as you navigate these terrains?

My agent, whom I've worked with for a quarter-century now, provides splendid advice on proposal writing. I've also been fortunate to have fine editors at trade presses whose advice and line-edits have made the books themselves far better: Steve Fraser (formerly at Basic Books), the late Ashbel Green at Knopf, and now Alex Star at Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. Not least, I've had the good fortune to get my friend, the great historian Gary Gerstle, to read and critique my unfinished manuscripts. And then there's my sublime wife, Beth (see above).

As you have already emphasized, working with an agent has been essential to your writing these past twenty-five years. What advice would you give to younger scholars who feel they too would benefit from partnering with an agent?

As I wrote above, my agent, Sandy Dijkstra (who has represented my last four books and the one I'm working on now), gives splendid advice while fighting to get me the largest advances she can. If one wants to sign with a trade press, an agent is essential (many presses won't deal with you otherwise). But it's important to find one who has a record of working with historians or, at least, with nonfiction authors who know something about the past. If one's book idea won't attract an advance in the mid-five figures or more, don't expect most agents to put in a great deal of work for you. After all, they only get 15 percent or, sometimes, 20 percent of your advance.

When looking back over your career, and reading through your corpus, we were struck by the range of your interests and coverage as a historian. As you stated on one occasion, yours has been an "abiding fascination with mass movements." Would you say a bit more about the origins of this fascination, and how it has shaped your writing? Has your commitment to this line of inquiry ever flagged or faltered?

In nearly all my books, I've attempted to come up with a satisfying answer to a question that strikes me as significant and which I would like to find a good answer to: Why were AFL unions so strong in San Francisco at a time when they were quite weak in most cities? How did conservatives capture the language of populism from liberals and radicals? How did William Jennings Bryan (and other devout Protestants) combine a literal reading of the Bible with progressive views about big corporations, farmers, and organized labor? What difference has the left made in American culture and politics? Why was there such a diverse movement to oppose U.S. intervention in World War I and why did it fail? How did the Democratic Party win and lose elections over its two centuries in existence? *America Divided*, the book on the United States in the 1960s I wrote with Maurice Isserman, is more of a survey of key elements of the period than a work driven by a question or argument. But, as the title suggests, we did seek to interpret the long Sixties as a time of conflict between political and cultural forces instead of focusing just on the civil rights movement, the youth culture, and the New Left, as many earlier studies had done.

I should confess that every book and many of the articles and reviews I've written have also been driven by a political motive: to further the ends, in however small a way, of the democratic left in the United States and elsewhere. By the time I finished my PhD forty years ago, I had resolved to do this as an author and teacher (and sometime editor) instead of as an organizer.

Not only am I better at that kind of work, it has also allowed me to say and write what I think is true and provocative about the left as well as its political rivals—without worrying constantly, as a good organizer must, about the tactical and strategic consequences of one’s speech and actions. One of my favorite quotes by a left-wing historian comes from Prosper Lissagaray, in the Preface to his *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*: “This history ... is due to their children, to all the workingmen of the earth. The child has the right to know the reason of the paternal defeats, the Socialist party the campaign of its flag in all countries. He who tells the people revolutionary legends, he who amuses them with sensational stories, is as criminal as the geographer who would draw up false charts for navigators.”⁴

Equally striking, in our estimation, has been your ability to write with empathy about the range of historical actors who populate the range of your histories. A striking statement of purpose, in this regard, appears at the end of the Introduction to your biography of William Jennings Bryan: “As a secular liberal, I confess to a certain ambivalence about both Bryan and his many admirers, who swore that a supernatural force was guiding him. When asked ‘Do you like him?’ I have no short or easy answer to give. But empathy is essential to the writing of good history, and I have tried to avoid judging either Bryan or his loyalists and enemies by the standards of the present, whose own blinders sit quite firmly in place.” Proof that your spirit of empathy registered with readers is the fact that the Bryan biography earned acclaim from such diverse outlets as NPR and the *New York Times* AND *Christianity Today*. How have you managed to strike such an ecumenical chord with readers, and write—consistently—with such a light touch?

