



Jeremy Hance

349: When a Story Idea Won't Let a Writer Go

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome word nerds to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/349 because it's Episode 349. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on Apple, Google, or you know, all the usual places where you might listen to a podcast, and please leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there discover the show as well.

Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Jeremy Hance.

Jeremy is writer and freelance environmental journalist, who also happens to cohabitate with mental illnesses. He has named his OCD, Steve; and his depression goes by the name, Malachi. He is the author of the memoir *Baggage: Confessions of a Globetrotting Hypochondriac*, which is the book we're going to be discussing here today.

As a journalist, Jeremy is passionate about wildlife conservation, climate change, forests, animal behavior, and indigenous people and a whole host of other topics. His work has appeared in *Mongabay*, the *Guardian*, *HuffPost*, *Ensia*, *YaleE360*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and many other places. His story on the Sumatran rhino was chosen for the 2019 edition of the Best American Science and Nature Writing.

Jeremy has traveled to over 30 countries on five continents; and considers himself ridiculously lucky to have spent time with singing rhinos, dinosaur mammals, and angry clown fish. He is graduate of Macalester College with a major in English and minor in History, as well as a graduate of the Great Books Master's Degree program at St. John's College.

He lives in St. Paul, Minnesota with his wife, daughter, and pooch. When he's not writing, he enjoys; time with friends, cups of tea, long hikes, longer naps – and even longer novels, and playing *Dungeons and Dragons*.

So, welcome, Jeremy. It is so great to have you here today. So, I always like to start with the story behind the story. What first inspired you to write *Baggage*, in the first place?

Jeremy Hance: I think it was less inspiration and more that once the idea, kind of, crept into my brain, it wouldn't go away.

GP: [laughs] As many books probably happen for many writers.

JH: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it wasn't like the book that I ever would've envisioned for myself. I had been an Environmental Journalist for a number, you know, I've done that for over 10 years now. And I was not someone who would talk openly about my mental health issues – if you want to call it that, or mental illness.

And I never really thought I'd write like a memoir about mental illness. Like, that was the furthest thing I could imagine myself doing in my, you know, especially my teens and 20s and such. But once the idea took hold about writing it in a sort of a funny way that was regarding my trips and stuff, it just won't let go.



And eventually, it became obvious the only way to get rid of the idea was to just do it. And then, became, of course, a year's-long process of making that happen. But yeah, it was less that I was like, 'This is what I want to do,' and it was more like, 'Okay, I guess this is what I'll do,' not that I'm not passionate about it.

And it turned into, I think, a really amazing project for me on a personal level. But when initially the idea was there, it wasn't like I was like, 'Yeah, that's really what I want right now.'

GP: Yeah. I have to say I totally relate to that because often projects do-- As I mentioned, for a lot of writers, that tends to be the thing. It's not so much the project we're inspired to write, it's the project that just won't leave us alone.

And I find, especially when it's something personal, that can be really hard. Like, you know, we kind of don't want to look at the entity behind the curtain; we just sort of want to push it away.

So, what made you realize like, 'Okay, I actually do need to look at this?' And how did you start that process of investigating and, sort of, unpacking because there's so much in the story and so many layers to the story?

JH: Yeah, I think, you know, I've been doing journalism for lots of years, and this idea was sort of in the back of my mind for a decade, really. And I think it was just when I finally made that decision, like, 'Okay, I'm going to pursue this,' it became sort of like, 'Okay, well, then what does that look like?' Right?

And I decided to then be very candid about the mental health struggles both on the darker side, at times – but mostly, the book is mostly more a little bit more lighthearted and humorous, though I do get nitty-gritty about what it's like to live with various mental illnesses.

And it was-- It was really a process then of, sort of-- The book follows a number of different trips that I've taken for my journalism, and, sort of, trips that influenced the way I see the world. And so, it sort of was a process of revisiting each of those trips in my mind, and looking at notes and photographs, of course, and articles that I'd written for the trips and kind of re-going through.

And then, trying to create a coherent narrative for a book that would sort of span from the early trips to the later trips – and how my, I guess, management of my mental illness and the way that I view mental illness changed over that kind of decade of travel.

GP: Yeah. So, let's unpack that process a little bit because I think it's really important to look at both the, sort of, the content in terms of the travel side. Like there's sort of two sides of the material that you're working with in this book.

There's the mental health side, but then also the travel side. Before we dig into the craft of actually, you know, excavating the memories and putting them on the page, can you talk a little bit about the distinction between travel writing versus, say, just carrying a journal while you're traveling and sort of jotting down what you did, like travel log versus travel writing?

JH: Yeah, I mean, I think carrying a journal-- And with some of these trips, especially some of the older ones, I very fortunately had some notes and journaling that I did. But, you know, I think as a writer, you start to realize that obviously travel notes and journaling is--

I mean, I know some people, we can read certain journals of those people that are really clever and witty and have that spark – you know, when they write without rewriting; but that's not the way that I write.



