Interview | As he publishes his most ambitious novel on the eve of his 70th birthday, Paul Auster talks to *Lidija Haas* about parallel lives, existentialist clichés and making sense of America in the age of Trump

Countdown to chaos

It makes a strange, almost comforting kind of sense to be talking to Paul Auster on the Monday after Donald Trump has assumed the American presidency. Auster, after all, is not known for his devotion to realism, and I catch myself wondering whether his interest in sudden turns, uncanny coincidences and the porous line between everyday life and genre fiction may have prepared him a little better than the rest of us for this eventuality. His novels are full of such phenomena mainly because, he assures me, he believes that "the mechanics of reality" are far stranger than we think, that "unexpected things are happening all the time" and that we ought to "embrace that and try to understand the world as an unstable, unpredictable place, not insist that it's an exception every time we see it happen. This is how things work."

Nonetheless, Trump's rise has clearly been a shock even to him. His wife, the novelist Siri Hustvedt, and their daughter, Sophie, a singer-songwriter, had been at the Women's March in Washington DC over the weekend, and though the scale of protest across the country and abroad has been unprecedented, Auster says he is still adjusting to the possibility that American institutions that had seemed solid could simply disintegrate. "Things like the Justice Department, the Environmental Protection Agency. Education. Labour. All the things that are in place could disappear," he says. "If Trump and his cabinet do everything they are proposing to do, very quickly they can dismantle American society as we know it."

The pervasive sense of unreality also bothers him: "Trump talks about a country in utter ruin, devastation: that inaugural address sounded like we had just undergone a nuclear attack, the way he presented the landscape of the United States. Tombstones, factories, American carnage — it's just not true." He notes an irony in the Republican eagerness to see apocalypse almost everywhere except the one place where it genuinely appears to be imminent — climate change, whose systematic denial the new administration is now trying to institutionalise.

Still, entering the house in Park Slope, Brooklyn that he shares with Hustvedt feels reassuringly like stepping back a few decades. It's all wood and books and art (there's a Calder above the dining-room table). There is no computer, which, as Auster confirms, means that he drafted his vast new novel *4321* by hand, then typed it out on a typewriter "considerably older than you", and only after that asked someone to retype it into a desktop for him. Quite an undertaking, since at 1,100 pages in manuscript and nearly 900 in print, the book is several times longer than any of his other works to date.

His sentences have grown longer, too, and sometimes run on for a page at a time — absorbing baseball games and movies and marriages and political crises — unlike the sparer style of the early novels that made his name. "We know that he had once been married, had once been a father, and that both his wife and son were now dead," runs a typical line from *City of Glass* (1985), the first instalment of his philosophically playful New York Trilogy, in which writers and gumshoes are hard to tell apart.

Auster in person looks like a dashing existentialist, complete with all-black clothing and the occasional cloud of smoke (he vapes rather than smoking cigarettes). He did, after a New Jersey childhood and some time at Columbia University, spend the early 1970s in Paris with his first wife, the writer Lydia Davis, leading what sounds (in his memoir *Hand to Mouth*) like a rather romantic version of the impoverished literary life, he and Davis getting by on translations and starting a small press together. He has no patience, though, with the cliché that his work has a great following in France, claiming that he's now more widely read in Germany and Spain. "The Iranians, the Turks, the Israelis, they're reading my books too, and South Americans." The French theme has been following him around for 30 years and he takes it as an insult, a "mean-spirited attack", in one direction or another. Either "if people in other countries like me then I can't be that good . . . If they like you in France, you're Jerry Lewis"; or it's a way of branding him somehow too European, too pretentious, a way of implying that "I don't belong here and I'm an alien here". "It is irritating," he says, "because all my books have been about America."

Rangier than his previous works, *4321* also wears its metafictional playfulness a little more casually. It spins itself out of an old joke about American identity: the protagonist's grandfather, reaching Ellis Island at the turn of the century, can't recall the fake name he'd meant to use, and ends up with a very gentile one when the immigration officer misheard *vergessen* as Ferguson. The book's emotional heart, though, is in an incident Auster has written about elsewhere as the root of his obsession with chance and life's arbitrariness: the sudden death of a friend in his early teens, struck by lightning right in front of him.

In this novel, the same protagonist, Ferguson, lives four different lives, which play out in successive parallel segments (except that one incarnation doesn't last nearly as long as the others). "Different lives" is a misleading way to put it, because we don't follow any of them past early adulthood, and because the variations in their circumstances only go so far: all are somewhat precocious (far more so, Auster claims, than he ever was himself) and progressive in their politics (though not all equally engaged), all manage to avoid the draft, and all become writers of one sort or another — a journalist, a memoirist, a novelist. It's been said that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the death of capitalism; to read *4321* is to wonder whether Auster finds it easier to imagine dying young than not becoming a writer.

