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Arts & Humanities

The Art of the Book Deal

How Columbia Journalism School professor Samuel G. Freedman has helped more than a hundred students get coveted book contracts.

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|
Winter 2024-25
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Casey Parks ’18JRN spent more than twenty years chasing an idea. After coming out as gay to her homophobic family in rural Louisiana, she learned that her grandmother had grown up across the street from, in her grandmother’s words, “a woman who lived like a man” — something unheard of in the Bible Belt of the 1950s.

Parks, a reporter for *The Oregonian*, knew there was a story there, so she started taking trips back to Louisiana to research the life of this enigmatic person. But she didn’t know what form the story would take. At first, she imagined it as a podcast, then as a documentary film. It never occurred to her that it might be a book.

“I worked at newspapers, which felt like a totally different kind of writing,” she says. “And the entire system seemed daunting to me. How do you get an agent? How do you sell an idea?”

But when Parks enrolled in a master’s program at Columbia Journalism School, a mentor advised her to apply to Sam Freedman’s six-credit book-writing seminar. Four years later, Parks’s first book, *Diary of a Misfit*, was on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review.*

When asked about the part he played in Parks’s success, Freedman demurs, calling her one of the most naturally talented writers he has ever taught. But she is not an anomaly. In thirty-three of the thirty-four seminars he has taught since 1991, at

least one student — and often several — has gotten a book deal, for a total of 112 contracts. Alumni of the class have gone on to critical and commercial success, winning major prizes and hitting bestseller lists.

At the same time, Freedman has enjoyed his own literary accolades. A former *New York Times* columnist, he is the author of ten books on topics ranging from college football to the state of modern American Jewry to the rise of a popular Black church in Brooklyn. He was a finalist at the 1990 National Book Awards for his first book, *Small Victories*, which followed an extraordinary teacher through a year at a troubled inner-city school. In 1997, *The Inheritance: How Three Families and America Moved from Roosevelt to Reagan and Beyond*, a look at the American political landscape over the course of the twentieth century, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. His most recent book, *Into the Bright Sunshine*, published in 2023, details Hubert Humphrey's impact on the civil-rights movement.

What's the secret to Freedman's success? His students say it's his perfect combination of tough love and unwavering support. "He's very hard on his students, but you quickly come to realize it's only because he cares so much," says Josie Cox '22BUS, the author of *Women Money Power*, who took the class during her year as a Knight-Bagehot Fellow in business journalism. "He'll push you to your limits but then will be your cheerleader forever."

Freedman says that his use of inspiration combined with intimidation stems from his own relationship with influential teachers and editors. "They had very high standards, but once you proved yourself, you knew that they were always with you," he says. "That mix is what pushes me to do my best writing."

Freedman works with students tirelessly on their ideas. He teaches the fundamentals of great storytelling, suggests structural changes, and polishes prose, shaming them out of their clichés, their mixed metaphors, and their overwriting. He demystifies the publishing process and shares his connections with industry professionals. Above all, he makes it clear that there's no magic wand. "The ethos of the class is struggle, perseverance, and improvement," he says. "Try, fail, try again."

That work ethic has been with Freedman since the fourth grade, when he first decided to pursue a career in journalism. "I worked on my junior high school newspaper, my high school newspaper, and then my college newspaper. In the

summers, I did internships. There was always a clear next step."

After earning his BA from the University of Wisconsin, where he studied history and journalism, Freedman took a job at *The Courier-News*, a local paper in Bridgewater, New Jersey, and then moved to the now defunct *Suburban Trib*, a subsidiary of the *Chicago Tribune*. His beat was education — he covered nearly fifty school districts — which proved to be invaluable preparation for his role as a teacher.

But perhaps the greatest gift of that second job was Cissi Falligant, a colleague who shared Freedman's literary sensibility. "We called her Max, after the legendary book editor Maxwell Perkins," Freedman says. Falligant nudged Freedman toward his next job, at *The New York Times*, where he worked as a staff reporter from 1981 to 1987. For part of that time, as a culture reporter, he covered theater and wrote feature stories about actors and playwrights.

"I saw exactly one hundred plays during that time period. Some of the real greats — Marsha Norman, Sam Shepard, August Wilson, Terrence McNally," Freedman says. "It gave me such a course in narrative and in character development."