My approach to history stems partly from experiencing the rapid decline of the New Left, the movement to which I devoted most of my time and all my political hopes from 1967 to the early 1970s. When Richard Nixon crushed George McGovern in 1972, I had to confront the fact that we young leftists had failed to win most Americans to our side and had alienated more of them than we’d attracted. That was especially true of white, working-class people.

It seemed natural for me, then, to turn to labor history to try to understand how class politics had evolved since the beginnings of the modern labor movement in the Gilded Age. That led me to write about the building trades in San Francisco—a group of class-conscious men who controlled the construction labor market in the city and whose leader was elected mayor but who were also leaders of the anti-Asian movement in California. To simply condemn them as racist “labor aristocrats” seemed a waste of time. As with white workers who voted for Nixon, I wanted to understand all aspects of their working lives and ideology. That required empathy.

For my generation of labor historians, E. P. Thompson’s (once) famous line in the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* became a motto for what we hoped to achieve. His aim, he wrote, was “to rescue” the diverse plebeians of the early industrial revolution “from the enormous condescension of posterity.” Like many of us, I quoted that in the introduction to my first book.

Later, I became friends with Lawrence Levine, the great cultural historian, whose first book was a study of William Jennings Bryan’s last decade. An article he wrote in 1970, “The Historian and the Culture Gap,” remains one of the wisest statements of how to approach our work that I have ever read. To quote Larry (and excuse the male pronoun):

⁴Preface to Prosper Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871* (London, 1877), <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/archive/lissagaray/preface.htm> (accessed Aug. 15, 2023).

At some point in his studies (for many historians at *all* points), the historian is faced with a situation where there is little continuity or connection between his own cultural conditioning and expectations and that of his subjects. He is faced with a culture gap that must be bridged both by painstaking historical reconstruction and by a series of imaginative leaps that allow him to perform the central act of empathy—figuratively, to crawl into the skins of his subjects. This situation is a familiar one, which any good historian has had to face and overcome. It is, in fact, the primary function of the historian and gives the study of history much of its excitement and importance.⁵

Empathy is easy to proclaim but quite difficult to practice consistently. For all our good intentions, we invariably slip in a few paragraphs, or sentences, or turns of phrase that put down our subjects for failing to think and act as they *should* have—to be as enlightened as we imagine ourselves to be.

Larry understood that historians who have insufficient empathy for their subjects are not just guilty of condescension. They produce flawed history: either they view their subjects as inhabiting one small, cramped dimension of existence or they see them as crushed beneath structures far too mighty for them to understand or change. Writing empathetically, then, is a way of practicing democracy in print: it respects the choices people made in the past, even if we disagree with or even abhor them today.

Considering your considerable scholarship on populism, has it become more difficult to write with such generosity in our political moment? Or is the demand for empathy in historical writing all the more urgent and necessary?

I view “populism” primarily as a powerful way of talking about politics—“the people” vs. “the elite” (with multiple variations of how to define those terms). As such, figures on both left and right have used populism to their advantage and will continue to do so. I remain fascinated by how well such different figures as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders deploy that rhetoric—and why so many Americans admire their “populist” performance. If the political and economic elites in our society and others around the world were more effective at living up to their ideals, populist talkers would likely be less popular. Populists thrive during times of mass discontent when citizens assume that those who wield power—political, economic, and cultural—are to blame. If, as historians or progressives, we scorn or belittle the creator of “Rich Men North of Richmond” or those who made the song a big hit, we are failing both analytically and politically.

Do you feel that your embrace of nuance, empathy, and complexity has opened you up to criticism, or trapped you between readerships?

A great question for which I don’t have a very good answer. As mentioned above, I love to engage in intellectual and political argument and often get inspired to assess the work of writers who take strong ideological stands—and appeal to large audiences. So that drew me to write critiques of Zinn but also of the conservative historian Wilfred McClay and the right-wing provocateur Mark Levin. I also enjoyed writing an appreciation of the literary criticism of Christopher Hitchens—at a time when his support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq had made him enemies on the left and new fans among neoconservatives.

⁵Lawrence Levine, “The Historian and the Culture Gap,” in *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York, 1993), 14-15. The article was originally published in 1970.

