

“Imagine The Talk of the Town as if written by Dostoyevsky.”

—Rachel Donadio, *The New York Times Book Review*

BEG, BORROW, STEAL

A WRITER'S LIFE



MICHAEL
GREENBERG

AUTHOR OF *HURRY DOWN SUNSHINE*

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BEG, BORROW, STEAL

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by MICHAEL GREENBERG

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that belongs in the company of classics

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—*Foreword Magazine*

“[Greenberg’s] refreshing approach avoids the self-indulgent and solipsistic impulses that often characterize autobiographical writing. In a concise format—modeled on that of his column for *Times Literary Supplement*, which, the author writes, “seemed as strict as that of a haiku”—Greenberg offers concentrated excursions into a wide variety of subjects, including film, literature, Jewish identity, immigration, racism, family conflict, the wildlife in Central Park, tenement housing, New York City’s rat problem, and even the politics of transgendered sexuality...”

Greenberg skillfully explores issues that range from the profoundly tragic to the delightfully funny.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

BEG, BORROW, STEAL: A Writer’s Life (Other Press; September 8, 2009; \$19.95) is a kaleidoscopic autobiography by one of today’s best contemporary writers. Michael Greenberg’s *Hurry Down Sunshine*, a father’s story of love and madness, was hailed by Oliver Sacks as “a classic” and by Joyce Carol Oates as a work of “hard won art.” Now, Greenberg regales us with his adventures as a struggling writer in New York City.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native New Yorker, Michael Greenberg is the author of the memoir *Hurry Down Sunshine* (Other Press, 2008), published in sixteen countries and chosen as one of the best books of 2008 by *Time*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Amazon.com, and *Library Journal*. He is a columnist for the *Times Literary Supplement*, where his wide-ranging true life stories have been appearing since 2003. His writing has been published in such varied places as *O*, *The Oprah Magazine* and *The New York Review of Books*. He lives in New York.

BEG, BORROW, STEAL

A Writer's Life

A conversation with Michael Greenberg

In what ways is *Beg, Borrow, Steal* a love letter to the city of New York? Describe your relationship with this city that has been your lifelong home.

The wonderful thing about growing up in New York is that you never arrive at a full understanding of the place. The city changes faster than a judge changes robes. It functions miraculously well, despite its mad self-devouring drive. You form powerful attachments to certain streets and buildings, but always at your own peril. James Merrill has a lovely poem about this. He stops to gaze at a construction site, sees the crane fumbling luxuriously in the foundation pit and thinks: “everything is torn down before you have had a chance to care for it.” This impermanence is part of New York’s glory. It’s a human mess, in the best sense. On the street, the subway, at a gathering of friends, I often feel in the presence of a secret that’s about to be revealed. The spectacle of uninhibited public life is bracing, as is the constant proximity to joy, grief, deception, sincerity – the great parade of emotion and circumstance, the human chaos that you yourself are a breathing part of. A paradox about the city is that the truest New Yorkers are the people who came here from elsewhere, the people who went out of their way to choose it. Sometimes I have the illusion of seeing my immigrant grandfather in men who are younger than me: the Ghanaian cab driver, the Dominican grocer in the corner bodega, hustling as my grandfather had hustled, with that special arriviste rashness. “Apurate, hombre!” says a voice behind me when I stop dreamily in the middle of a street I know too well. The owner of that voice thinks that I, a born and bred New Yorker, am a tourist, and in a way I am. The city has formed me, yet it gives me the sense of never being fully formed, of always being in flux. It’s a feeling I try to transmit in *Beg, Borrow Steal*.

You seem to have lived in New York as a member of nearly all social strata at one time or another. Child of a middle class family, housing project-dwelling father, broke bohemian artist, and now you’re a solidly upper middle class with an Upper West Side condo. How has class informed your perspective on life in New York over the years?