So, I had to look at each trip separately and really write out what, I guess, I would see as sort of the narrative of that trip. It takes a lot of work to do travel writing in a way that I think is just like any kind of memoir or personal writing, you're plucking what is the most important bits without telling any fibs or anything.

You're trying to turn real-life experience of, let's say, a week-long trip into some kind of narrative with some kind of meaning, whether that's some, kind of, the lesson you took from it or ending on some kind of experience.

And so, sometimes that involves, sort of, bouncing around the timeline a little bit. Often, that would involve me writing stuff that got cut. A lot of stuff-- I tend to be a 'long writer'. I love long books, and this is not a particularly long book – so, believe me, a lot of stuff got cut.

But I think that makes it a sharper, stronger book in that, you know, the stuff that got cut was fun stuff; and I really, it was personally meaningful to me, but it maybe was not that necessary for the reader. The book has – as you said, it has a mental health theme, it has a travel theme, and it also has a nature theme.

And so, one of the things that I worked with, with my agent and my editors was really trying to, how do you balance three quite distinct themes going on in one book and not lose the thread on any of them?

And that was, I think, the biggest challenge. I do think through the process, we were able to get a nice balance and make it a coherent story; and response from people has been really great so far.

So, I feel like we were able to balance those, but that was really the major challenge, was constantly thinking about, 'Okay, where does the mental health stuff come in? Where do I want to focus on more of the environmental nature stuff that's been the heart of my career? Where am I focusing on more what it's like to travel in a really personal way?'

In a way that's not like, I'm not like glamorizing what a good traveler I am because the whole point of the book is that I'm a terrible traveler, you know? That was where a lot of the work and rewriting, oh my god, so much rewriting and time went into – kind of trying to make those themes work within real experiences that I had, and then trying to tell it as a coherent chapter in a story.

GP: So, I think there's a lot to unpack in what you just said, but one of the things that really struck me was that idea of the higher purpose of each episode, of each travel chapter, as it were. Like, it's not just a, 'This happened, and this happened – and on Day 4, we did this – and on Day 7, we did that.'

It's not just a documentation of the events; it has that arc, that emotional arc – and it requires it. And I think that's, you know, where you talked about like sort of fitting the logistics of the story into that emotional arc. Like that's really, I think, where the artistry happens.

So, you mentioned you had notes to start from some places or from some of the early trips, just at the beginning of the process – like if a writer were thinking, 'I want to turn my journals from traveling into something with an arc, like what did you have to do to go from just this happened and this happened in, let's say, a journal, to going to something that does have that narrative through-line?'

JH: Sure. I think the first question you ask yourself is, why, 'Why this trip, why me?' In this incredible age of humanity where a lot of us, especially in wealthy countries, have been able to go on trips, have these great experiences, these experiences that enrich our lives and change who we are.

But I think there's always a question with travel writing. Travel writing is, it's – yes, it can be a travel log and it can be a description of the trip and stuff, but I think it's good to have a theme or an idea of what you're trying to say with that trip or with that writing.



And so, you know, sometimes I had certain trips that I would've loved to have fit into this book, but it just didn't really fit narratively. And as I said, I had other parts where I had whole sections of stuff that happened on these trips that just got cut because, again, it sort of moved too far away from the themes I was going for.

So, I think the first question is, you know, as you do with any book, why am I writing this book? Right? Why would I put myself through this insane amount of work, this obsessional focus; and am I the right one to be doing it? And I think those are like very personal questions to ask.

I think that struggling with those questions can make for a better project and a better book in the end. I think from my perspective-- You know, it's hard for me to talk about exactly how other writers would then answer those questions or, you know, I think everyone would have different experiences around that.

But from my perspective, as I said, the book wouldn't really leave me. And then there was a sense of, you know, I love travel writing, and I love reading travel books – but a lot of them are also about these really good travelers go places and they just seem to like just kick butt at it.

You know, they don't have a lot of folies, they're not having panic attacks. They know the language – even if they don't know the language, they can communicate, you know? Fun to read that; it's almost like reading a superhero comic book for me.

And I don't begrudge with that at all. I know I've met travelers like that. So, it's not-- It's not that it's unreal, but I wanted to write a book about the kind of traveler that I am, which is; panic attacks, can't speak the language, miscommunications, constant anxiety – but still loves it.

You know, and that's kind of part of the book too, is that, for all the challenges that travel brings me, I still continue to do it; partly because it can be part of the job – but largely, because I love it. I think it's incredible experiences for me.

So, I think that's kind of the question of, 'Well, why me?' Well, I felt like I had a kind of unique story to tell around travel and mental illness. And then it was the question of, 'Okay, well, what are the themes?' You know, obviously, mental illness is a theme.

