

Paul Auster, Man in the Dark

How can such a brilliantly original writer have such dumb, derivative politics?



by Bruce Bawer

I am on record as being an admirer of the fiction of Paul Auster, author of such novels as *The Book of Illusions* and *Man in the Dark*. In 1989, I gave his novel *Moon Palace* a rave review in the *New Criterion*; in 1990, I enthused over *The Music of Chance* in the *Wall Street Journal*; and in 1992, again in the *New Criterion*, I praised *Leviathan*. Auster, I repeatedly argued, was one of the most impressive living American novelists—a brilliantly original talent. It's been a while since those reviews, but my admiration for Auster's work hasn't faded.

So when I saw his name in a newspaper headline the other day, I was quick to click on the story. And what a [story](#) it was: Daniel Auster, the novelist's 44-year-old son by his first

wife, the writer Lydia Davis, had just been charged with manslaughter and criminally negligent homicide in the death, last November, of his 10-month-old daughter, Ruby.

[According](#) to a Brooklyn prosecutor, the baby had ingested enough heroin and fentanyl to “render an adult unconscious”; her father, who’d been taking care of her in their Park Slope home while the baby’s mother was at work, had been doing heroin earlier in the day, and kept “glassine packets of heroin” in his bathroom.

When contacted by the *New York Post*, Paul Auster had no comment.

Simply put, this terrible story renewed my interest in Auster, and I went online to catch up with him. I found a 2016 [interview](#) with the BBC, whose reporter met him at his home on “a gentrified street in Brooklyn” which had “immaculately placed sitting room furniture.” Auster, the reporter noted, had “called right-wing Republicans ‘jihadists’” and complained that Barack Obama was too moderate. Now, with the 2016 election imminent, Auster testified that “most people I know are on the verge of a nervous breakdown.”

Why? Trump, of course. “When Trump says make America great again,” Auster declared, “he means Make America White Again.” Asked if Trump’s voters were racist, Auster said yes. Ten years ago, Auster lamented, there had been 60 “white supremacist” groups. “Now there are 900.” *Nine hundred?* Where did he get that number? “Trump has enabled them.” Oh, and Trump was also anti-Semitic: “there are times when Trump does sound like Hitler. The ‘International Banking Conspiracy’ is just a code word for Jews. It’s very scary . . . I am scared out of my wits.”

Needless to say, there was nothing surprising about these accusations. I’d seen them a thousand times. They were the

baseless, unhinged left-wing talking points of the day, and parroting them had quickly solidified into an obligatory ritual for any member of the cultural elite who wanted to stay in the cultural elite. Still, it was depressing to see Auster playing the game. Was he reciting this leftist mantra out of foolishness or cowardice?

After all, Auster, who at the time was pushing 70, had lived in the New York area most of his life—and Trump had long been a New York fixture. He was constantly in the media. He'd won awards from Jewish and black groups. He had countless celebrity friends, and was a particular favorite of rappers. His daughter married a Jew and gave him Jewish grandchildren. Did Auster seriously believe that Trump had become a racist and antisemite of the first water? If so, at what point had he undergone that extraordinary metamorphosis?

And what about Auster's claim that half the people in America were ideologically indistinguishable from Nazis and KKK members? Did Auster, who is Jewish, really believe that? If so, how could he bring himself to step outside his home, let alone fly to red-state cities to promote his books?

On the day of Trump's inauguration, the *Guardian* published an [interview](#) with him. It was more of the same: "Trump's election is appalling. I've been struggling to work out how to live my life in the years ahead." Auster also made a point of saying his wife, novelist Siri Hustvedt, was "an ardent feminist" and that "I agree with her in all her positions." How, I wondered as I read this nonsense, could such a brilliantly original novelist have such dumb, derivative politics?