New York looks more pleasant when viewed from a secure home and with money in the bank, there’s no question about it. But I never felt desperate, even when I was broke and bringing up two children in a federal housing project at what was the violent far east border of Chinatown and the Lower East Side. Maybe I should have been more alarmed than I was, but I had an improbable optimism about myself and my family. The generous social spaces of New York seemed big enough to hold me as I veered from one social stratum to the next. In the housing project my neighbors and I shared, among other things, the intimacy of being made to feel less

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important than others. When the elevators broke down, for instance, and we were left to walk up ten, fifteen, twenty-five stories to our homes. During a climb like that, at the end of a hard day, a real closeness is forged. Now I can see that my shifting social position increased my reach as a writer, though I didn't consciously plan it that way. I had a crazy series of jobs, designed chiefly not to threaten my precarious identity as a writer: Spanish/English interpreter in Manhattan's criminal court; selling cosmetics in front of Loehmann's department store on Fordham Road; driving one of those obscene stretch limousines. There were times when I felt guilty about failing to give my children a proper middle-class life. But as it turned out, this upbringing was the greatest advantage I could have given my son Aaron. He feels at ease with a wide range of people, and this ease has contributed mightily to his success in life. Even during my worst moments, I never felt panicked. After all, I was still ahead of where my grandfather had been when he arrived here from the Ukraine.

What is the meaning of the title *Beg, Borrow, Steal*?

A writer is a kind of social outlaw. You're constantly stealing, in the sense that you greedily take what people give you of themselves, you hoard it, and by doing so steal a piece of who they are; even with the best of intentions, it is a kind of theft. You borrow from everywhere: other writers, snippets of conversations you overhear, the newspaper, friends. The quest for material is constant and turns you into a kind of spiritual omnivore. There is no better place than New York to be an omnivore. And sometimes you just flat out beg: for work, for attention, for a break, for a reader's patience, for a subject's time.

The subtitle of your book is *A Writer's Life*. What about your experiences are unique to the career of a writer? What do you hope other writers take away from this work?

The essential ingredient is to be open, to listen, to observe and receive -- like a psychoanalyst, but without the schematism of diagnoses. You try to hear the nuance, the subtext, to ferret out what lies beneath, and to make it apparent, even while mundane everyday life is happening under your nose. Once you do that, material pours towards you. To me that is what this book is about, letting the world pour in. That's the writer's life. Literary life doesn't take place in the salon or at a cocktail party or workshop; it occurs wherever a writer happens to be, usually in the most "unliterary" places. What I hope writers take away from this book is the sense that our material is everywhere.

How have your family and friends responded to being written about in your work?

Not always happily, I'm sorry to say. It's a tricky proposition, writing about people you know, people who are close to you. It's an ethical matter really: what you are giving is only your version of people, but there it is, with all the cold authority of the printed word, whether the people you write about approve of it or not. They can't answer you. As a writer, you have the final word. Looking at it from the point of view of his poor subjects, Philip Roth remarked, "It's like having a very long argument with someone who won't go away." When I take my notebook

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out, my wife goes silent, as if to say, ‘I won’t give you any ammunition.’ She once wrote a letter to the editor of a magazine claiming I misquoted her. It was true, I had. They ran the letter, and it’s the only thing people remember about that piece. In that one case, Pat had the final word. I loved it.

Your writing often touches on Jewish themes and history and yet you are not particularly religious. What meaning does being Jewish hold for you?

For me, being Jewish is a bit like being an émigré. If you leave the fold, as I have, you enter a kind of private exile. Yet when among Jews I continue to feel at home. A kind of mischief jumps to life in me, I hear myself say riskier things, mainly because I feel instinctively that I will be understood. I love the community I come from, full of characters, survivors, people of conviction who insist on who they are, take it or leave it. On the other hand, my associations with being in synagogues are not happy. To be caught in “a net of memory and expectation” was how Harold Rosenberg described his New York Jewishness. The memories he is referring to are tribal, ancestral – the shared tragedy of being a Jew and the shared joy. The expectation is the peculiar pressure Jews like Rosenberg and me put on ourselves to live up to an ideal whose meaning we can never quite explain, even to ourselves.

You talk in *Beg, Borrow, Steal* about giving your son Aaron “all of the drawbacks with none of the perks” of being Jewish. What do you mean by this?

I haven’t given Aaron the rituals of Judaism, the sense of belonging, the mythologies, and pleasures, the calendar, the great stories of Saul and David -- all the things I had as a boy. Those are the perks, and they are considerable. All I gave him was a name that makes him implacably a Jew in the eyes of others. Aaron works for UNICEF as a child protection specialist. He lives in the world of international catastrophe and aid. Being a Jew in that world isn’t always an asset.

You attended a tiny Hebrew day school for eight formative years in your childhood. How do you think being educated in this insular environment has informed your life and work?

