

## Heidi Julavits Writer, editor, mother, Mainer

Discussed: Brooklin, New York, boatbuilding, fog, neighbors, *The Uses of Enchantment*, and getting lost.

Heidi Julavits grew up in Portland and has written three novels, *The Mineral Palace*, *The Effect of Living Backwards*, and *The Uses of Enchantment*. She also edits *The Believer*, teaches at Columbia University in Manhattan, and writes for *Esquire*, *The New York Times*, and *Men's Journal*.

During the summer, she lives and writes in Brooklin with her husband, Ben Marcus, and their two children, Delia and Solomon. This year, she finished writing her yet unnamed fourth novel. When she works in Maine, she works in a cabin on her property, just down the road from where the preeminent literary Mainers E.B. White and Katherine Sergeant White once lived and farmed. The Blue Hill Peninsula still serves as a creative haven for big-city writers, and Julavits regularly shares Sunday dinners with authors Ayelet Waldman, Michael Chabon, and Jonathan Lethem.

While the characters in her novels are sometimes unlikable, Julavits is smart, funny, and agreeable. And her slightly nervous laughter is infectious.

**Maine:** What are you working on now? The last I had read you had traveled to Budapest and were working on something about psychic self-defense.

**Heidi Julavits:** That's what I'm still working on. When I was in Budapest, I was actually researching a short story for *McSweeney's*, where all the writers were told to pick a place and write about it in 2024.

**M:** Does coming back to Brooklin help you focus?

**HJ:** I have written, I think, 130 pages in five weeks—essentially a third of my book. In New York, I build up all this creative pressure so that when I get here—because I haven't had a chance to tap into it there or to utilize it there—it's sort of a creative cascade. I just work like crazy. There are no interruptions. All those things that I cared about so deeply when I was in New York, or the things that would keep me up at night, I don't care at all.

**M:** It seems like editing *The Believer* and writing nonfiction pieces might be like a fiction-detox period for you. Also, a lot of that work seems to be about Maine.

**HJ:** I don't like to travel when I get up here. I was given a story to go to Iceland. I said, "You know, I don't want to go to Iceland." When I'm up here, I'm up here. I'm very protective of this time. Subsequently, I have been trying to fulfill my magazine quota by trolling around here, looking for local subjects. I have a piece coming out in *Men's Journal* this month about the Wooden Boat School, which is right in my town. I sat in on a beginner's class last summer. I was

sort of dumbfounded watching all these guys trying to wrap their heads around this stuff, but I only have to know enough about it to explain it in a magazine article. [Laughs.]

**M:** So you're not building a boat in your backyard?

**HJ:** No, no. [Laughs.] But up here, it's hard not to. A lot of people... We will say, "I wish we just had a dingy." And they'll say, "Well, build it."

**M:** You grew up here and you're writing about Maine. Do you think people will say, "Oh, Heidi Julavits, she's a Maine writer?"

**HJ:** I've never written about Maine in my fiction. My novels don't take place here. No short story has ever taken place here and that's on purpose. I love Maine, and I love writing about Maine, but only in the nonfiction context. I feel like my imagination works best for things that I don't know that well. Obviously, there are writers who are very geographically identified. Their fiction comes from a very specific geographic place that they're familiar with and that's what gets them going. But for me, if I can feel like a tourist in a place, that makes me write fiction about it. Who knows? Maybe some day I'll write a book about Maine.

**M:** The essay ["Maine"] that you wrote for *State By State: A Panoramic Portrait of America* describes the state of Maine as a place where people eat lobster like bologna, drink coffee brandy, and stand around in the rain with their cats. Do you get a lot of fan mail or response to that?

**HJ:** I haven't. When my husband and I are up here, we tend to not really be writers. That's what we do all day long, but we don't really go around broadcasting our writer status. We don't really talk about what we're working on. Not because we're secretive, but because it's really boring. My neighbor, for example, features prominently in my Maine essay, and I've never told him I wrote about him. Maybe he saw it, maybe he didn't. I have no idea.

**M:** Your last book used the title of Bruno Bettelheim's book [*The Uses of Enchantment*], which is about interpreting fairy tales. What stories do you tell your kids?



Julavits' writing cabin | Opposite: Hard at work





Heidi Julavits and Solomon | Home, Brooklin

**HJ:** We obviously have the whole Robert McCloskey series in our house. We also live quite near to Buck's Harbor, which is where *One Morning in Maine* takes place. Otherwise, I get to tell a lot of stories from my own Maine childhood to my kids. Lots of near-death sailing experiences, stuff like that. Or, when they get kind of crabby on some long stretch of fog, we'll imagine: "Imagine if it was just the four of us, stuck in the fog for ten days on a 30-foot boat. Now, doesn't it seem better that we're just stuck in the fog in a house for ten days?" [Laughs.] I've also been making a children's/young adult literature collection based on all the books you can find at yard sales around here—Madeleine L'Engle books and *Lost on a Mountain in Maine*. There's nothing better than that story, you know, where a little kid gets lost in the woods.

**M:** So, do you feel like you're getting lost in Maine?

**HJ:** I do. And it's a good kind of lost. The best kind of lost. +

*Edited and transcribed by Peter A. Smith*