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Soul thief

by [Barton Swaim](#)

The one thing every writer knows about writing is that you can't make a living by it. Until you score a hit, you've got to support the habit with a steady paycheck. Michael Greenberg has spent much of his life trying to controvert this rule, with only partial success. For years he performed odd jobs—peddling cosmetics on the street, chauffeuring wealthy school children, sorting mail at the post office—chiefly for the purpose of writing about them. Eventually, the need to support a family got the best of him, but he remains an incurable scribbler, his mind constantly on the prowl for new material. His friends are apt to appear in published essays; his daughter is the subject of a bestselling memoir. Once, when his wife invited someone for dinner, he questioned the guest relentlessly, taking out a pen and notepad to jot down answers, for which he was scolded afterwards.

Beg, Borrow, Steal is a series of reflections on the hardships, delights, and moral dilemmas one encounters when trying to get through life primarily by means of stringing words together. Each of the book's forty-four short chapters first appeared in the "Freelance" column of the *Times Literary Supplement*, in which Greenberg's pieces alternate with those of the English critic Hugo Williams. Greenberg's prose is everything Williams's isn't—efficient, understated, languidly witty.

In the title essay Greenberg remembers an orthodox teacher he had at the Beth-El school in Rockaway who objected to the students taking art class on the grounds that representational art violated the second commandment, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." To create the likeness of a living creature, the instructor felt, was to twist what that creature had been intended to be. As Greenberg thinks about it now, the man had a point. People who hear or read stories told by others about themselves almost always feel wronged. "That's not me," they think. "You don't know me at all." Greenberg is haunted by the fact that he has made a career out of, as he calls it, soul theft. "A couple of years ago," he confesses, "I staked out a relative's apartment so I could intercept from the mailman a magazine with a story I'd written about him."

The earlier chapters deal frequently with the jobs he did as a young radical trying to "avoid the psychological rut of 'working for the Man.'" Fresh out of high school, he took a job in the post office near Grand Central Station:

Honesty at the post office was regularly tested by the planting of twenty-dollar bills on the conveyer belt—a ploy that even the dope fiends, who had taken the job to swipe pharmaceutical samples addressed to doctors, knew not to fall for.

Later, he managed to get writing gigs, such as when he wrote some bits of dialogue for low-budget Hollywood films. "The hardest part," he recalls, "is having to pretend to care about plots and characters you'd be ashamed to have invented on your own, a costly insincerity when it spills over

into other aspects of your working life (suddenly a character in the short story you're writing is 'mid thirties, athletic, withholding')."

Greenberg's only novel, the story of his Jewish childhood in Rockaway and Manhattan, never saw the light of day. It had been recommended to Ted Solotaroff, the founder of *The New American Review* and then an editor at Harper & Row. Within a week Solotaroff replied in a letter: "This manuscript represents everything I hate in fiction. Good luck trying to find it a home." Much later, when he met Solotaroff at a party, Greenberg asked him about it. He couldn't remember. "Maybe it made you stronger," replied the old man. "The name of the game is endurance."

Last year, endurance paid off when Greenberg's book *Hurry Down Sunshine*, the story of his daughter's mental breakdown, or "crack-up," became a bestseller. To my mind, there's something bizarre about describing the vicissitudes of your daughter's madness in a book. But its popularity, questions of propriety aside, was deserved.

The book's appeal, I think, had as much to do with the telling as with the tale: Greenberg's prose is spare, his disposition unemotional, almost detached, like an Old Testament narrative. He was asked about his book's tone in an interview with the London *Daily Telegraph*, and his answer is worth attention. "I had plenty of emotive passages in my first draft," he explained, "but I left out a lot because I wanted to leave enough space for the reader to jump in." That, I think, begins to explain why the mostly autobiographical essays in *Beg, Borrow, Steal* are so quietly powerful: Greenberg refuses to be his own interpreter.

As a stylist—is it possible to use that term without suggesting affectation?—Greenberg is at the top of his form, manifestly having worked hard to get there. He has the rare ability to say exactly what he needs to say in order to make the story work and, at the same time, to give his sentences a felicitous rhythm that doesn't call attention to itself. One example, taken more or less at random. This is from "Love in the South," about the time he and his high school girlfriend spent in Argentina in the 1970s.

Argentina was much in the world news and it wasn't difficult for me to find work as a stringer writing for various publications back home. Within a year of our arrival, the country was at the point of civil war. I was electrified by the turmoil, though I should have been alarmed. Robin, for her part, was uninterested in politics, studying Argentine music and acting in an experimental play in which she had been cast for her elongated, strikingly Klimt-like figure. Late at night we would lie awake in our apartment, listening uneasily to gunshots and the explosion of home-made bombs.

That modifier "home-made" turns a well-crafted paragraph into a delicious one.

Greenberg writes obliquely about his intellectual attachments, and that, too, gives his writing an attractive subtlety. He went to Argentina, he says, because he was "interested" in revolutionary movements. Clearly he has moved away from radicalism, and I believe I'm right in discerning an acute irritation with political correctness, but he hasn't moved to the right in the way many of his Jewish contemporaries did in the 1970s and 1980s. He speaks of his friend William Herrick, the novelist, as having "brok[en] with the [Communist] Party, not to replace it with another orthodoxy, as some Communists would do, but to hash out, as a writer, his growing disgust with ideology and power."

The really puzzling thing about Michael Greenberg, however, is that he isn't more famous than he is. Any author who can write as beautifully as this ought to be laden with honors by his mid-50s. Nevertheless, endurance has paid dividends.

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