And then, of course, I wanted the nature part of it. I couldn't-- I couldn't really write a book where I was telling about my travels as Environmental Journalist, and not get a little bit into; my connections to nature, my love of the natural world, and also the environmental issues we're facing.

And then, of course, just as I said, sort of the travel element goes through all these stories as well. So, that was kind of the way I approached this is, you know, 'What makes this story a little bit different? What makes this story unique, and why should I be the one telling it?'

And that is really kind of what it came down to. And then, it was a question of, you know, again, 'How best do I do this?' You know, 'Do I do flashbacks to my childhood or do I not? How deep do I get into my mental illness stuff? How much do I focus on other things so the book isn't just about mental illness?'

And that, again, was a lot of, sort of, negotiating and rewriting and rethinking it about – and several years of sort of processing what would make the most interesting, compelling... and hopefully, funny book.

GP: Yeah. So, when it came to the structure of it, and you mentioned like you worked really hard with your agent and editor to make sure that you didn't sort of let any of those important through-lines drop at any point.



And, you know, just from the sections that I've read, it definitely – those three elements are sustained; the travel, mental health, and nature. How did you actually decide on the order of things? Was it just chronological?

I mean, I notice like even just looking at the Table of Contents, they're broken into groups – so, clearly, there's some sort of a story arc between the chapters themselves. So, how did you decide that order, those groupings, et cetera?

JH: Yeah, that's a great question. So, you know, I could have done straight chronological, but I think in the early days of mulling over how this book would look – you know, working on the outline and such, when I was doing the proposal, the nonfiction book proposal – I think thematically, it ended up working better not to do it chronologically.

It's somewhat chronological – in that, most of the early chapters are about earlier trips... and most of the later chapters are more of like a later part of my life when I'm more of a seasoned journalist and stuff. But within that, some of the trips are mixed up as far as like, you know, 'This trip happened three years before that trip, but it's actually last.'

And part of it was, I knew the trip I wanted to end on and that was not the most recent trip; and I also knew where I wanted to begin. And then, I also knew that I was going to probably bounce back to an earlier trip after that.

So, I did mix it up and I-- You know, we made that as clear as we could in both the way I write about, you know, 'Seven years earlier, before this happened', or, you know, we also have dates saying that – but you also, it doesn't really--

From a narrative standpoint, I wanted to make clear that, you know – obviously, as a memoir, I'm being honest... like, 'These trips took place on this year.' But it really doesn't matter in some ways because again, I'm writing sort of as a, 'Well, then, let's take the next step in this journey and explore this theme a little deeper.' And it doesn't matter if that trip became for or after that much, right?

GP: Right.

JH: It's sort of getting into more of the nitty-gritty details. So yeah, I decided to take it non-chronologically just because chronologically, to me, would not have had as much narrative punch – would not have been quite as impactful because some trips, just the way the trips laid out.

Now, if you were doing a travel book where you're talking about one trip, then I think it's a lot easier to sort of be somewhat more chronological, right? But because I'm writing about 7 or 8 different trips – and I'm writing about my process of sort of 'coming of age with mental illness' and learning how to travel with mental illness, it just made more sense to move things around.

And yeah. And then I decided, 'Okay, so what are the main themes?' And so, you know, the opening section is really about kind of getting to know me – and me discovering I have OCD for the first time during a trip, basically, because of a trip.

And then, another section is about sort of my love of nature and what nature means; and like, yeah, it has some mental illness threaded through it – and you know, stuff... and it has travel obviously, but it's more about the nature element.



And then, the later sections are really about kind of all that coming together, and me learning to travel with mental illness and manage my mental illness a little bit better. And at the same time, learning to--

I mean, again, there's sort of a coming-of-age factor in that I kind of become a more mature adult and all that. And coming to experience why I travel, why I love travel, and why nature is so important is sort of the end of the book – is it's this experience that I have over two chapters in the Dominican Republic.

And so, that just felt like a really nice way to sort of close out the whole narrative. So, I looked at it very much as, 'What would be the most powerful way to tell this story? What makes the most sense from a story stand?'

You know, almost like writing a novel, right? You know, there's the intro, there's the rising action, and then there's a climax. And again, skip the chronological, skip the stuff that... and just treat that as sort of a, 'Hey, I'll let you know that this is not quite chronological, but it really--' you know, like I said, it sort of doesn't matter thematically.

GP: Yeah. And I mean, you say that like right up front in the Author's Note.

JH: Yeah.

GP: Like you tell us that like, 'Things are not necessarily chronological, many of the names have been changed,' or you've just like made them up because you didn't know them, and that's okay. Like, we don't need that minutiae in order to get the emotional story.

And you know, it's interesting as you were talking and you were saying how it's kind of going through that creative arc – like writing a novel – and you were talking about how like it's not necessarily the chronology that gives us that arc.