The Hebrew School I attended made me a writer. For eight years we crawled through the Five Books of Moses, in Hebrew. Among other things, it’s a great work of literature. It gave me a sense of myth, drama, tragedy, revenge, love, betrayal – the entire spectacle of human possibilities. It taught me about primitive emotions and refined ones – and the relationship between them. Imagine reading the Greek tragedies in ancient Greek when you’re eight, nine, ten years old. That’s what it was like. My teachers were European for the most part, recent immigrants, alumni of the camps: Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Treblinka, Terezin. Everything about my early education was fantastical, horrifying, wondrous and extreme. There wasn’t much math or science. It was completely impractical. But it was the best education I could have asked for.

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In *Hurry Down Sunshine* you wrote extensively about your daughter Sally's sudden descent into bipolar disorder at the age of 15. After the difficult experience of watching your child lose her sanity, you had another child by your second wife. How did you enter into the decision to become a father again after what you'd gone through?

I was reluctant to have another child. But after Sally had her breakdown, my wife Pat's devotion to her was crucial. What could have led to the end of our marriage served to bind us more closely. Not having a child with pat, after this experience, was out of the question.

How has the way you have parented Brendan differed from the way you raised Sally and Aaron? What do you attribute these differences to?

I'm more aware of the fragility of life than I was with my older children – a combination perhaps of what happened to Sally and my being older. Essentially, however, my parenting hasn't changed: share your enthusiasms and be open to theirs. It's expensive, but delightful.

Even allowing for the fact that you live in New York, you have interacted with what seems to be an inordinate number of real characters over the years. Do you seek out relationships with whack jobs or do they find you quite by accident?

I think we recognize each other instinctively. It's a way of being in the world, a certain subversive glint in the eye that says, "Hey, I know you...."

Do you have an obsession with rats?

Yes! I have an absolute horror of them. I have four brothers. You can imagine the savage household we grew up in, almost devoid of feminine influence. Freud once remarked that when rats appear in dreams they represent your siblings. When I catch sight of a rat skittering along the street, disappearing into a crack in the pavement, I see a representation of the life I had to leave. I know, I know, it's completely crazy!

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PRAISE FOR HURRY DOWN SUNSHINE

by MICHAEL GREENBERG

“A remarkable account.”

—Rachel Donadio, *The New York Times Book Review*

“In its detail, depth, richness, and sheer intelligence, *Hurry Down Sunshine* will be recognized as a classic of its kind, along with the memoirs of Kay Redfield Jamison and John Custance....Lucid, realistic, compassionate, illuminating, *Hurry Down Sunshine* may provide a sort of guide for those who have to negotiate the dark regions of the soul—a guide, too, for their families and friends, for all those who want to understand what their loved ones are going through. Perhaps, too, it will remind us of what a narrow ridge of normality we all inhabit, with the abysses of mania and depression yawning to either side.”

—Oliver Sacks, *The New York Review of Books*

“There is a dancing, dazzling siren seductress at the heart of this book and...[it is] madness itself...The startling associative imagery that gives Greenberg’s writing its power is like a domesticated version of the madness that nearly carried away his daughter’s life.”

—Lev Grossman, *Time*

“*Hurry Down Sunshine* is one of those extremely rare works of literature that operates well as both a love story and a social indictment—without either aspect interfering with the dramatic force of the other.... an eloquent disquisition on the fragility of daily living.”

—*Rain Taxi*

“This memoir of a family crisis captures the grief that transformed their lives....readers come away with a sense of the intractable nature of psychosis and the courage it requires for patients like Sally, whose struggles continue, merely to live.”

—*People*

“*Hurry Down Sunshine* is not just a book about a girl gone mad, it’s about the fierce love of a father for a daughter....With stark honesty and compassion, Greenberg has transcended his genre to create a work of art.”

—*The Globe and Mail*

“An excellent memoir...Greenberg’s description of life on a psychiatric ward is exceptional: marked by critical insight and occasionally dark humor.”

—*NAMI Advocate*

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“*Hurry Down Sunshine* is artful, well-observed and brutally clear about the impact of bipolar disease on everyone it touches.”

—Jane Ciabattari, *Chicago Tribune*

“[*Hurry Down Sunshine*] is about tenacity and tenderness, feeling helpless but being present, about cracking up, then finding the wherewithal to glue the jagged pieces of your mind back together again. But mostly it's about love.”

—Oprah Winfrey, in her letter to readers in *O, The Oprah Magazine*

“A triumphant story.... Greenberg renders the details of his daughter’s breakdown with lyrical precision.”

