

JANCEE DUNN

The rock journalist-turned-novelist waxes on the charms of her folks' bran obsession, why writing a novel is easier than working on deadline, and what she wants to be when she grows old. We take notes.

By Kate Rockwood • Photo by Meg Wachter

Within 20 minutes of entering Jancee Dunn's apartment, nestled into the top floor of a converted church in Brooklyn, I've been asked about my hometown, family, and favorite spot in the city. Dunn can't help herself. A journalist for nearly two decades, Dunn has interviewed hundreds of people, first as a writer at *Rolling Stone* and then as an MTV2 VJ. Blending blistering wit with self-deprecation, Dunn detailed her strange journey from big-haired Jersey girl to intrepid (but still wonderfully awkward) reporter in her laugh-out-loud 2006 memoir, *But Enough About Me: A Jersey Girl's Unlikely Adventures Among the Absurdly Famous*.

Happily, when the tables are turned, she's as forthright as she is inquisitive. Over delicate white mugs full of strong coffee, Dunn opens up about the joys of moving back in with your folks, loving little old ladies, and her new novel, *Don't You Forget About Me*, about a recently divorced New Yorker who moves back in with her suburban parents.

Your novel takes a cue from your sister Heather, who moved back in with your folks in her 30s. Did you have to blackmail or bribe her with anything for info?

At first she balked a little bit. She's very private. She moved home for about six months, and she would call me and complain — when my folks weren't hovering — and tell me about these funny

SETTING THE SCENE

How has your journalism affected the way you approach fiction writing?

When I first started in magazines — in 1989, yikes! — we could do these long pieces, and now they're relegated to magazines like the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker*. Generally these mass-market magazines that I write for, the cover stories are tiny.

So I try to make every sentence exciting, and I'm really big on brevity and trying to keep people moving along. Setting a scene quickly, with a few key details — that's where magazine writing has definitely helped me.

You don't need to have a giant description of every object in a person's house, you just have three details that quickly gives you an idea of what that person's like. For my house, one would be the cat litter that crunches under your feet when you walk in [laughs].

things they would do. So I got the idea for her to take notes. There are so many things that are extrapolated. It's barely fiction.

There's one scene I wrote about in the book about my parents' fiber obsession. It's like kindling. They add bran to everything. Heather and I just died. She was a little leery at first, but the whole family's used to being exploited, and now I've even trained them. My mother called me and said, "Jancee, I'm getting a tattoo. And I know already you're going to write about it. That's OK. If you want to pitch it somewhere, I can wait." And I thought, "Are you turning showbiz on me?"

I read that you follow the Graham Greene model of writing just 500 words a day?

With fiction, that's what I definitely did, and anything beyond that was gravy. With magazine writing, I'll do a spurt in the morning and a spurt in the afternoon. It's not healthy, really. I'll sometimes spend days getting a piece done, where I don't leave the house. It's a little hermetic. I'll flap outside to buy food and wonder, "Why are people staring at me?" It's because I'm wearing my ratty sweatpants and I'm gray and I have no make-up on.

Using so much of your life as material for your writing, is there anything that you want to write about that you're afraid to write about, in terms of yourself?

I don't know if I can go there, but I'm definitely conflicted about having kids. Every day I hear about it. Everyone thinks I'm a psychopath because I'm conflicted and I'm running out of time. There could be an expiration date on my eggs already. I'm going to be 42 in May, and I met my husband later in life, at 35, and we just wanted to have fun. We travel all the time. We just got back from Japan and Mexico.

This is the life I dreamt about, and I'm finally living it, and I don't know why I don't have that overwhelming desire to have kids. I don't know what the goal would be in writing, other than kind of giving an essay from my perspective, like, "I know you mean well when you keep at me with the kid thing, but it's a private decision." Even my cleaning lady will take tampon wrappers out of my trash and say, "No baby?" You know, everyone's on me. If I could really pluck up the courage I would —



DON'T YOU FORGET ABOUT ME

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not be anti-kid but call people out who mean well. That's one area of my life I debate writing about.

The one character I'd love to get some more insight into is Vi. She's so wacky and yet very tender. How did she come about?

I have an affinity for older ladies that I see walking around New York that have this smile on their face and they're kind of looking in the distance and they're done up from head to toe. There's just something about them. You want to protect them almost. I've had a soft spot for them since I was a child, and I always end up talking to them.

She's partially based on my grandma, who had five million lipsticks and always looked very put together, and it was a kind of armor, to deal with people who are impatient and want to get around her on the sidewalk. Partially I conjured her up because I wish I had a friend like that. When I came to New York, I thought I would have friends of all different ages. You know, you see enough movies and you think you're going to have all these wacky friends in your apartment building to chat with. All my friends are my age, they look like me, and they're in the same job. And it's like an imaginary friend I conjured up because I wished I knew her.

If someone were to profile you in 20 years, what would you want the headline to be?

I'd like the word "gal" in it and something like, "Still making them laff," spelled L-A-F-F. I want to be full-on crazy lady with the big glasses and crazy caftans. I want to provide laughs that probably make people cringe. What it is: I want to be one of those ladies I like. And it's happening — it's a straight shot down that road.



Jancee Dunn and her cat Kitty in their Brooklyn home.