In a way, it made me think like, 'Well, of course, we're not going to put it in chronological order,' because it's not really your journey over the course of the book, it's the reader's journey that you're sort of taking us on this emotional journey from beginning to middle to end.

And it doesn't really matter if it's chronological or not because it's not about us experiencing your life exactly as it was; it's us sort of being guided on this trip.

JH: Yeah. I think that's one thing. I mean, this is my first memoir. I never really thought I'd write a memoir. You know, I'm a journalist, so I'm knee-deep in writing things as truthfully and factually.

But with this, you know, I really looked at it as sort of writing – and writing more of a novel or looked at it in a story framework or what was going to be the most important. And I knew going in, that some of these trips took place almost 20 years ago.

So, I knew that-- And that's why I have that in my sort of, my foreword and stuff as I point out like, you know, 'Some of this, I don't know the names of these people - I don't remember – some of my memories are not the greatest.'

You know, there are holes in shadiness of-- You know, when a trip has taken place that long ago, you remember moments and fragments – but you don't necessarily remember everything. And even our memory – as research and science – tells us, it's not always completely dependable. Right?



So, I just-- I wanted to make that really clear that like, 'This is a subjective journey, and I'm telling it in using sort of the storytelling devices that we've had for ever since our species has been running around the world to try,' and tell it in the most emotional impactful way.

I mean, it is all true, but at the same time, I didn't experience my life where I was traveling and then having flashbacks; and then, moving, you know-- Our life doesn't usually fit in a coherent, nice little neat story, right? But we like that framework because emotionally, it resonates with us.

GP: Right, right. It also allows us to lend some sense of order after-the-fact to all of the jumbled-up memories that have come before. Another thing that I thought was interesting is the use of prologue and epilogue, which, you know, oftentimes we think of that as sort of a very much a novelistic thing.

And by the way, we just had one of the biggest debates in one of our classes about like, you know, should you have a prologue? Some agents apparently are very anti-prologue, others are very okay with prologue. So, I'm curious, like, was that baked in from the start or was that something that got added once you had already, like the story had started taking shape?

JH: Sure. That's a great question. So, I should probably frame this a little bit of saying like, so I was an English major and my first love has always been novels. And then as you mentioned, I did a Master's degree in Great Books where we read tons of different, you know, both fiction and nonfiction of sort of the Western classics, right?

So, I've always been attracted to those kinds of stories; and then I sort of fell into journalism, which I love and has been so important. But I think my first love and my oldest love is storytelling.

So, when I started this book, initially, there was not like a prologue, per se – but a little bit into it, I just had this, you know, flash of this scene of when I was on a plane flying to Jakarta, which is like a 20-something hour trip. And I had a complete panic meltdown and I thought, 'You know what, that is such a good way to sort of throw the reader into what this book is about.'

Like, 'Let me show you how awful of a traveler I am, and what it's like to have a panic attack at the top,' and do so again in a sort of a humorous way to, sort of, hit a number of those notes, right – to show that this book is going to be humorous, this book is about travel, this book about mental illness.

And so, I kind of wrote that prologue in like one-sitting, which is a rare for me. And it just felt so right and it felt right as a prologue because it's a trip that happened relatively recently. It didn't fit any of the timelines, but it just felt like a really good way to throw the reader in and give them a sense of what the book is going to be about in a rarely dramatic way.

And then, the epilogue actually came out when I was doing my first draft, just finished the book; and I was like, 'Well, the book doesn't feel quite complete.' And I thought, 'Well, I'm going to do kind of like a mirror of what I did with the prologue and write a little epilogue about a more recent trip where I was getting on a plane and how I felt about it.'

And again, it just-- Thematically, it fits so well to have that prologue and epilogue. And I think that's what prologue and epilogue-- I mean, I'm a fan of them – clearly, I use them in my book, so I love them in novels and such.

And I like them in nonfiction when they work, but I think they can, they can be a nice little bookend to sort of fit. And I think, you know, it doesn't fit-- You don't need that for obviously every book. Some books don't, that doesn't really fit.



But for my book, introducing the themes and closing out the themes in a sort of mirror image that are quite different – you know, one time I’m having a panic attack, the other time I’m about to go on a trip to Vietnam and I, sort of, stop a panic attack.

So, it was sort of a perfect mirror of my journey, and kind of how I deal with travel and mental illness; and it just worked, you know? And I think as a writer, different books require different things – and different books have different needs; and you just got to do what works and, I don’t know, don’t listen to the haters, I guess.

GP: You know, what’s also interesting as you were talking and you were saying how like their bookends and their mirror images of each other, the other thing that I found with the prologue and the epilogue is that they’re not grounded in the travel location. Like, we’re suspended, right?

Like it’s either in an airplane or getting onto an airplane. And so, there’s also that sense of like, it’s a gateway into and out of that world.

JH: Yeah.