There is more opportunity (and urgent necessity) for historians of the modern United States to share their scholarship, their knowledge of the past, with as wide an audience as possible, in hopes of casting fresh light on and in the present moment. What advice do you give younger scholars who are trying to write as scholar-activists, or at very least with an eye to our present, heated politics and partisan divides?

Make strong, provocative arguments but take care not to spare your own side from criticism. We live in a time when how one understands American history is quite often a signal of one's politics. But a decent, democratic society should leave room for people who disagree to debate one another with both gusto and mutual respect. And if one's primary passion is to make social change, one should be a political organizer, not a historian. As it happens, it might be easier to find a job in politics these days than in academia!

In your more recent monographs, you wear your background and your politics on your sleeve. In your history of the Democratic Party, for instance, you carve out plenty of space for autobiography, and weave your own experiences as a Democrat through the larger institutional history of the party. What has made you more comfortable as of late to write so freely in the first person, as an actor not just an observer in the stories you tell?

I thought a lot about whether to include some of my own experiences in *What It Took to Win*, and some reviewers criticized my decision to do so. But I undertook the project, in part, because I think it's critical to the future of the nation and the world that the Democrats, with a progressive policy agenda, are able to dominate U.S. politics again, as they did during the years of the New Deal Order. I don't believe one can learn precise "lessons" from the past, but a recognition of continuities might help inform the quest for victory in the present and future.

I also thought I could learn something useful about the history of the party as an institution at a time when few scholars write institutional histories. But, except during my time in the New Left, I have rooted strongly for Democrats to win and have worked on Democratic campaigns, including, recently, a few managed by my son. So, it just seemed honest to write about my own experiences. I hope those personal anecdotes enriched the narrative. But I regret the perception that the book is a "partisan" account; I hardly portray the Democrats through most of their history as a force for true equality and popular rule.

Has the style of your writing, your voice and use of the pen, changed in the process? Echoing Jill Lepore, you recently asserted that your goal is to let narrative do the talking: "to write history is to make an argument by telling a story." Is this embrace of narrative representative of shifting priorities and purpose in your writing, or is it a throughline that stretches back to your early work?

I haven't altered in any essential way how or why I write history. I have tried to reach larger audiences, though, so I eschew local histories and portraits of figures whose names are obscure to nearly everyone. I recently spent some months researching the life of John Logan, who began as a racist Illinois Democrat in the 1850s but became a leading Radical Republican—and ally of Frederick Douglass—after serving as a Union general during the Civil War. I wanted to understand why Logan underwent such a fascinating and profound transition in both his racial views and his partisan affiliation. But I dropped the idea of writing his biography after my agent and editor wondered how I would make many readers care.

Of course, I don't think historians should be reluctant to write in original ways about people and subjects that may not interest a non-academic audience. Without such works, history

would soon become both repetitive—and boring. But spending years writing about a man I might be unable to persuade many people to care about was, for me, a discouraging prospect. I do hope to produce an article about Logan in the future though.

Your current book in-process is about Samuel Gompers. Why Gompers? What do his life and times promise to offer the 2020s reader and student of history and politics?

The core question I'm trying to answer about Gompers is why his theory and practice of the labor movement triumphed over alternatives that competed with his during his career (1870s to 1920s): the National Labor Union, the Knights of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World, unions led by Socialists and, later, Communists. For me, Gompers was, to adapt Eldridge Cleaver's line, both part of the solution and part of the problem. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) he helped form and then led for almost forty years had a structure and a practical political strategy that has endured—despite all the changes inside and outside the ranks of labor since then. But Gompers's abiding skepticism of state actions regarding working people and his increasing opposition to the immigrants who were remaking the composition of the labor force kept the AFL from having the power it might have wielded.

I'm also keen to rescue him from the condescension of fellow leftists who write him off as nothing but a racist adversary of radical possibilities. He was a more interesting fellow than that: an organic intellectual and non-Jewish Jew (to use Isaac Deutscher's term) who began his career as a Marxist and was, in the words of the socialist leader Morris Hillquit, "the most class-conscious man I ever met."