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that writing and dying have always, for Auster, been intimately connected. He tells me he feels that he's spent his whole life getting to the point where he would be able to write this book, that it represents the closing of a circle that opened with *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), the memoir he started at 31 just weeks after the unexpected death of his father. Creatively speaking, that book paved the way for his career as a novelist (after churning out something like a thousand pages of "aborted" fiction early on, he had spent most of his twenties writing poetry, essays and translations) and contained many of the central questions that would animate his work over the decades that followed.

In the memoir, he noted his surprise at his own immediate reaction to the death of his father, who in life had struck him as "a block of impenetrable space in the form of a man": not tears or a paralysis of grief, but a strong urge to write about him, a horror "that my father had left no traces". Beginning *4321* so many years later at 66, Auster told me, he "hit that eerie moment when I was suddenly older than my father had ever been. For about a year, a year and a half I kept thinking I was going to die any minute. Because it seemed crazy to be older than my father." Fearing that, going at his usual pace, he might die before finishing the book, he began to turn down all invitations to travel or read and stayed "in the bunker mostly seven days a week, minimum six days a week". He managed to complete it in just three years, "which for me is astonishingly fast".

Nowadays, he says, writing is "all in my body, it's all instinctive", so that he was able to improvise much of the book from one day to the next, and the long sentences feel kinetic rather than clotted. He describes feeling increasingly free on the page, perhaps because, as he reminds me, he's been writing for 50 years now (he will be 70 next month). He stresses that *4321* is not autobiographical, but it does read as a somewhat mythical form of *Künstlerroman*. As he puts it, "I use the geography of my life and I use the chronology also," delving into the childhood and adolescence that he'd rediscovered as a "rich territory" in two recent memoirs, so that the reader spends a good deal of time in that late-1960s period to which Auster dates his birth as a writer.

His oeuvre is more diverse than it's often portrayed — when I arrive, he has been looking over a new screenplay adapted from one of his wilder experiments, the dog's-eye-view novel *Timbuktu* (1999) — but nonetheless the same preoccupations tend to recur. There is a concern with choice, destiny, control, responsibility, one that seems inextricable from the question of writing itself and what its relation to action might be. It's not only that you are never allowed to forget that what you are reading is being written — perhaps by one of the characters you are reading about — but that the connection between doing things and writing about them is permanently fraught. One of the more literal examples is *Leviathan* (1992), which envisages a writer finding far more dramatic and even violent ways to comment on and participate in civic life. Perhaps this is a case in which a strong work ethic forces a deeper consideration of the ethics of the work itself. These questions may inevitably arise for someone who has spent so many years at a desk. (A New Yorker piece about Lydia Davis described how, while she had to continually coax and trick herself back to work, he would keep writing steadily all day long.)

> 'These fights about the Confederate flag today, in the 21st century, are shocking to me. There's been no repentance'

The Ferguson in *4321* who becomes a journalist considers the political dimension of such questions quite explicitly. He is in love with Amy Schneiderman, whose politics are far more radical than the mostly left-liberal centrism he and the other Fergusons seem temperamentally suited for. Observing events at Columbia University and further afield in the charged atmosphere of the Vietnam war and the civil rights movement, he muses that "to be a journalist meant you could never be the person who tossed the brick through the window that started the revolution. You could watch the man toss the brick, you could explain to others what significance the brick had in starting the revolution . . ." For novelists, these tensions, whether fictional or not, are of course more complicated, but they do exist.

Although Auster began this novel "before Trump was even a blip on the radar," he found himself thinking, "as the campaign started and I'm grinding away at the novel, so many things are the same now as they were then. The parallels seem uncanny, really." For one thing, the country is once again "absolutely split in two". For another, race remains a central faultline — only a few years ago the Supreme Court struck down a crucial part of the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act. Auster sees Trump's victory as a resurgence of an old crisis of the American soul. In his view, America has always been divided between "people who believe that we live in a society together and we're responsible for one another, and those of us who believe that America is here to give everyone individual freedom and not feel compelled to have a social conscience".

If the instability of identity and the tension between choice and destiny in individual lives have long preoccupied him, the same is true in the case of America itself. "Founded on an extraordinary idealism, the first country in the world to invent itself", the US is also "built on two crimes: the genocide against the Indians, and slavery". He points out that "the Germans, after World War II, examined themselves and have atoned, really repented for what they turned into in the thirties and the horrors they committed. But I don't think America has ever examined itself closely enough. I mean, these fights about the Confederate flag today, in the 21st century, are shocking to me. There's been no repentance."

In the days after we spoke, it was reported that six US journalists were facing felony charges over their coverage of the protests against Trump's inauguration. Auster acquired more fans in Turkey a few years ago when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly attacked him for telling a local newspaper he wouldn't visit a country that jails so many of its writers. Over the past 50 years or so, American writers haven't had to worry about such pressures at home, but that may be about to change.