—Nell Casey, *The Washington Post*

“Touching, warmly intimate and unsparing... One comes away from *Hurry Down Sunshine* with the conviction that...this memoir...has transcended the merely particular and eccentric to constitute a kind of hard-won art.”

—Joyce Carol Oates, *Times Literary Supplement*

“[Greenberg’s] erudite portrait of bipolar disease as experienced from both inside and out is dazzling.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A poignant memoir . . . not only a moving account of familial love and acceptance, but also a powerful autobiography, charting the gradual overcoming of Greenberg’s own demons.”

—*Sunday Times* (UK)

“Restrained yet candid, [*Hurry Down Sunshine* is] a beautifully written book.”

—*The Guardian* (UK)

“Greenberg’s elegiac, beautifully crafted memoir chronicles the summer his teenaged daughter, Sally, lost her mind to madness. . . .At times acutely painful, at times painfully funny, his story alternates between the progression of Sally’s bewildering, frightening decline and Greenberg’s own at times comically absurd experience....Sure to become a new classic in the literature of mental illness.”

—*Library Journal*, starred review

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The Florida Times-Union

July 24, 2009

'Beg, Borrow, Steal: A Writer's Life' By Michael Greenberg

New York-based writer Michael Greenberg ("Hurry Down Sunshine") offers his autobiography in a series of essays. By the age of 16, Greenberg was a published poet. Still, his father wanted Michael to give up dreams of the writing life and settle down with a stable job in the family's scrap metal business. His paternal point of view: "You get all the major holidays ... You quit work every day at five. And to make a living, you don't have to be a genius."

Greenberg left home and kept himself from starving by driving cabs, selling cosmetics and writing about golf, a game he never played. Greenberg's descriptions of his encounters with mentors, his dealings with the movie world and his endless family dramas are rendered with biting humor and insight. The unflinching stories are so well written, readers will wince.

September/October 2009

Beg, Borrow, Steal: A Writer's Life

Michael Greenberg

Other Press

Hardcover \$19.95 (240pp)

978-1-59051-341-5

How rare are unflinching acts of self-reflexivity. “Eric had once commented on how closely I listened to him. Enough to steal a piece of his soul,” ends one of the essays in Michael Greenberg’s *Beg, Borrow, Steal*, an autobiography that is an unreserved self-examination. The book is an anthology of stories that first appeared in a *Times Literary Supplement* column between June 2003 and January 2009, which puts many sides of the writing life on display. The multifacetedness of this book is enabled by its form—a series of essays of between 1,100 and 1,200 words, each focusing on a different topic.

Greenberg is a well-known name in the literary community, and with *Beg, Borrow, Steal*, he offers a worthy successor to his highly acclaimed *Hurry Down Sunshine*, which was named an Indies Choice Honor Book by the American Booksellers Association and won the Ken Book Award from the National Alliance on Mental Illness. It was also named the “Best Memoir of 2008” by Amazon.com and was among the “Best Books of 2008” chosen by *Time* and *Library Journal*. *Beg, Borrow, Steal* is a writing memoir that belongs in the company of like classics such as Grace Paley’s *Just as I Thought*, Annie Dillard’s *Living by Fiction*, William Gass’s *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, and Eudora Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings*.

What is often thought of as an intangible, cerebral activity—writing—is made palpable in this book. One chapter, titled “Workroom,” is devoted to describing the physical space of his writing. Within the walls of this workspace, hours spent writing

become a “repellent mass.” Foregrounding the materiality of writing, Greenberg zooms in to the sometimes absurd and sometimes objectionable act of collecting a wage. He describes, “The bills were almost untouchable—Ellie had been incontinent—yet without hesitation I stuffed them, reeking and soiled, in my pockets.”

Because of the necessity of cash, Greenberg’s writing career is a composite of begging, borrowing, stealing; not to mention selling cosmetics from an ironing board in front of a women’s department store, interpreting for Spanish-speaking defendants at Manhattan’s criminal court, and serving at a five-star restaurant. These become as important to writing as actually putting words to paper for pay—collaborating on doomed movie scripts, ghostwriting a memoir, recording an audio version of his book, editing a novel that will never be completed. Each endeavor is for Greenberg an opportunity for research and observation to be translated to page. Greenberg’s writing is not compartmentalized into a separate time and space. He portrays himself taking out a notepad to interview a transgender friend during a social gathering, causing his wife embarrassment.