GP: You know, that kind of works really nicely with just the whole travel, sort of like the plane trip on the way into this world of all the travel and yada. And then, the plane trip, sort of-- Even though you’re going to Vietnam, it feels like a trip, sort of, like we’re landing out of it or we’re sort of on our way home after a big journey.

JH: That’s great. I’m going to totally steal that one.

[laughter]

JH: Like, ‘Yeah, I totally thought of that ahead of time – this is my, you know, story.’ No, but I think, you know, again, probably subconsciously, it just fit that way because, like you say, it works.

One of the things about the book is a lot of travel writing just takes place at the destination.

GP: Yeah.

JH: And I really wanted to show the horrors of trying to get to the destination. So, you know, a number of the chapters will include the terrible car rides, the boat rides, the plane rides, because that is where a lot of my mental illness shows up.

Like I usually do better when I’m actually on the ground and there; it’s the journeying that I can have a lot of trouble with. And also, I think that that’s such an important part of travel, right? Is travel isn’t just about when you get there, travel is also the horribly cramped seats and the awful experiences on planes or the often-terrifying driving in certain countries – you know, the boat trips.

And those can both be-- You know, I mean, I know a lot of people, there’s some romance around that journey and stuff. And I used to have a little romance around getting on a plane when I was really young, but like, you know, that’s all gone for me; [laughs] it’s just unpleasant and awful.

So, I wanted to make sure that I continually, in different chapters, there’s often a scene or two about what is it like to take a long six-hour car ride in Guyana, for example, into the rainforests on roads that are completely crap. I didn’t want to just gloss over that because the book is about sort of the uncomfortableness of travel.



I think one of the most uncomfortable themes are those times when you're not, as you've sort of said, that the gateways, right – when you're not at home and you're not yet at your destination, you're having to deal with the discomfort of getting from place to place.

And for me, that discomfort often brings a lot of anxiety, fears that I'm going to – you know, the plane is going to crash or the car is going to crash, or something like that too so it's even heightened, obviously.

But yeah, I really wanted to show that aspect of it. And I think those two scenes, the prologue and epilogue, it just fit that, kind of – you know, to say like, 'Okay, this is a little different than your normal travel book where you're already on the ground and you're enjoying the adventure.' Like, this is going to be a little different.

GP: Well, and the prologue also is really important in that it introduces and sort of puts us right in the thick of it with the mental health stuff, right?

JH: Yeah.

GP: Like, we know right away, there is no doubt in our mind that this is going to be a big thing throughout the story. So, you've already talked a little bit about the fact that the idea sort of gripped you and wouldn't let go, but can you talk a little bit more about the challenges of weaving something so personal and also something that--

Let's face it, not all people are super enlightened about mental health stuff. I know with my own experience around bipolar, like not everyone is cool with this type of thing. So, can you talk about weaving that into the story and being really vulnerable about this thing that's hard?

JH: Yeah, it was really scary, and it still is a little scary. You know, there are times in the book where I sort of flash back to my childhood, and I was first diagnosed with anxiety and depression when I was 10.

And kind of lived with that through my teenage years in a really dramatic way in which I would basically hide it from, you know, as many of my peers, especially, but even adults. You know, it wasn't something you talked about that much. My greatest fear, at the time, was discovery, right?

GP: Yes.

JH: Letting people find out. And I think for anyone who has mental illness, they're probably pretty familiar with that experience, right? And since then, I have close friends who've read the book and been like, 'Oh man – I knew you dealt with some stuff, but I didn't know it was that crazy or that bad,' you know? I'm like, yep.

But like, you know, I'm at a point in my life where for most of my life, it wasn't like I would really run around and display this or show this to people on purpose, right? I really got good at acting, which again, I think a lot of people with mental illness know what that's like too. You get very good at showing the same side of yourself out in public, and it's at home in the dark.

GP: Often alone, which makes it worse.

JH: Yes, often alone – yes, which does make it worse, where you are able to, sort of, that part of you gets unleashed. So, it was a really scary thing. I had a lot of trepidation about doing it, but I decided if I was going to do it, I was going to be full-on honest.

I wasn't going to try and mitigate any of it. There are pretty vulnerable – not just vulnerable, but there's also just some pretty bonker stuff that I do in the book.



But I thought, 'If I'm going to do this, there's no point in trying to sugarcoat it,' because the whole point is also, I think I wanted people who suffer or struggled mental illness to read this and be able to laugh a little and also be able to say, 'okay, you know, I'm not the only one,' to feel a little less alone.

And I also really wanted people that might live with someone mental illness and not have experienced it themselves or have a loved one who's mentally ill or a, you know, relative or friend to be able to maybe come away with a little greater understanding of what it's like because I'm a--

Like I said, I'm someone who can come across as very regular and normal – in public, I'm someone who's had a relatively successful career as a journalist. I have a very happy marriage. I have a daughter. Like I have, you know, a lot of things that I'm very blessed.