Falligant made another recommendation that would have a profound impact on Freedman's career: she told him to read *The Power Broker*, the epic 1,286-page biography of urban developer Robert Moses by Robert Caro '68JRN. "I was reading a lot of fiction at that time," says Freedman, "but Caro opened my eyes to the modern narrative-nonfiction tradition."

In 1986, a young English teacher named Jessica Siegel '92JRN wrote a letter to Freedman, inviting him to speak to her journalism students at Seward Park High School, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The city said the school, which served a population of almost entirely Black, Latino, and Asian-American students, was "failing," but Freedman soon discovered that the situation at Seward Park was far more complicated than that.

Freedman left his job and embedded in the school for the 1987–88 academic year, following Siegel, whom he calls "an extraordinary educator," through near-insurmountable challenges and hard-fought triumphs. The result was the book *Small Victories*. Though it was Freedman's first foray into long-form narrative nonfiction, he says that his years writing for the *Times* helped prepare him for the intensive research necessary to write a book. "You can't just interview someone and write down what they say and call it a story," Freedman says. "You need to find out why

something happened, how something happened, the historical context for it. Of course, in a book there's a lot more room for that."

In the spring of 1990, Freedman was hired as an adjunct professor at Columbia Journalism School, teaching cultural-affairs reporting and community reporting. But fresh off his own experience in book publishing, he was also interested in working with students on long-form narrative development. The following spring, he introduced a three-credit elective on the subject called "Reading, Thinking, and Writing."



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One student, Leah Hager Cohen '91JRN, stood out. Cohen was writing her master's thesis about New York's Lexington School for the Deaf, one of the nation's oldest schools for the hearing-impaired. Cohen, who is not deaf, grew up on the Lexington campus, where her father served as superintendent, and she was interested in exploring the history of the school and the complex issues facing the deaf community.

"I had no intention of writing a book. I took the class because Sam is an extraordinary teacher and mentor and role model, and I wanted the opportunity to learn more from him," Cohen says. "But a few weeks before graduation, he asked if

he could share some of my work with his agent. It was Sam's generosity that changed the entire trajectory of my career."

Shortly after the class ended, she had a book contract — *Train Go Sorry* was published in 1992 — and Freedman realized that his seminar had legs. He proposed teaching it as a full six-credit course specifically devoted to book development.

From the start, the class has been application-only, and students need to have a source-based narrative-nonfiction book idea (no fiction or straight memoir) to apply. Each year, hundreds of students compete for sixteen spots. "I admit people only on the basis of the idea," he says. "I don't take recommendations from professors. I don't look at grades. It all comes down to the idea."

If Freedman likes the idea, he'll e-mail the student a series of follow-up questions: Why should this be a book and not a magazine article? Will it still be relevant in five years? How does it complement books already published on the subject? What kind of access do you have to sources?

Freedman rarely accepts a pitch on the first try, and students are often rejected several times, which can be part of the learning experience. "It forced me to figure out how to sell it to him," says Parks, who was initially rejected. Ultimately, the application process helped her with a defining feature of the book — weaving her own personal story into the narrative.

"I really didn't want to, and we kind of had a tussle about it," she says. "But he pushed me to try, and ultimately, of course, it made the book what it is."

Similarly, Cox applied to the class thinking that she wanted to write a sweeping history of women in the workplace. Freedman convinced her to draw out the stories of some of the key figures she was researching, to make the narrative more character-driven. It changed the way she approached the book.

"He's looking for resilience, determination, and ambition," Cox says. "If you can take his feedback and prove that you have those three things, he's likely to take a chance on you."

A hallmark of Freedman's course is the length of the classes. The seminar meets once a week, for seven hours. When people ask him about this, Freedman likes to quote a story about the jazz musicians Miles Davis and John Coltrane. While Davis

was famous for his efficiency, Coltrane was known for his “sheets of sound,” often soloing for more than twenty minutes. “People used to ask him, Why you gotta play so long? And he’d say, That’s how long it takes to get it all in,” Freedman says.

