

## Books



**The Following Account of  
My Short Career at The New Yorker  
Ran as a Series of Tweets on  
May 8, 11, and 12, 2009\***

People often ask why I left the New Yorker. After all, I had a staff writer job. Isn't that the best job in journalism? Yes.

Nobody leaves a New Yorker job voluntarily. I was fired. And over the next few days, I'll tell that story here, in 140

Character chunks.

First, a little about the job of New Yorker staff writer. "Staff writer" is a bit of a misnomer, as you're not an employee,

But rather a contractor. So there's no health insurance, no 401K, and most of all, no guarantee of a job beyond one year.

My gig was a straight dollars-for-words arrangement: 30,000 words a year for \$90,000. And the contract was year-to-

Year. Every September, I was up for review. Turns out, all New Yorker writers work this way, even the bigfeet. It's

Just the way the New Yorker chooses to behave. It shows no loyalty to its writers, yet expects full fealty in return.

It gets away with it, because writing for the New Yorker is the ne plus ultra of journalism gigs. Like everybody, I

Loved it. More later.

It took me seventeen years to break into the New Yorker. I'd been a freelance journalist that long, and had sent in

Proposals from time to time. I never even got rejections. The New Yorker doesn't send them. If they don't want the

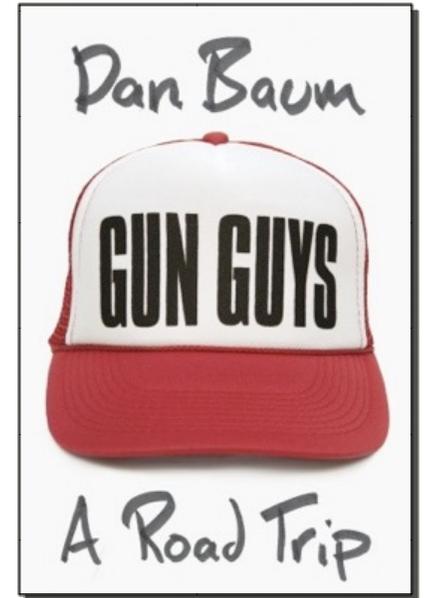
Story, they simply don't respond, so filing to the New Yorker is like filing to the dump. You send in a proposal, and

If you're smart, you forget all about it. In May 2002 I sent in a proposal for a profile of a particularly interesting

Mexican government official. That proposal, if you're interested, is at [http://danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Proposals.html](http://danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Proposals.html)

In fact, I've posted a lot our successful magazine proposals there. In any case, I mailed in the proposal and promptly

Put it out of my mind, as always. Four months later, I got a call from John Bennet, who had been an editor there



Read about the responses to my New Yorker tweetathon [here](#).

Longer than just about anybody. He loved the proposal. In fact, he was teaching a magazine-writing class at

Columbia University at the time, and he told me he was sharing the proposal with his students because he thought

It was one of the best he'd ever read. What took so long to respond, he said, was clearing the assignment with

Alma Guillermoprieto, who had been covering Mexico for the New Yorker for years. John didn't think he could assign

A piece about Mexico without checking with her first. That was courteous of him. And of her, to give the green light.

He assigned me the story – my first ever for the New Yorker! – and to celebrate I took the rest of the day off to

Bike into downtown Watsonville, buy the New York Times, and spend the afternoon reading leisurely. There on page

A-something was a little article about the Mexican official I was about to profile for the New Yorker. He'd been

Fired, and his office abolished. As Boris Badenov used to say: I drop bomb on moose, and who gets blown up? Me.

John was gracious. What else would you like to write? he asked. I remembered a story I'd tried for years

To interest my agent in: An epidemic of paralysis in 1930 caused by Prohibition, and which spawned an entire

Sub-genre of the blues. John gave me the assignment, which became "Jake Leg," my first New Yorker piece,

Which can be read here: [http://danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Articles.html](http://danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Articles.html)

I was paid \$7,750 for "Jake Leg," which ran 5,000 words. Dollars-per-word isn't a very good measure of pay.

Because writing short can take more work than writing long, but either way, this was good pay but not terrific.

At the time, I was writing just about full time for Rolling Stone, which was paying me \$3.40 a word.

Still, the New Yorker is the New Yorker, and my next question to John was, "What can I do next?"