And I wanted to show that people with mental illness can be just as normal or just as sort of successful or whatever. But we struggle really hard to get any of that and to maintain that. And every day, every week is kind of constantly holding yourself together a little and finding ways, healthy ways to mitigate and keep your mentalness under control a little bit.

So, I just wanted to tell that story in a way, but it was, it was scary. I mean, it's very vulnerable to think of certain family members, relatives, friends, people that I grew up with in my hometown reading this. You know, that's hard.

The response has been great though, I will say that. Like, I've had a lot of people come out to me – and in the way of just saying like how much it meant to them to read a book like this, how much they learned... or people with mental illness saying this really spoke to them, and all that kind of stuff.

So, the response has been really heartening that like it did work and it kind of successfully did some of the things that I hoped it would do. But it's still, you know, all writers have doubts and anxieties and obsessions. It's part of being a writer, right?

Like, there's still those times when I'm like, 'Did I do the right thing? Was this the right book? Should I have just written some sort of straight journalistic book that wasn't about me, that wasn't like so vulnerable and me just sort of standing there in all my naked glory of mental illness?' Like, should I have done something more sensible? You know?

But in my better days, when I'm doing a little better, I feel like this was the right thing to do. And if it's helped a few people here and there, or made them laugh a little – or made them understand someone with mental illness a little better, like that's what I wanted to do. Right? That was kind of one of the overarching goals when I took on this project.

GP: So many things to unpack in what you just said. One of the things that jumped out at me when you were talking about like, you know, the acting like, oh my gosh, that is one of the things I tell people again and again, it's like, I have put on some Oscar-worthy performances in my lifetime.

JH: Right? Yeah.

GP: Right? And the thing I find that like, it's sort of an occupational hazard of being an intelligent, functional human – and having a mental illness is the ability you get really good at hiding it.

Like if someone's a hot mess, then it can actually get treated, then they can get the help that they need. I didn't get help until I was 26; and I've been struggling with bipolar since I was like 11. You know, but that happens when you get really good at hiding it, and people get really good at not seeing it.

JH: Yes.



GP: You know, the other thing that you mentioned that I thought was really interesting was that vulnerability of putting it out there. Like, I still remember the very first time I sort of publicly talked about bipolar. Like I can point to a date on the calendar. Like, I know when it was. And, it's scary.

Like it's really terrifying to share something that you know is going to completely change how everyone sees you.

JH: Yeah.

GP: Like from here on out, they're going to reverse-engineer every stupid thing you've done your whole life and they're going to be like, 'Oh well, that was the bipolar, and that was that.' Yeah. You know? And there's that fear of like, now this is always going to haunt you forever; and once you ring the bell, you can't unring it.

So yeah, kudos for putting this story out there. I think it's so, so important for people like you and myself to be talking about this stuff, and sort of weaving it into storytelling in a way that is true and not just sugarcoated.

Like one of my pet peeves with movies that depict mental illness is that they, just like you were talking about glamorizing the travel and it's always like the great traveler who's a superhero, it's like the people with mental illness in movies are always like, they're like Bradley Cooper in *Silver Linings Playbook*.

You know, like they're sexy; and they're kind of swab in a dorky kind of way. But like, there's still that aspirational quality; and I'm like, that is not what mental health issues look like at all.

JH: Yes. You know, movies usually-- I understand why they do this too, but it almost always ends with them being like "cured". Right?

GP: Yeah.

JH: Like, all of a sudden, they've met the person they're going to marry, and now they're fine. And it's, you know-- And one thing I wanted to do with this book as well, is to show that like, 'Yeah, I'm never going to be cured of OCD,' right? I'm never going to be cured of depression and anxiety.

Like it starts in the book, it ends in the book; it's still there, and it's just about managing the symptoms. And I have good days and bad days, and good years and bad years; and that's just the reality.

GP: Yeah.

JH: And I think that's the reality for most of us who've, you know, deal with mental illness no matter to what degree or how. Part of the reason why I was so young is that I grew up in a family that was, all of us struggled with mental illness; and my parents were very aware of it.

So, in a very good way, I kind of grew up with it; and that allowed me to, sort of, be-- I may obviously be diagnosed early; you know, go through the process early. And I feel like in many ways I had to jump on a lot of other people who had mental illness because I sort of learned a lot very, very young; and then have continued that process.

But I think, you know, yeah, there's a lot of mythologizing around mental illness; and there's a romanticization of it, which I can understand to a certain extent. But on the other hand, it's like – no, mental illness is usually just awful.

GP: Yeah.

JH: Like, it's very rarely, you know, like, 'Oh, I'm brooding genius,' you know? No, it's just usually awful.



GP: There's no like silver lining to it. Like, yeah, it's just total BS.

