



Photo by Kevin Powell

New Possibilities #2: A Monthly(ish) Newsletter by J.R. Barner

Hello, friends! By the time this lands in your inbox, I will be deeply ensconced in one of the fine boroughs of New York City, celebrating the end of what kind of got accidentally named the ‘This Is (Not) A Book Tour.’ It was a wonderful experience, not least for meeting people, new friends and old ones alike, who read *Little Eulogies* and support my writing. That made all of the planes, trains, and automobiles worth it!

Now that the tour is done (for now), it’s back to the grindstone working on the Shiny New Thing That I’m Not Ready to Talk About, or the “SNT,” for short. The SNT is still in its infancy and I’m looking ahead to 2024 as a quieter year so that I have the time and space to polish up the SNT, but also do some things I didn’t have the resources, wherewithal, or stamina to get over the finish line in 2023. That does NOT mean, dear reader, that I will forget about you or that these monthly missives will slow to a droll crawl, no! Just the opposite. This newsletter will be the front-row seat to all the things and you might get a sneak peak (or two, or three) of the SNT along the way!

So why the newsletter lean in? Glad you asked.

The Final Countdown, or Asking the (Dreaded) Social Media Question, Part 2



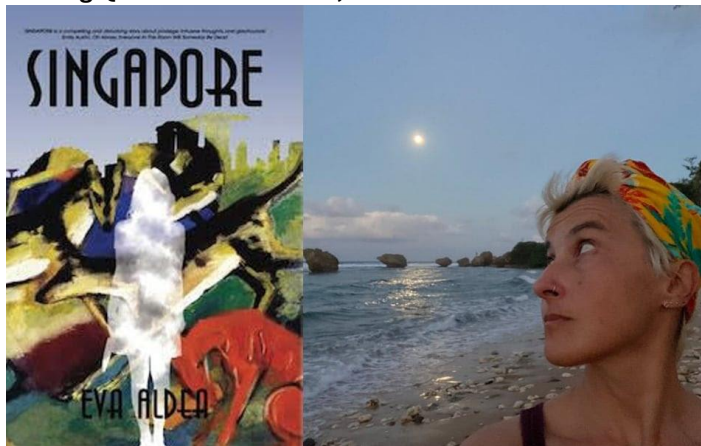
So in the month between the first newsletter and this one, I received a number of responses about social media use. They intrigued me enough to start reading more about the process of backing away from social media, so I checked out Jaron Lanier's book and [Tatum Hunter's more recent profile in The Washington Post](#). I was surprised that, ultimately, it was the reader responses that dovetailed more with my own feelings about social media, than the more well-researched, data-driven tech world responses. For example, one reader, who is an editor and a publicist, was pretty frank about it. "If I don't follow and post regularly on social media," she wrote, "then I will eventually lose my job because I won't be doing it as well." Another writer wrote in to say that, despite the fact that he was experiencing increased anxiety and depression as a result of spending a lot of time on social media, he planned to continue because "that's where people know me."

Many respondents said they have chosen one platform and [abandoned some \(or all\) of their others](#). Others have equated their social media presence to expanded business opportunities and book sales. There were comments about toxic stress, body image, [changes in trends and platforms](#), and the future of the community of writers that once existed to support and promote one another. And that community is not just some utopia - It is (and was) real and I benefitted from it.

But something's got to change.

So I'm calling the clock on my research. In 2024, my social media identity will be different, but I don't yet know what that difference is going to be. I think having a timetable, or countdown, in the background will help keep me grounded and thinking concretely about what I want to use social media for, and what I want to get from it. And, I'm inviting you to join this conversation. Feel free to drop me a line at jrbarner@gmail.com and tell me your thoughts on social media, building community, and using technology. I have gotten so much from the conversations I've had already and feel so much better about the choices I'm making, knowing that I'm not alone in making them. So thank you and let's keep talking!

Burning Questions: Eva Aldea, in Conversation



Eva Aldea, author of *Singapore*

New feature alert: Burning Questions is when I ask a writer I admire three questions and they, if they choose, ask me three questions back. Because that's only fair.

Eva Aldea, born in Krakow and raised in Stockholm, is a writer, lecturer, and editor living in Greenwich, London, UK. She is also, to my mind, one of the most compelling and original fiction writers working today. Her debut novel, *Singapore* (Holland House), is a showstopper and my favorite book of 2023. She is repped by [David Godwin Associates](#) and can be found & followed on Instagram at [@to_write_like_a_dog](#) and subscribed to via her amazing Substack, [Leaving Stockholm](#)

J.R.: What is your typical writing environment like? Quiet or noisy? Organized or disorganized?

EVA: I am very lucky to have a great study at home. It houses most of my books, has a beautiful wooden curved desk that allows me to write with my legs propped up in a position that would give my osteopath apoplexy, and an old couch – the latter is very important: it is where my dog works hard at being my writing companion. It is also where I take my naps – my brain is a buzzing hive of fairly random activity and gets overheated when I focus on something, and a nap works as a kind of turn-it-off and on-again mechanism – calming some of the static, and clearing space for an afternoon activity – especially if it is something different than writing (say reading or university work). I tend to do writing first thing in the morning for a few hours – which is my max – and then go on to other things.