As any writer knows, editors almost never suggest stories. Generating story ideas is the real work; researching and

Writing them is the easy part. In one of our conversations, though, John let drop a real jewel:

"We have this sense that we should be paying more attention to the military," he said. (This was now early 2003,

as the country was getting ready for war in Iraq. "Thing is, nobody here cares about

the military, and nobody here

knows anything about the military." Well, I certainly didn't know anything about the military but I did find it

interesting, so I piped up, "I can do that!" I wasn't worried about my lack of experience or knowledge in the field

of arms. Tom Wolfe is right, I think, when admonishes young writers to ignore the old advice about "writing what

you know," and instead write about what you don't know. If you have to learn about something from scratch, he

argues, you don't bring any lazy preconceptions. John said I was welcome to give it a try. "Think about trying a

process story," he said, using a term I'd never heard. "It's a New Yorker standard," he went on. "You simply

deconstruct a process for the reader. John McPhee was the master. It makes for a simple structure."

By that time the improvised explosive device was the weapon of choice in Iraq, and limb loss was the signature

Wound of the Iraq war. So I followed one soldier from the moment he left his job at Wal-Mart in rural Wisconsin

To join the Army to the day he returned to speak to his high school without his leg. John Bennet gave me another

Great piece of New Yorker advice: "This is the New Yorker, so you can use any narrative structure you like," he said.

"Just know that when I get it, I'm going to take it apart and make it all chronological." Telling a story in strict

chronological order turned out to be a fabulous discipline. It made the story easy to write, and may be why New

Yorker stories are so easy to read. Of course, the magazine does run everything through the deflavorizer, following

Samuel Johnson's immortal advice: "Read what you have written, and when you come across a passage you think

is particularly fine, strike it out."

My wounded-soldier story ran as "The Casualty" and can be found here:  
[http://danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Articles.html](http://danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Articles.html)

Next I pitched a story about what killing does to soldiers, psychologically, and how the Army is ill-equipped to deal

With the damage that killing does. That proposal can be read here:  
[http://danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Proposals.html](http://danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Proposals.html).

That piece, "The Price of Valor," won the Medill School of Journalism's 2004 John Bartlow Martin Award, and can be read here:

[http://danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Articles.html](http://danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Articles.html).

Now I was three stories in to the New Yorker, but I wasn't about to let die my relationships with other magazines. After

All, I was a freelancer with no other income, and relationships with editors and their magazines is the currency of the

Trade. While writing the pieces for the New Yorker, I also wrote two for Playboy, about genetically modified crops and about

The perils of electronic voting. The proposals for both of those articles can be seen here: [http://danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Proposals.html](http://danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Proposals.html), and the Playboy stories themselves can be seen here:

[http://danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Articles.html](http://danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Articles.html)

Then, out of the blue, Rolling Stone called with a jaw-dropping over-the-transom assignment: 30,000 words on missile defense, to run over several issues, and paying \$90,000. I was floored. I got the call while I was in San Francisco working

On yet another New Yorker assignment about geneticists trying to make people live forever. Right after I hung up with

Rolling Stone, John Bennet, my New Yorker editor, called for some reason. In an act of inadvertent brilliance, I mentioned

To him my new Rolling Stone assignment. Forty minutes later, David Remnick rang my phone. "Don't do that Rolling

Stone piece, he said. "Come to work for me instead, on staff." The heavenly angels burst into song. I'd made it to the

Staff of the New Yorker.

(Note: After this first day, several bloggers suggested – yea, demanded – I not break sentences. They were right; it reads better.)

Remnick asked, "What do you want to write?" We bandied some ideas.

I told him that two years down the road, my wife, daughter, and I were planning to move abroad.

We didn't know where, but Rosa would be in eighth grade and we wanted a family adventure.

Remnick said, "As long as you're writing 30,000 words I want to publish, I don't care where you live."

I was beside myself with glee. Remnick's deputy, Pam McCarthy, called with the details.

The magazine would pay me \$75,000 a year for 30,000 published words.

In return, I'd agree not to write for The Atlantic, The NY Times Magazine, Harper's, RS, and a few others.

Hell, I'd be giving up a \$90k Rolling Stone assignment to earn \$75k at the New Yorker.

And what about Playboy? Playboy wasn't on McCarthy's list, and I'd made a pretty good living from Playboy.

Could I still write for Playboy? McCarthy said, "How about we increase you to \$90,000 and you don't write for Playboy either?"

I said fine. It's much more pleasant to write for one magazine's sensibilities than many.

Especially if that one is the New Yorker.