JH: Yeah. So, part of what I wanted to do was write a book about mental illness that was, you know, obviously 100% accurate to my own experience, but I also wanted to make it funny and lighthearted.

Like there's a lot of great mental health memoirs and experiences and books about the real darkness, you know, that underlines the depression and any of, you know, the ups and the downs. And I think part of me wanting to make it lighthearted is like, that was the only way I could tell the story – if I just told the dark parts of my story, I didn't want to tell that book.

There are the writers who have done it so much better. But I was attracted to the idea of trying to write a book that would be about mental illness, about a subject that's so intense and awful, but also do it in a way that shows sort of the underlining absurdity of it and, you know, kind of touch on that nexus.

And with something like OCD and travel, it was pretty easy to find those places where we could get into sort of the humorousness of it, because part of-- I mean, part of me, at least, learning to live with mental illness is the ability to laugh at myself after the fact – is the ability to say, "Well, that was dumb... you know, that was, that was silly... that was off the wall, Jeremy."

And so, I think that that is again, sort of, one of those, I guess, coping mechanisms or tools that I use to sort of try and remain as healthy as possible. And I thought, 'Well, that would be an interesting way for people to--'

You know, maybe somebody who doesn't want to read a book about what it's like to live with depression, would be more open to reading a book where, you know, they can watch somebody make an ass of themselves in Sumatra.

You know, like that might be more fun and maybe they would get something out of it again, of understanding a little bit what it's like to live with mental illness and what mental illness, how it can make someone like me who's, you can meet me and see I'm perfectly rational, do some really irrational, crazy stuff throughout my life. And I think that that was just an important point to make.

GP: Yes, I am right there with you in terms of humor. Even the way I recount some of the most traumatic episodes relating to my bipolar when I'm just telling people about it, it has to be with humor. Otherwise, I myself can't process it fully.

JH: Yeah. I think that's-- Again, it's like we turn our lives into stories because it makes it more coherent and easy; and humor adds another element of our ability to process sometimes things that are really harrowing, sometimes things that are really awful in the moment.

But if we do it with humor-- And maybe it's partly an avoidance thing, I don't know, maybe it just makes it easier to tell. But I do feel like it allows me to, in some ways, weaken the mental illness and see it for the ridiculousness it is; and that's one of the reasons why I name my mental illness.

GP: Yes. I was going to ask you about that.

JH: Yeah. So, my OCD is Steve; and my depression is Malachi. And as I write in the book, you know, part of that is to distance itself from myself. Like these are diseases that are in me; it's not necessarily me. They are a part of me.

You know, they've created bits of my life, both good and bad. They've, you know, interfered with, but they're not necessarily me. And so, part of it's a distancing theme, but part of it too is just to be able to give them a name and identity allows me to sort of, you know, when it does get real bad to sort of have that internal monologue with them.



And for whatever reason that is helpful. And there are two ways you can live with mental illness. One is by doing self-destructive behaviors, right? And then the other is trying to find behaviors that allow you to live as full of life as possible depending on the severity of your issues using somewhat positive behaviors, right?

And I feel like in some ways, the humor – at least, for me – and the naming, the mentalness are some positive ways that I've tried to mitigate, frame, understand, tell a story about my own mental illness and allows me to sort of function. And you know, I have a number of other things that I do, obviously, to deal with my mental illness, but that those are two of the, sort of, maybe more unusual ways that I deal with it.

GP: Yeah. Well, not that unusual because as I mentioned before, we hopped on the interview. Like I also have named my bipolar, it's sort of two names, either The Dark Passenger, which is a nod to Dexter or I also call it The Terminator.

Not so much because I think it's going to terminate me so much as it's like it doesn't stop; it's relentless, and that sort of relentless feeling of The Terminator. And I just have to be like, 'I'm going to take you on,' Terminator. And it sort of puts me in like, I see myself almost as like Sarah Connor, and ready to like, you know, duke it out.

JH: Yeah. Good for you. I think giving yourself-- I mean, part of it is being able to say like trying to empower the part of yourself that isn't the mental illness, can be really helpful.

We've been taught, I think, so much for so long that mental illness makes us weaker, makes us weirder, makes us damaged and broken. But it's like, 'No, man, screw that.' Like I've been through some crap, you know, I've been through some awful stuff and I've come out on the other side. And mental illness, you know, it, kind of--

It gives you that, I'm not going to let it take me down today. That can be a helpful, I think, attitude to sort of move forward as best we can, you know?

GP: Yeah. And you know, the thing like for me with the Terminator image is like even at the darkest times, she doesn't stop fighting.

JH: Yeah, exactly.

GP: Like, there is no choice; she is not going to give up.

JH: Yeah.

GP: You know, unless the Terminator wins, she is not going to give up. And so, there's that element of just like relentless resistance to that dark thing. The other thing, I think, that was really interesting with the naming of them too – like adding the humor, I think, is brilliant.

