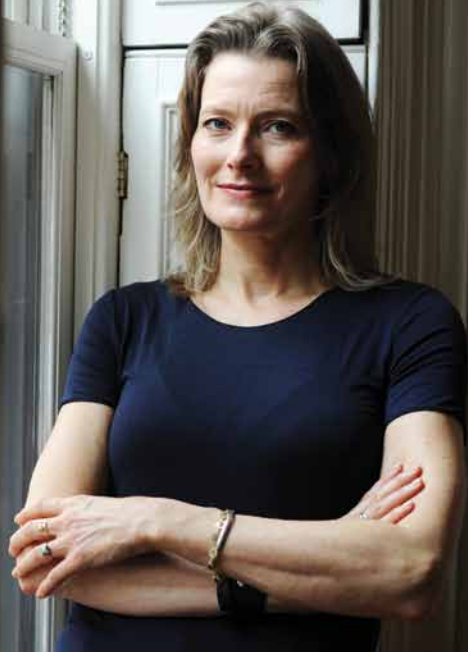


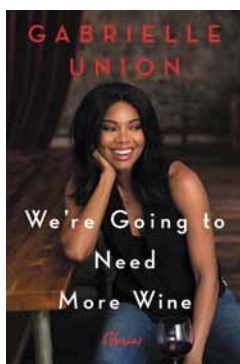
# WWJD: What Would Jennifer Do

By Greg Hudson



## THREE RULES FOR WRITING A TELL-ALL

*Gabrielle Union lays it all out in her memoir.*



A few weeks before the release of the 2016 film *The Birth of a Nation*, Gabrielle Union penned a heartfelt essay on why she couldn't take the rape allegations involving her director/co-star Nate Parker lightly. Her piece went viral. (You probably read it.) Thankfully, Union still has more to say in her memoir, *We're Going to Need More Wine*. Writing about yourself can be tricky, but Union nails it. Here are her rules for penning a tell-all:

1. **DON'T ACTUALLY TELL ALL.** "I certainly didn't. I told what I would feel comfortable talking about on a press tour—things I'd have enough distance from and enough therapy to deal with. I wanted to remain emotionally stable enough to get through the tour and talk about the book effectively."
2. **CONSIDER HOW MANY STORIES ARE ACTUALLY ABOUT YOURSELF.** "I refuse to use someone else's pain or humiliation for my own social currency. When a lot of people write their tell-alls, it's about getting attention from somebody else's pain, which is not fine."
3. **BE REAL.** "I cuss. I know it brings a lot of shame to my mother, but the book is supposed to feel like a conversation with a close friend." —D'Loraine Miranda

Jennifer Egan, who won a Pulitzer Prize for her 2010 novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, laughs when I tell her that if there is a God, He/She/They/It is a lot like her. Obviously, she disagrees (what reasonable person wouldn't?), but *Manhattan Beach*, her latest novel, makes a pretty compelling argument for my thesis. It follows a young woman, her estranged father and a New York gangster whose lives interconnect during the Second World War. Set in a time when America was both becoming a superpower and planting the seeds of its present decline, the novel epitomizes how the specific is universal. (Would you believe that women are still facing discrimination in the workplace? And most aren't trying to become divers for the navy, like the novel's hero is.) But it's not so much what Egan wrote that seems godlike—it's how she writes.

I understand why Egan might balk at my analogy, even though all authors are deity-esque: They build worlds, give life, travel through time and are essentially omniscient and omnipotent among their creations. Still, if you're picking an author/god, you can't do much better than Egan. Her characters aren't constrained by plot or flattened by the responsibility of representing lofty ideas. You get the sense that she cares about them, even as they surprise her. She'll maintain that she's too instinctive to be godlike. And her writing style—quickly scribbling out a first draft in longhand to see what she has to work with—seems more intuitive than designed. But maybe that's the way a god should be. It makes for a hell of a read either way.

**You've been doing press for *Manhattan Beach* for a month. How's it going?** "I have a high capacity to talk about a book, and I haven't even gotten close with this new one. I feel like there is some element of the process that I don't really understand until I talk about it. When I write, I'm trying to make the book good but I'm not necessarily thinking more than I need to about what it is."

**Dan Savage once said that it is only after the book tour that he is able to distill what the book is about. He almost wishes he could write the book after the book tour.** "I wouldn't go that far, because thinkyness can just get in the way of the spirit, life and animation of the material. To me, they really are two different parts of the brain. I think I could have had a very happy career as an academic, studying and writing about literature. In a way, it's important for me, as a writer, to turn that off to some degree because there's a certain self-awareness that you want—but not too much." »