The editing is as superb as you'd imagine. And it's lovely to have all the time and resources you need.

I particularly liked the fact-checkers, who go way beyond getting names spelled right and actually do a lot of reporting.

More than once, the fact-checkers uncovered information I hadn't had, found crucial sources I hadn't interviewed.

It's like having a team of back-up reporters.

They work like soldier ants, and are invariably cheerful. Their boss, Peter Canby, is a calm and competent gentleman.

I must say, though, the office itself is a little creepy. I didn't work there. I live in Colorado. But I'd visit 3-4X a year.

Everybody whispers.

It's not exactly like being in a library; it's more like being in a hospital room where somebody is dying.

Like someone's dying, and everybody feels a little guilty about it.

There's a weird tension to the place. If you raise your voice to normal level, heads pop up from cubicles.

And from around the stacks of review copies that lie everywhere like a graveyard of writers' aspirations.

It always seemed strange. Making it to the New Yorker is an achievement. It is vastly prestigious, of course.

And the work is truly satisfying. Imagine putting out that magazine every week!

Yet nobody at the office seems very happy. The atmosphere is vastly strained.

I'd get back on the Times Square sidewalk after a visit and feel I needed to flap my arms.

Get some air into my lungs, maybe jog half a block. And I came to realize I had a really good job.

I could write for the New Yorker, but not have to be of the New Yorker.

Therein lies the reason I'm no longer there.

Still, the work was great. After seventeen years of freelancing, it was quite a thing to get a check every month.

If I had a productive month, I'd get a check. If I had an unproductive month, I'd get a check. It was dreamy.

Not that being on staff means not having to write full story proposals.

Some successful ones can be read at  
[http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Proposals.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Proposals.html)

Some unsuccessful ones can be read at  
[http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Failed\\_Proposals.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Failed_Proposals.html)

Only occasionally would I get a verbal go-ahead to write a story, such as when the tsunami happened.

The story I wrote about that – and all my stories – can be seen here:  
[http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Articles.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Articles.html)

All the work that goes out under my byline is at least half the work of my wife, Margaret Knox.

Details about how that works can be found here:  
[http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Knox\\_and\\_Baum.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Knox_and_Baum.html)

And here: [http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Margaret.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Margaret.html)

Margaret doesn't care about getting credit and we knew that double bylines would never work.

But I was surprised that Remnick would never allow, on the Contributors page, something like:

"Dan Baum is a staff writer who works with his wife, Margaret Knox."

Margaret hated that I'd even ask. "What's the difference?" she'd say. She was right, of course.

We both enjoyed the work, and both benefited from the income. "Dan Baum" was just the name of the brand.

One of the best things about working for the New Yorker is that sources call you back.

Though maybe not with the alacrity that people return a call from Rolling Stone.

I'd worked for The Wall Street Journal, and found that people were way more eager to return calls from Rolling Stone.

A friend explained it this way:

"If you get quoted in The Wall Street Journal, you might get rich. If you get quoted in Rolling Stone, you might get laid."

Still, leaving a message from the New Yorker, you're pretty sure get called back. That may not sound like much.

But for a reporter on deadline, it's everything.

I was on staff for three years, and six of my stories were killed – five long ones and one Talk of the Town.

All of them can be read here, at the bottom of the page:

[http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Articles.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Articles.html)

Atop each is a paragraph explaining, from my point of view, why the story died.

It seemed to me that in each case, the reason for the story being spiked had nothing to do with the quality of the work.

But maybe I'm wrong. That's why I put them on the website, to let others decide. Maybe they really were stinkers.

These killed stories were the reason Remnick gave when he called in early 2007 to say he wouldn't renew my contract.

But from the high hill of my old age, the real reason seems a little more complicated.

The big difference between being freelance and on staff – besides the irregular pay and the lack of benefits –

Is you're not part of an institution. And every institution has its own character, its own emotional temperature.

Freelancing for so long, I'd forgotten that. (If I ever knew it; I never held a job very long, either.)

I'd come to believe that all that matters is the quality of the work on the page. That's what set the writing life apart, I thought.

And journalism folklore is replete with impossible personalities tolerated – yea, venerated – because their writing was so good.

Hunter Thompson. Thomas Wolfe. William Faulkner. And on and on.

Now, I'd always tried to make myself very easy to work with. Never, ever missed a deadline. Footnoted all stories.

Didn't write too long or too short. Delivered clean copy. Called to talk at the right time of day on the right day of the week.