The other piece too is what you said about behaviors. And I love the idea that, and I also, I'm constantly thinking like, replacing one behavior with another behavior and there's a lot of like mental acrobatics that goes on in living the day-to-day life.

But there's something very objective and sort of antiseptic about managing behavior as opposed to managing emotion. Like it's one thing to deal with our feelings; it's a very different thing to just be like, 'Here's the behavior I'm going to do, and I don't need to worry about all the messy stuff – I'm just going to do this behavior and move forward.'

JH: Yeah. No, I think that makes a lot of sense. And like, you know, you do have to deal with the emotions. You do have to--



GP: Of course.

JH: Yeah. And that's the thing is like, or the-- I was just talking to my therapist last week about, you know, like even if you're doing the behaviors and your cognitive mind isn't in the right place, it doesn't always help yourself, right?

But I think that relentlessness that you talk about is so important. I think people without mental illness or haven't struggled with it, don't understand that it's an everyday thing.

GP: Yeah.

JH: I think of it as a chronic illness that I've had since, you know, at least I've been aware of since I was 10; and you, in your mid-20s – but had it all the way back to the same age as I was, pretty much.

And it is an unrelenting thing that you just constantly have to live with. It makes your ability to sort of be functional, to be productive, very different than maybe, you know, your average person who maybe hasn't struggled with these things.

And again, part of the thing of the book was to sort of try and show that, right?

GP: Yeah.

JH: Try and show that. I don't end the book where I'm suddenly cured of mental illness; and now, I can go on the great trip around the world that I've always wanted to do or whatever; like it's none of that BS.

It's like – 'No, it's still here... I'm going to go to Vietnam now, all right.' But I do get to a place where I am managing it to a certain extent using all sorts of different things; meditation, yoga, nature time, walks, exercise, medication, lots of medication.

You know, all these different things that I do and most of them healthy – and sometimes maybe I drink a little too much unhealthy, you know. But again, we're all just trying to survive.

And so, I think that's sort of more of an honest story about living with mental illness than sort of the, as you said, the Hollywoodization of it – of that it can be fixed, or that it ends in a nice way or it can be tied with a bow.

That's our desire again, to tell stories that make sense. And mental illness is not something that really has ever made sense, but it's something that those of us who have it have to live with and hope that we can still live, again, as full or rich of lives as we can depending on the severity.

GP: Yeah. Well, here's two more books like this that depict mental health and mental illness in real ways. Like as writers, I think that's what we need to do is tell the truth and not sugarcoat it – or like you said, Hollywoodized it.

JH: Yeah.

GP: So, yeah, cheers to that. That's actually a great note for us to start winding down. But before we go, I'm sure that folks out there are probably curious to learn more about you. So, where can they go to find out more about your book and your other writings?

JH: Sure. So, I have a website, jeremyhance.com – that's H-A-N-C-E. And you know, you find out more about the book, where it's available. Actually, it's cool because it's in audiobook too; and the audiobook is great. Professional voice actor did it; he did a wonderful job. And then, there's, of course, you know, the eBook version and a paperback.



And then, also a lot of my journalism stuff, you know, there are links on there and stuff. So, you can find more of that on there if you're interested in seeing some of the journalism that I do.

GP: Love it. So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

JH: So, I know that you've heard a lot of things.

[laughter]

JH: You mentioned that. So, I'm going to try and do something and say something that maybe hasn't come up yet. I would say honestly, go for a walkout in nature. One of the themes that we didn't talk as much about, which makes sense considering this is for writers, one of the themes of the book is about nature – and how emotionally and spiritually tied we are as humans to nature.

And a lot of the science is now backing that up and showing that. And in doing research for the book, I really got sort of floored by some of the research that shows like going out in nature, what it can do for your mental health, what it can do for your thinking and your processing.

You know, a lot of great writers throughout the ages, have talked about just what going for a walk every day can do, allowing your mind to process and kind of think in a less intensive, less-- You know, we're all sort of so focused on computers now and screens that just getting outside going for a walk--

I've often had some of my most creative best ideas when I'm on a walk, or I'll go for a walk and I'll come back and an hour later I'll have solved some problem in my head about how to deal with this chapter or this article.

And so, I really think that spending some time outside where you try and just let your mind focus on the beauty of our blessed world that we happen to have inherited – and going for a walk or just sitting on a bench or whatever, however you want to do it. But I really would recommend that for writers because I think it's a great way to get a spark creativity or solve problems that seem unsolvable.

GP: That is such great advice, and not one of the more common responses that we've gotten on the episodes.

JH: Good.

GP: Yeah. Thank you so much, Jeremy, for being here today. It's been an absolute pleasure speaking with you.

JH: Well, thank you so much. I'd love to be able to get into the nitty-gritty of the writing. That was really a wonderful conversation around that.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