My study is quiet, I can't write with music on. My desk is messy AF. There's a cycle in which it gets progressively messier until I can't stand it anymore and blitz it clean, only to start cluttering it up again. As a snapshot, this is what's on it now (sort of mid-cycle, messy but workable): stacks of books and the Pile of Doom (unopened post), a few half-used notebooks, a couple of empty coffee cups, sweets, tissues, air pods, nail varnish that I don't use, a lipstick (why?), a cloth to clean my glasses and screens, empty and half-empty blister packs of headache pills, hand cream, a roll of kitchen paper (I spill a lot), measuring tape, dog treats – and of course a desktop computer, and a laptop, an unused laptop stand, and finally bits of paper with math equations on (not my doing, my husband is a maths teacher). There's a lack of pencils. I use pencils to underline when I read and they have a tendency to disappear.

For a long time, I beat myself up about being so messy, but now I accept that this is part of how my brain works. It's either chaos or hyperfocus in there, and when the latter hits I am not going to let anything (such as putting things in their right place) get in the way of writing. An orderly desk may be a sign of an orderly mind, but I don't have one of those and that's why I'm the writer I am.

J.R.: You incorporate your real life and experiences into a lot of your writing, how does inspiration find you when writing biographically?

EVA: A hundred percent. For years I couldn't write creatively because I thought I needed to write pure fiction, inventing great stories, like the stuff I'd read on my English degree. Then I let go

of that and the block lifted as I allowed myself to write from real life – that doesn't mean that the result was all real, but I need that starting point. But I also realized that a lot of the writers that are lauded for their great fiction are just writing from their life – it's just that we don't know their life – I think real life is a basic building block of all writing – writers just transform it to a lesser or greater degree.

When I start a project the writing is to a large extent automatic. I have a vague idea, but then I just sit and write every day for a period (I set myself a minimum of 500/day). As I do a theme or story emerges, which I let myself be guided by. Eventually, I arrive at an idea of a finished thing, then I start to work on the structure and filling gaps and eventually editing.

During that period of almost free writing, I tend to write quite autobiographically, but not always in the sense of memoir – rather I write my thoughts and experiences, which can be internal and imagined experiences. Sometimes those become externalized in stories about other characters, sometimes they serve as a jumping-off point for something entirely fictional.

My first “novel” *Singapore* is very much based on my own experiences as an expat wife in Singapore, to the extent that friends – especially those who visited me during that time – find it a little unsettling to read! I deliberately played with where the boundary between fact and fiction lies in the book, not in the least because the narrator is not entirely reliable, so I hope that readers who don't know me also get a sense of being unsettled by that.

The current book I am working on is officially partly autobiographical, but again I very much mess with the idea of fact and fiction. It's a book that takes my family's migrant past and uses it to highlight the unreliability of memory, and the way stories create their own reality – whether it is a family's past or the history of a nation.

J.R.: What do you like to do when you're not writing?

EVA: This is a really interesting question to me at the moment. I used to do a lot of other things – because I thought I should, like exercise and looking after the house and garden, but then I realized that it was taking energy and time away from what I wanted to do which is write, and read, so now I do a lot of that. It's supposed to be detrimental to one's health not to take enough time off, but I don't know, I'm pretty happy with reading and writing most of the time

This is why the dog plays a large part in my day-to-day activities – he gives me structure gets me out of the house, and provides my main form of physical exercise – I probably walk an average of two-three hours a day. Then there are the naps. But both the walks and the naps are integral to the writing. It's hard to separate out “leisure” time in our line of business. Food and wine feature heavily: a nice dinner is probably the time I relax the most.

Recently I have spent more time going to readings and other literary events, usually organised by small publishers or other writers. Having a novel out and seeing the competitive grind of

mainstream publishing, I am more and more convinced that communities of writers are the answer – a way to support each other and enjoy the work in a setting where selling copies or getting reviews is not the primary goal (although it does contribute to it).

EVA: I know you've recently been doing a (not) book tour. Can you tell me a bit more about how that came about, and how you have found that experience?

J.R.: Even before *Little Eulogies* was released, I made a plan to set aside some of the profits to fund a smallish book tour. So small that I frequently joked that it wasn't much of a book tour at all, kind of like how Public Image, Ltd.'s 1983 single was known as both "Love Song" and "This Is Not a Love Song." I imagined it as Schrödinger's book tour – both alive and dead, real and unreal, significant and insignificant. It had to be fast and cheap because I was funding it, so I set out to make every moment of it crackle with energy and life. As modest as it was, it enabled me to go out beyond my comfort zone and talk about this book with strangers. And, with help from friends near and far, it brought me to independent bookstores, open mic nights in bars and coffeehouses, public libraries, and writer's salons in twelve cities across the United States. I was lucky enough to share the stage with poets and friends that I admire and respect and talk about what writing means to people who buy and read the books, come to the shows, post about them on their socials, get autographs, buy the drinks, put gas money in the hat when it gets passed around—those that have the real, lived, visceral experience of creating, supporting, and loving art. I would not trade that experience for anything in the world. Even more valuable, I now know people and places that are waiting for us out there, little stops on the road that welcome writers and make us feel at home. That sort of belonging is priceless, in my opinion.