Turns out, though, magazines have personalities – especially a magazine like the New Yorker, with such a long history.

Had I been working in the New York office, I might have picked up on this, and adapted to it.

But living in Colorado, and flying in for a one-day visit every three or four months, I had no idea.

And being out of the institutional-man mindset for so long, I simply didn't have the antenna.

Or maybe I was too arrogant to care enough to take the time to figure the place out.

Either way, I blew it. Here were the guideposts along the way:

A year before Rosa reached eighth grade, I emailed Remnick and said, "Remember our deal?"

"Remember when you hired me I said my family and I wanted to live abroad for Rosa's eighth grade year?"

"And you said, 'I don't care where you live as long as you're producing your word count for the magazine'?"

"Well, we'd like to do that a year from now."

David replied that he really needed me to stay put in the middle of the country, to balance the magazine's focus on the coasts.

Like a dope, I fought back.

I said, "Jon Lee Anderson covers Latin America and lives in London."

Remnick said he didn't want to tell me and my family how to live, and that if we went abroad, he'd still look at proposals.

He just couldn't keep me on contract if we moved abroad.

"I know that," I told him. "I know that if I quit my job I can do anything I want. But I want to stay on staff and do what I want."

There's a fine line between standing up for the deal one has and being a dilettante. I seem to have crossed it.

We didn't go abroad. Remnick kept me on staff. But I'm sure I did not endear myself to him.

(Rosa, though, said, "I don't work for Remnick. I still want to go." She ended up living in Costa Rica without us.

Spent second semester of eighth grade living with a Costa Rican family. But that's another story.)

Her blog from Costa Rica – which we haven't finished posting – is here:

[http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Rosa\\_CR.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Rosa_CR.html)

My contract was renewed after one year, and then after the second. Both times were nail-biters.

It isn't pleasant, late in one's career, to face a life-or-death career moment every year.

Not the genteel, tweed-jacket kind of life I'd envisioned at the New Yorker.

But that's modern life. And as I say, all New Yorker writers put up with it, I'm told. Even the big names.

Each year, I got a three-percent raise.

That's small, but hell, ninety-something large is good pay. And it's not like we went into journalism to get rich.

Second guidepost on my road to unemployment: When Katrina happened, I petitioned successfully for the assignment.

I got to New Orleans two days after the levees broke. Jon Lee Anderson was sent in as well.

As I arrived, Remnick called my cellphone to say he was coming, too.

Now, I was a little freaked out down there – hot, confused, mind-blown, and more than a little frightened.

But still, I probably shouldn't have said, "You're going to bigfoot me?"

(To bigfoot is to snatch a story away from a lower-ranking reporter.)

"I would never do that," Remnick said.

"Well, what do you call this?" I asked.

Remnick came to New Orleans. I drove him around for a day and a half, a story in itself, for another day.

Then he continued his trip across the Katrina-struck South.

He wrote a very good piece, geographically bigger than New Orleans and more historical than my more immediate reporting.

So he technically did not bigfoot me, I suppose.

On the other hand, the magazine had only so much appetite for Katrina, and his story satisfied a lot of it.

So that's a tough call.

My pushing back against Remnick when he wanted to come to New Orleans was, in retrospect, a mistake.

Protecting one's journalistic turf is fair; protecting it against one's editor – especially *el capo de tutti capi* – is dumb.

Where I really blew it, though, was in a single conversation in Remnick's office in August of 2006.

Just David and I, overlooking Times Square, kicking around story ideas.

I wanted to write about Mexico's disputed presidential election. A million people were demonstrating in Mexico City.

David said, "Dan, this is not the year of Mexico."

"Not the year of Mexico?" said I. "With a million people in the streets and immigration one of the biggest issues in the US?"

I should have felt a chill descend, but didn't. Strike one.

Here's what I thought: Remnick and I are the same age and grew up within about twenty miles of each other in New Jersey.

Two guys at the top of their game, having a discussion. He edits the magazine, I write for it, but basically the same species.

Turns out, not so much.

David said, "I guess if you want to write about Mexico, you might write about that mayor of Mexico City; he's interesting."

And here's where it all went to hell.

I should have said, "Great idea, David. I'll get right on it."

Instead I said, "David, that's the guy I'm talking about! That's the guy who claims to have won the election!

"That's the guy who everybody is demonstrating over!"

Now, what was the point of doing that? He was ceding me the chance to write about the situation in Mexico.

And if he didn't know the details, he had more than the average American's sense of Mexican politics.