Paul Auster will be speaking at an FT Weekend Oxford Literary Festival event in the Sheldonian Theatre on Wednesday March 8 (oxfordliteraryfestival.org)

From above: Paul Auster photographed at home in New York by Martine Fougeron; a copy of '4321' on his desk

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Sun, sea and modernity

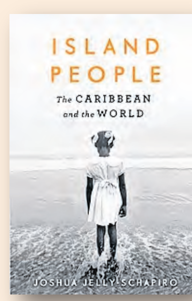
A wide-ranging Caribbean travelogue paints a picture of a region ahead of its time. By Ian Thomson

Back in the 1960s, Fidel Castro's bearded, Old Testament head appeared in student bedsits more dependably than rising damp. Yet his 1959 *revolución* was not in essence socialist but nationalist in origin. It was only after Cuban exiles attempted their disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 that Castro opportunistically aligned himself with Nikita Khrushchev's Soviet Union.

The late Castro's nationalism was an ethnically inclusive sort, a consequence less of socialist orthodoxy than of Cuba's distinctively Caribbean history. By the 19th century the island had become the greatest slave-importing colony in the history of the Spanish empire; today it remains typically West Indian in its collision of European and African cultures.

Island People, Joshua Jelly-Schapiro's meandering but often vivid account of the Caribbean and its multi-shaded community of nationalities and cultures, champions the underrated "modernity" of the region. Jamaica's intermingling of Asian, white and African bloods made it in many ways a more "modern" society than late 1950s and 1960s Britain, where calls for racial purity often puzzled Caribbean newcomers.

Jelly-Schapiro, a New York-based academic and journalist, sets out to prosecute his "modernity" thesis in a series of journeys undertaken across Jamaica, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola (the Greater Antilles) in Part I and, in Part II, Barbados, Grenada, Antigua, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Trinidad (the Lesser Antilles). The result is a gallimaufry of history and colour supplement-style reportage that does not always quite cohere.



Island People: The Caribbean and the World
by Joshua Jelly-Schapiro
Canongate £22/ Knopf $28.95
464 pages

Apart from the accident of their having been under British rule, Jamaicans, Trinidadians and Bajans actually have little in common other than a history of slavery. Superimpose a map of Europe on the West Indies: Jamaica would be Edinburgh, Trinidad would be north Africa, Barbados would be Italy. That is how far apart the islands are geographically and, by extension, culturally. How to find a thread ("modernity" turns out to be a slightly flimsy one) that might adequately unify them?

Barbados, with its golf clubs, Anglican churches and statues of Lord Nelson, is disappointingly suburban and "Little England"-like for Jelly-Schapiro. Perhaps due to his American birth, he does not care to dwell much on the history of British colonialism in the West Indies; for good or ill, however, British culture remains a significant part of what it means to be Bajan today.

The history and mythology of Jamaica is fabulously revealed in its music, from trance-inducing reggae to DJ-based dancehall to old-time gospel and mento (a type of calypso). The first of three long chapters on the island, titled "Branding", discusses the sainted figure of Bob Marley. A kind of political correctness cautions that one should not be too unkind to Marley, who died of cancer in 1981, aged 36. Yet much of his music (except for the early Lee "Scratch" Perry productions) sounds slightly vapid to my ears. Jelly-Schapiro evidently does not think so. For many middle-class Americans, Bob Marley *is* reggae.

Kingston, the Jamaican capital, is mostly explored here by car. Although the essence of Kingston — the place where the noisy, violent and frequently humorous quality of the city's life unfolds — is the public bus, the attraction of the car is self-evident. A white man seen on a Jamaican bus has either lost his mind or place in society; like the "walk-foot buckra" (white man) who had no horse in the days of slavery, he is looked upon as a misfit or loser. In lively pages, Jelly-Schapiro reflects on his place in postcolonial Jamaica as a white tourist (or, as he solemnly puts it, one "without brown skin").

If the author is sometimes given to portentous jargon ("telos", "hegemon", "the epiphenomenon of poverty"), he is also happily wide-ranging in his enthusiasms. He discusses the influence on salsa music of self-conscious "badman" Puerto Rican singer Héctor Lavoe, celebrates the Ellingtonian dance jazz of Cuban bandleader Benny Moré, and appraises the work of both the Trinidad historian and cricket enthusiast CLR James ("my first big intellectual crush") and Martinique-born anti-colonialist Frantz Fanon. The result is a pleasingly broad study of the Caribbean and its vital, indecipherable blend of peoples.

Ian Thomson is the author of 'The Dead Yard: Tales of Modern Jamaica' (2009)