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## An Interview with Joan Wickersham

In the winter of 1991, Joan Wickersham's father got up one morning, made the pot of coffee he made every morning for his wife, set a cup on her bedside table, and then retrieved a pistol he had hidden in his closet. He went to his study, sat in a comfortable chair, and shot himself. Although Mr. Wickersham had some business problems, he left no note, and had no history of mental instability.

*The Suicide Index*, a memoir about the event and the years since, is Joan's way of trying to understand what happened, and more importantly, how this tragic event fits into her world and the world at large. *The Suicide Index* was named one of the finalists for the National Book Award last year, and *Stone's Throw Magazine* is pleased to be able to interview Joan about this wonderful book.



*First I want to ask about the way this book was organized. You chose to label each chapter as if it is an actual index, with suicide as the heading, and the subject matter of each chapter as the subheading. How did that idea come to you?*

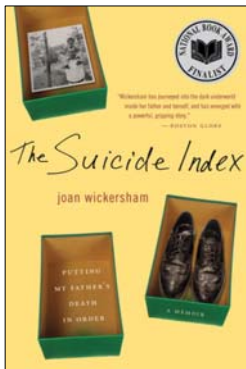
I had written about a third of the pieces that eventually made up the book, but I was having a lot of trouble putting them in order. The agent I'd been corresponding with (Gail Hochman, who later took on the book and sold it) said she thought the book needed an arc, an emotional progression; but I didn't feel there was a natural chronology either to the events or to my understanding of them. There was a chapter called "Numbness: An index," and one night I suddenly wondered how the whole book might work as an index. It was an intuitive choice, but I think it worked because an index is kind of numb: an almost ridiculously formal, ironic way to impose a structure on events that can't be put in order any other way.

*The best part about this book is the raw honesty you display regarding every single aspect of this story. The effect this tragedy had on everyone around you was displayed so honestly and clearly. How difficult was it to reveal so much of other peoples' experience? Did you get any negative reaction from the other members of your family?*

I worried a lot about this. A family memoir is inherently problematic. Memories are individual and subjective, but families are all tangled up together—you can't write about your own experience without writing about other people. I didn't want to hurt people, but I didn't think there was much point in writing this story if I didn't do it honestly. And suicide is messy. Everyone is asking "Why?" and coming up with answers; no one quite agrees, everyone has a version, and that's part of what I wrote about. Luckily people have reacted very well. I do have one close relative who decided not to read the book, and I understand why—it's too painful to go back and read someone else's take on the experience.

*Did you consider novelizing this story?*

I tried it, and it didn't work. It felt too far removed and smoothed-out.



*Humor played a huge role in your family's way of getting through this tragedy. There were some very funny parts in this book, especially the scene where you and your mother are out to lunch on Valentine's Day. How much do you think your family's humor helped cope with this tragedy?*

I think it helped a lot, and that there's often a strain of dark comedy that runs through any family tragedy. When a terrible thing happens, it's so disorienting. You think: "So who are we, now?" The humor reminds you, "Oh, yeah: We're still us."

*How much do you think writing this book helped you heal from the experience?*

Hugely. It was a way to get all the events and feelings and paradoxes together in one place, to reflect the full complexity and mess of the experience.

*What made you decide to tell this story in other than chronological order? What were you trying to achieve with that?*

As I said earlier, it resisted chronology. So the idea of chronology pissed me off—it felt like an attempt to pretend the experience was neater than it was. I needed to find a way to write about it that encompassed the circular, frustrating, unresolved nature of the story. Wrestling with the story is the story.

*What were some of the final conclusions you drew from this experience, both of losing your father this way and of writing about it?*

That suicide is full of paradoxes. How could my father have loved me, and yet done this? How could he have been so tolerant of other people and so secretly intolerant of himself? Why, when I learned of his death, did I think, "That's impossible" and at the same time "Of course"? In writing the book I batted all these contradictory truths around, and got to the point where I could hold all of them in my head at once. I think this is a peculiar truth about suicide: The facts do contradict each other, and they are all true.

*One of the more highly regarded books about grief written in recent years was *The Year of Magical Thinking*, by Joan Didion. One of my favorite things about that book was that it addressed the notion that people in America have very little idea about how to grieve. They expect something to help them fix the problem, or they expect to find a way to 'move past' things. That was something I also loved about this book. You didn't offer any solutions or cures for getting through this stuff. You seemed to be more interested in recording how the process happens organically. Does that seem accurate to you, and how did you avoid falling into that trap of feeling like you needed to 'move past' this?*

Yes, I think we have a very simplistic idea of grief. We have a myth that it's a neat, orderly process. Maybe that makes grief a less scary thing to contemplate in the abstract—but it doesn't help much when you're actually going through it. It just makes you feel like you must be doing it wrong. And suicide is particularly murky and confusing, because it can take away not only a

person, but your sense of having known that person. My mother died this fall, and I miss her hugely but I know who it is I'm missing. My father's death colored all the memories I had of him. I couldn't separate his absence from the action that brought it about. It took a really long time, and a lot of writing, before I started to feel that I knew him again—and it meant integrating pieces of him that were really painful and difficult to accept.

*One of my favorite passages was when you switched to second person when you talk about being numb. I always tell my writing students that it's better not to switch point of view, but that if you can make it work, then there are no rules. This really worked, I thought, because it gave that section an extra distance from your narrative. Was that your intent, or what made you decide to approach that section that way?*

This book took about ten years to write, and I experimented with a lot of things in the process—different genres, structures, points of view. Some things worked and others didn't. You have to be free to take risks, but then be rigorous about admitting when something doesn't work, and look for another way. I agree with you that the rules are helpful, and so is breaking them sometimes.

*You also shared one of the more difficult moments of the process in that section, when your husband was the first to admit that he hated your father for what his decision had put your family through. As difficult as that must have been for him, it seemed to be a turning point, as it wasn't too long after this that you were able to reach a point where you found yourself saying you were happy for the first time in many years. Your genuine affection for your father (and your husband's) was very apparent throughout this book. Did that make it more difficult to get in touch with the anger that anyone would feel when they go through something like this?*

Yes, my love for my father made it really hard to feel angry at him. After he killed himself, a lot of people were furious, very critical of him. I couldn't bear to see him as a pariah—how could I get angry at someone who'd already dealt himself the worst possible punishment? I could see intellectually that his action had hurt people, including me; but I felt very protective of him. Since the book was published, I've gotten letters from other people who've had suicide in their families, saying they felt the same way.

*How is this event, almost twenty years later, still part of who you are as a person?*

I think there's always a fear that the ground beneath my feet may not be as solid as it seems—that some big thing could give way without warning. At the same time, when I was younger I really didn't get that bad things could happen. I think that's a kind of innocence that we all lose as we get older—something big and painful happens to everyone eventually—and in some ways it's a relief to lose it. Once you get that anything can happen, you really appreciate the good things.

*How thrilling was it to find out you were a finalist for the National Book Award?*

It was incredible. When I got the call, I babbled on the phone and put my foot in my mouth all over the place, because I was so shocked. What I really hope is that it brings the book to a wider audience—both people who have been through this experience, and people who just care about reading and writing.