Interview with Jay Neugeboren on his latest release,
DICKENS IN BROOKLYN: Essays on Family, Writing and Madness
Eastover Press; April 28, 2026

Where do you find inspiration for your writing? Or what intrigues you most about a story that you want to share it through your writing?
Whether I'm writing fiction or nonfiction, memory and desire are my inspiration! And it's what I do *not* know about something—i.e., why, for example, does a particular afternoon when I visited my brother in a mental hospital (out of the thousands of other afternoons) continue to haunt me—that encourages me to take on the reality that words on a page will give it. And the same with novels and stories—why does a particular image, or dream, or historical fact (i.e., Frankie King's life!) intrigue me, and how can I pierce its mystery, and make it come alive. The process—the writing and completion of a story or essay, often serves only to increase the mystery!

Do you have a favorite essay in this collection or one that is especially meaningful to you? Explain.
What I love about the title essay of the collection, "Dickens in Brooklyn," is that it takes a particular moment in my life—a passing thought while isolated during the covid pandemic: to re-read all of Dickens—and enables me to see my entire life (as it were) in this moment: my childhood and early family life, my middle years and my coming-of-age as a writer, and my later years, when I'm able to look back, remember, and begin—but only begin—to understand who I am: how I've become the man and writer I seem to be.

You are a prolific author who has written twelve novels, four collections of short stories, and 8 non-fiction books. Do you prefer writing nonfiction or fiction? When you have a story to share how do you decide if you'll tell it through fiction or nonfiction?
I never wrote a short story until I'd written 5 novels—I couldn't understand how I could somehow contain all the complications and puzzlements with which stories, or the glimmers of stories, came to me—the endless complexities and connections and interconnections of plot, character, and setting—how they could be reduced into a single narrative of, say, 10 to 20 pages. With the years—and the stories, books, essays, and scripts I've somehow produced—more and more the decision is made for me by the nature of the tale. Thus, when I want to conjure up a particular moment or experience from my own life, I try to write it as nonfiction – to be as true as possible to what actually happened; when I write fiction, stories come to me as possible lives—as lives of people different from me in ways that excite my imagination.

DICKENS IN BROOKLYN is your 9th published book since you turned 70. And in these last few years you've also published dozens of essays in places such as *The New York Review of Books*, *NewYork Times*, and *The American Scholar*. How do you account for the post-70 years becoming the most productive period of your writing life?
Short answer: my good fortune. Longer answer: I am, on a daily basis, more free of responsibility than I've ever been. I'm no longer an on-site single parent to my three children

(who were abandoned by their mother); I'm no longer the full-time caregiver and advocate for my brother Robert, who was abandoned by our parents, and who spent most of his life in and out of mental hospitals, psych wards, and halfway houses; I'm no longer caregiver and guardian for my aging mother, who spent her last decade in a nursing home; I'm no longer a full-time college teacher: I no longer own a big, old house or several old used cars that need ongoing care and repair … and, having earned the praise of writers I admire (Joan Didion, Oliver Sacks, Ian Watt); and having published in places (*The N Y Review of Books, The American Scholar, The NY Times*, *The Atlantic*) where, as a young writer I didn't think I'd even be allowed an audition; and having produced a body of work far beyond what I ever thought myself capable of… what's to prove? I'm time-rich and free in a new way to write whatever I want, and so am ambitious only on behalf of the writing itself: being free and able, every day, to make sentences that become stories, essays, and books.

You taught creative writing for many years at several prominent universities. Do you prefer teaching creative writing or the actual writing?

I always loved the act of teaching, though I never missed teaching when I was not teaching. What I cherish about my years of teaching are the friendships I had and now have with my (former) students, many of whom have gone on to have productive, distinguished careers as writers. A week does not pass in which I do not hear from several former students, many of whom I also meet regularly. It's like having another family. I helped them, I trust, in their formative years as writers, and now (while I still read their manuscripts, make suggestions, talk with them about publishing, etc), we're equals in an extended family of writers who are friends—a family with mutual interests, common memories, and—shhh—without the emotional "gook" that often accompanies the families in which we grew up.

What's one writing rule you believe in?

Based on my four decades-plus of working with writers, the only rule which I can offer is Flannery O'Connor's: that "routine is a condition of survival." Many people can write one (good) book, but to have a career as a writer, one cannot wait for inspiration. "If you do the same thing every day at the same time for the same length of time, you'll save yourself from many a sink. "Routine is a condition of survival," O'Connor wrote in a letter to a writer-friend. And you turn off your phone, you don't do emails, pay bills, etc. You show up, even if you get no writing done on one day, two days, or several weeks. Because you don't want to be away from your desk on the one day that the muse decides to visit.

Why essays, and not another memoir?

Although my publishers have called several of my books (*Parentheses, Imagining Robert, Open Heart*) memoirs, I think of them more as essays-in-autobiography, and when I wrote them—and when I wrote the essays included in *Dickens in Brooklyn*—I didn't think I was writing about my "personal" life (though I may have been doing that too), but that I was a guide to stories I hoped would illuminate interesting worlds for readers: e.g., what it was like to have survived Auschwitz; what was like to grow up in a somewhat mad, extended family of first generation Americans; what it was like to be a young man working on a merchant marine ship; what it was like to be a single parent; what it was like to be a mental patient in a state psychiatric facility, etc.