But, believing we were two colleagues - couple of guys from New Jersey - hashing out what was best for the magazine,

I made him feel uninformed.

Then I did it again.

He said, "How about the governor of Montana? He's an interesting guy; you could profile him."

Again, the correct response would have been, "Right away, sir."

Instead, I said, "David, I proposed that story six months ago and you turned it down. Now it's too late.

"Next week, he's on the cover of the New York Times Magazine."

Oops.

The conversation ended amicably enough, but everything went to hell after that. I knew it at once. It all turned frosty.

I couldn't get proposals approved, one story got assigned at an unusually and impossibly short 3,500 words.

Two stories got killed.

And then, in January 2007 – the very day Margaret and I returned from taking Rosa to Costa Rica –

Remnick called to say he wouldn't renew my contract come September. He said he didn't like my work. There were those five long stories that were killed.

That's a lot in three years, he said.

I argued that in all five cases, the quality of the work wasn't the problem.

(Again, you can read them here, along with my explanation of what happened, and judge for yourself: [http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Articles.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Articles.html))

Remnick disagreed. My work had started out good but had declined over time, he said. He was very cold on the phone.

By this time, I'd signed the contract to write "Nine Lives," our book about New

Orleans. ([www.danbaum.com](http://www.danbaum.com))

"David," I said, "Could I take a book leave and come back? I've done good work for you, and could again."

"That's not possible," he said, and that was that.

It has always felt to me that the problem wasn't my work. A lot of people liked it. I'd won an award.

And that the real reason Remnick fired me was that he took a personal dislike to me after our conversations.

I was pretty bitter for a while.

A New Yorker writer should be able to have a straight-up exchange of views with his editor.

And a guy as accomplished and powerful as David Remnick shouldn't be so insecure that he can't take some pushback.

Pretty galling, too, to be punished for failing to fit into an organization that made it clear I wasn't part of the organization.

I, like all New Yorker writers, was never an employee. No 401K and no health insurance does more than deny nice benefits.

It sends a message: You're on your own. We only buy your services. And we'll revisit that every year.

You're not one of us; but we'll chop off your head if you don't act like one of us.

Ah, what's the use?

The reason I've waited so long to tell this story is it's given me time to think.

Who knows what it takes to put out a magazine like the New Yorker every week?

Let's face it: It's very good. And Remnick not only edits it, he writes a ton of stories. The pressure must be intense.

Maybe the New Yorker can't run like a collective.

Maybe it has to run like an aircraft carrier, with one captain in absolute control and everybody else on bended knee.

After all, everybody always called Mr. Shawn "Mr. Shawn."

Maybe Remnick knew he was facing budget cuts like everybody else, and somebody had to go.

In any case, any number of therapists have told me there's no point in analyzing other people's behavior.

Only one's own.

The failure was mine. I didn't bother to figure out the culture of the New Yorker.

Turns out, Remnick may have done me a favor, letting me go before the great wave of journalist layoffs.

And he let me work out the rest of my 2007 contract by writing a daily online column about New Orleans

For the New Yorker's website. (You can read that here:  
[http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Articles.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Articles.html))

Writing that column let me stay in New Orleans while researching "Nine Lives."

It also gave me a crash course in that fascinatingly convoluted city, which helped me write the book.

Having to go out and find something to write about every day for five months was hard, but fun.

And I got to know things about New Orleans that even some New Orleanians said they didn't know.

(Where to buy live turtles for the pot, say, or the intricacies of making a Hubig's Pie.)

So I came out okay.

And that's where my New Yorker story ends.

If you were waiting for a full-on dish of Remnick and the New Yorker, I'm sorry to disappoint.

The New Yorker is an idiosyncratic place, no question. There's plenty there not to like.

But do I miss it. At least I miss the early days when everything was going well.

I liked writing for an intelligent readership with broad interests. I liked the editing, and the factchecking.

I liked having New Yorker business cards, and the prestige that went with them. And I loved the regular check.

The biggest disappointment was learning that, after all, it's not only about the work on the page.

That the writing life is not a pure meritocracy, or a refuge from office politics. All that crap still matters.

Even at the top of the heap. Perhaps especially at the top of the heap.

Who knew?

I will be posting this account, in proper order, at [www.danbaum.com](http://www.danbaum.com). Thank you for your patience.

Over and out.

-- Dan Baum  
Boulder, Colorado  
May 12, 2009

\*Margaret didn't edit this. In fact, as of December 2012, she hasn't even read it.