Greenberg’s versatility as a writer—his publication record includes such variety as the *New York Review of Books*, *O*, and the *Village Voice*—is in part owing to his reporting ability. “Occasionally I subjected myself to unnecessary hardship for the sake of research,” Greenberg writes, “such as remaining in a subway car with a strong-smelling homeless woman after everyone else had abandoned it.” This book penetrates the New York that most see—taking readers to the foot on the brake in the subway motorman’s cab. For the essay, “Oh! Oh! There He Goes!,” the author draws on a vast knowledge of rats.

The chapter title “Notes of an Anti-Traveler” is surprising given the excursion that is this book. The point made in this chapter is that Greenberg’s travel is not wide in terms of mappable space. Greenberg’s travel remains for the most part bound to the five boroughs, but he goes to discover the “mole people” of underground Manhattan, the gourmet fare at the Broadway Presbyterian Church on 114th, a prerevolutionary African cemetery in the financial district, and the unreachable Hart Island.

The writing life is fraught with relational quandaries and emotional ambivalences, and these do not fall outside of the book’s scope. Greenberg deals with thorny identity

issues including race, familial roles, and immigration. The first page sounds a “crush of bone as his fist hit the wall,” and this is an apt metaphor for the signature Greenberg story—particularly the Greenberg ending, which is often both witty and tragic, a fusion of insight and pain. Greenberg writes, “My editor’s instructions were simple and concise: each piece had to spill a drop of blood.” They do. (September) *Janelle Adsit*



July 15, 2009

Greenberg, Michael
BEG, BORROW, STEAL: A Writer's Life

Times Literary Supplement columnist Greenberg follows his acclaimed debut memoir (*Hurry Down Sunshine*, 2008) with a collection of tight, readable essays.

The author's refreshing approach avoids the self-indulgent and solipsistic impulses that often characterize autobiographical writing. In a concise format—modeled on that of his column for TLS, which, the author writes, “seemed as strict as that of a haiku”—Greenberg offers concentrated excursions into a wide variety of subjects, including film, literature, Jewish identity, immigration, racism, family conflict, the wildlife in Central Park, tenement housing, New York City's rat problem (“Dozens of them were hanging out like teenagers, copulating, browsing, completely at ease”) and even the politics of transgendered sexuality. Although the narrative is structured in episodic fragments, Greenberg does an excellent job keeping them unified via his plainspoken, unpretentious tone. Most chapters read like anecdotes told among friends, yet at the same time the author creates poignant subtexts involving fundamental human values and emotions like love, desire, honesty and malice. In one essay, for instance, Greenberg recounts his days as an interpreter for Spanish-speaking defendants in a criminal court, and how this experience impacted his later compassion and sympathy as a juror in a case involving a janitor accused of selling drugs to students. In another, he relates the story of a tense friendship with a black man who implies that an uncomfortable number of black Americans harbor violent fantasies about killing whites. From odd jobs and family drama to political unrest in Argentina and the many pitfalls of memoir writing, Greenberg skillfully explores issues that range from the profoundly tragic to the delightfully funny.

Succinct, entertaining personal narratives.

The International News Source of Book Publishing
**PUBLISHERS
WEEKLY**

August 10, 2009

Beg, Borrow, Steal: A Writer's Life Michael Greenberg. Other Press, \$19.95 (240p) ISBN 978-1-59051-341-5

In these 45 thoughtfully crafted short essays written for London's *Times Literary Supplement* from 2003 to 2009, Greenberg (*Hurry Down Sunshine*) touches on his decades of trying to make good as a writer in New York City. Greenberg starts with early memories of growing up in Brooklyn, where he opted out of joining his father's scrap-metal business, instead dropping out of school in the early 1970s in search of a "blunt exotic experience" in Argentina and New York's Lower East Side. He ended up strapped with a young family of two children and faced years of plying odd jobs, like driving a cab, giving Spanish lessons, selling cosmetics on the street and ghost writing, all the while trying to write his novel. He fashions an anecdote for each of these experiences, in gently self-deprecating prose, such as writing for the movies and working the stock market, both to some success despite his naïveté. He tapped into an enthusiastic group of dachshund owners when he had to find another home for his child-nipping Eli, a troublesome pooch with a "disgraceful domed head"; he devotes chapters to the Negro Burial Ground and the paupers' cemetery on Hart Island, in New York City. As well, he offers touching reflections on the life of novelist William Herrick and editor Ted Solotaroff, and chronicles some funny run-ins with New Yorkers of all stripes. These are graceful ponderings by a deeply sympathetic soul, a consummate New Yorker and terrific writer. (Sept.)