EVA: In light of the tour and the feedback you've had on social media, what are your thoughts on trying to build a writer's community? Most of the lovely events and people I have met are through social media, but it is the physical iterations of those communities that feel the most valuable to me – partly because it feels like these connections are more durable than online-only ones

J.R.: I couldn't agree more! I am thankful to have an in-person community in my town (Athens Word of Mouth) and to have had the communities that were flourishing online, through the former Twitter and Tumblr, when I first started sharing and publishing my work. I was exclusively online with my writing for over two years and to see that community fragment and dissipate due to changes in the platform, is, frankly, painful. It is truly a loss I feel every single day. I admit that the fragility or tenuousness of online platforms is what led me to seek out Athens Word of Mouth and I am so glad I did! It is a collective of some of the most talented, open, genuine, and thoughtful artists and I relish those monthly events. It is an incubator for creativity and a much-needed security blanket, at times. That said, I think it's important to keep reaching out, keep putting out the welcome mat, and extend the

comradely hand as much as possible. I try to use technology to that end, because I'm interested in engaging with writing and writers across the globe, and technology helps with that, but I'm no longer satisfied with that alone and I'm always working toward putting together initiatives that bring people physically together to explore the creative act. There's a magic that happens there, and I want to honor that as much as possible.

EVA: What's your view on the work-life balance when you're a writer? It seems to me that writing is BOTH if you are a creative writer anyway. What do you do if you're not writing and how does it affect your writing?

J.R.: I agree that my writing is an inseparable part of my life and has been such, for better and worse if I'm honest since I was eight years old. I've made accommodations for it, adjusted for it, and moved the furniture around to keep it comfortable. I've reassured it, comforted it, consoled it, made excuses for it, put it ahead of relationships, told myself lies to protect myself from it, and taken it for granted more times than I feel comfortable enumerating. I think being a writer pointed me toward a career in academia because reading and writing are 90% of what I do for a paycheck, which then allows me to poach some of that 90% to write for myself and no one is the wiser. My teaching is a constant laboratory for ideas that come in and out of my writing and most of my students who know that I am also a creative writer are willing to help me break things down, or at least humor me while I think aloud in the classroom. The one thing I do to get out of my head and away from the page is hit things hard. Being a musician, specifically a drummer, has saved me a fortune in therapy over the years (although it hasn't completely exempted me from it). Drumming taught me about rhythm and the complexities of meter, which are handy things for someone writing heady narrative poetry to know about, so I'm thankful for my musical education. As I've gotten older, I've appreciated a slower pace in life and the attention I've paid to being a husband and a father, because I've noticed it's helped me to observe more, which again feeds my writing in new ways. But, speaking honestly, and I wonder if all writers feel this way, I have the furnace going at all hours, and everything has the potential to be fuel—know what I mean?

Special thanks to Eva for doing this!

What the Turntable Said to the Bedside Table...

Here's what I've been reading and listening to this month.



Antony Szmieriek *Seasoning EP* (LAB Records, 2023) Let's call this a "poet done good" story. Szmieriek follows up his viral smash *Poems to Dance To* with the atmospheric lyrical banger that is "The Words to Auld Lang Syne." If you like your spoken word with a dash of hard house, this is most definitely your jam. It sure is mine. (Available [here](#)).

Richard Siken *War of the Foxes* (Copper Canyon Press, 2015). Richard Siken has a voice that gives me the shivers. That kind of starkness and vibrancy permeates everything around it in this collection: what begins as a commentary on visual art slowly unveils itself to be a meditation on life itself. Highly recommended. (Available [here](#)).

Oh, Right, the Poem...

Tonight Comes in Waves

Let's wait until the strobes fade
& let our eyes adjust for a while
Work our way through to the coat check
& get lost inside the pile.
Let's pretend we're in your bedroom
A dozen miracles pinned to your wall.
A dozen different ways to say 'I love you'
Without saying anything at all.
Try to blink in tandem with the pulses,
As the rhythm slowly fades
Tomorrow, we may wake up drowning,
But the night still comes on in waves.

Here's one for empty dancefloors at 3:00 am.

Disclaimers, etc.

You brought this on yourself. If you're having second thoughts, send the word UNSUBSCRIBE to jrbarner@gmail.com if you don't want any more. That is also the address if you want to speak about happier subjects. I'd love to hear from you! My website, jrbarner.com is brought to you by Squarespace. This newsletter is courtesy of Buttondown. Special end-of-year 'New Possibilities' in 30ish days!