In a typical class early in the semester, Freedman will spend an hour on a writing lesson, then introduce guest speakers, and finally workshop students’ assignments. Later, the majority of the class time is spent working on proposals and sample chapters. Students typically read six books over the course of the semester. One is always by a class alum, and one is always fiction. “I like to start the class with something overwhelming or intimidating, like Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns*,” he says. “I don’t want the students to coast after they’ve been accepted. I want everyone to be jolted back to reality.”

Freedman invites a variety of authors to speak, as well as agents and editors. Parks says that Freedman was instrumental in introducing her to her literary agent. “She has a lot of huge clients, and I don’t think she would have looked twice at me otherwise,” Parks says. “But his reputation is pretty sterling. She read my hundred-page proposal the week I sent it to her.”

While Freedman did not directly introduce Cox to her agent, she said that taking the class gave her the courage to pursue the relationship and eventually sell her book. “I had a space where I could get all of my dumb questions out of the way,” she says. “Which made me so much more confident through the entire process.”

Freedman encourages his students to stay in contact with each other after graduating, to lend support through the arduous steps of writing and publishing. He maintains a Facebook group, open to alumni from all thirty-four years of the workshop, where people can post about their book readings and reviews, ask for a couch to crash on during a research trip, and offer feedback to each other. “Honestly, it’s the only reason I’m still on Facebook,” Cox says.

For many alums, Freedman remains a guiding force. Andrea Elliott ’99JRN, a *New York Times* journalist, won the Pulitzer Prize for her book *Invisible Child*, about a teenager living in a New York City homeless shelter. But she still sends anything important that she writes to Freedman to review — just as she sent him a draft of her book, which she says he of course made better.

“He had this way of reaching past the noise of his students — all the insecurities and half-formed ideas and scattered reporting — and seeing our promise,” she says.

“And that made me work harder than ever before. He remains the most treasured editor in my life.”

This spring will mark Freedman’s last year teaching the book workshop. He plans to retire to spend more time with family and focus on his own projects. Though he doesn’t know who will take the reins, he feels optimistic about the future of the class. He says that while the publishing industry may wax and wane, the students are a constant. “The passion is unchanged, the work ethic is unchanged,” says Freedman. And even more important, “the eagerness to put something good out into the world is unchanged.”

Cohen, who has written four nonfiction books since *Train Go Sorry*, says that she is deeply moved by the legacy of the class and by the indefatigable teacher at its helm.

“The gift that he gives his students is holding us to the same tough standards that he holds himself to. It changed me as a writer and as a person,” she says. “The gift that he gives the world are all of the incredible stories that he has ushered into being. We are so much richer for it.”

Book Club

A selection of titles by Freedman’s students

Better for All the World, by Harry Bruinius ’00JRN

The Birth of Loud, by Ian S. Port ’16SOA

Black Fortunes, by Shomari Wills ’13JRN

Butts, by Heather Radke ’19SOA

A Country Called Amreeka, by Alia Malek ’06JRN

Crude Nation, by Raúl Gallegos ’10JRN, ’11SIPA

The Day the Earth Caved In, by Joan Quigley ’02JRN

The Death and Life of the Great Lakes, by Dan Egan ’12JRN

Deep Delta Justice, by Matthew Van Meter ’16SOA

Diary of a Misfit, by Casey Parks ’18JRN

Finding Mañana, by Mirta Ojito ’01JRN

Greetings from Utopia Park, by Claire Hoffman ’04JRN

How to Think Like a Woman, by Regan Penaluna ’14JRN

Kings of Their Own Ocean, by Karen Pinchin ’19JRN

The New Beats, by S. H. Fernando ’92JRN

Prescription for Pain, by Philip Eil ’11SOA

Season to Taste, by Molly Birnbaum ’08JRN

The Secret Epidemic, by Jacob Levenson ’99JRN

The Teacher Wars, by Dana Goldstein ’11JRN

Unremarried Widow, by Artis Henderson ’10JRN

Welcome to Shirley, by Kelly McMasters ’05SOA

When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone, by Gal Beckerman ’21JRN

The Whole Damn Deal, by Kathryn J. McGarr ’09JRN

Women Money Power, by Josie Cox ’22BUS

This article appears in the Winter 2024-25 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title "The Book King."*

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