In March 2017, it was the BBC's [turn](#) again to speak with Auster. On "BBC Newsnight," he confessed: "I feel as if I'm living in a nightmare." He called Trump "deranged . . . demented, incompetent, unqualified." Asked whether his reaction to Trump was "a class thing," Auster admitted it

might be, in part. But then he deflected, charging that Trump has a “demonic talent for inciting crowds” by spouting “gibberish, utter nonsense.” Trump, he asserted, wants to “dismantle American society.” Asked if this was “alarmism,” Auster replied: “You never know what he thinks . . . I don’t think he even knows what he thinks.”

Well, Trump went on to engineer the Abraham Accords. And move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. And take black unemployment down to record levels. In fact, he racked up a litany of remarkable accomplishments. And no, he didn’t dismantle American society. If not for the pandemic and election chicanery, he’d have been easily swept back into office. Has Auster ever expressed regret for having been such a hysterical fool? Has he made a single public statement in criticism of anything about the Biden Administration, which is a cause for despair?

Nope. On the contrary, he’s kept on singing with the choir. In a joint Skype or Zoom [interview](#) last October, he and Hustvedt complained about Americans—those right-wing deplorables, you know—who refused to take vaccines. Dropped down the memory hole was the fact that Trump had made those vaccines possible and that Kamala Harris and other Democrats had said they wouldn’t take any vaccine produced under Trump.

During that interview, Auster and Hustvedt sat in their Brooklyn home, well-dressed, holding forth on literary and political matters and on the pandemic. They seemed terribly self-important, greatly impressed with themselves, eager and unembarrassed to go on at length about their writing processes, the narratives in their novels, the characters whom they conjure up in their imaginations and shape stories around.

On the day of that interview, a very real person named Ruby would’ve been about four months old, lying in a crib in an apartment not far from Paul and Siri’s home, being taken care

of, at least part of the time, by a heroin addict. How often did Auster see his granddaughter? He had worried endlessly, he maintained, about Trump. Although he and Siri seemed supremely serene and happy throughout that Zoom interview, we were supposed to believe at the same time that he felt he was “living in a nightmare” because of Trump.

Did he ever worry about Ruby? Did it occur to him that *she* was the one really living in a nightmare?

For that matter, how much did he ever worry about Daniel? A quick Google search turned up these sentences about Daniel in a 2014 *New Yorker* [profile](#) of his mother: “As a teen-ager, he started going to clubs in New York City and became deeply involved with drugs. In 1996, when he was eighteen, he was present in the apartment when a dealer named Andre Melendez was murdered by Michael Alig, a former club promoter, and his roommate, Robert Riggs. Auster was given three thousand dollars of Melendez’s money in exchange for his silence, and later pleaded guilty to possession of stolen property and served a five-year probation.”

Where was Daniel’s father, Paul, during all this?

Donald Trump, note well, has three kids who, by all indications, have grown into supremely well-adjusted, responsible-minded adults—plus a fourth who’s in his teens and *not* going to clubs or doing drugs. Surely Trump deserves at least some of the credit for the way his children turned out.

No, I’m not suggesting that Paul Auster should be blamed entirely for what happened to his son. Still, one can’t help wondering: where was he when, as a teenager, Daniel was “going to clubs in New York City” and becoming “deeply involved in drugs”? And where has he been over the past 10 months, when he had to have known that his baby granddaughter was not far away from him, alone in her home in Brooklyn with a heroin addict?

In that Zoom interview, Paul and Siri held forth righteously about the rampant “inequities” in America. Auster expressed pity, as a New Yorker, for the “poor and struggling and black” people in the city. Hustvedt griped about the misogyny she faces as a female writer. But even as these two were shedding crocodile tears for abstract victims of “inequity” and poverty and feeling sorry for their own extraordinarily privileged selves, what were they doing—personally, actively—to protect Auster’s baby granddaughter, who might not have been “poor and struggling and black” but who, it’s clear now, was living in what amounted to a heroin den?

In the same interview, Auster and his wife outlined their day-to-day routine in some detail: their writing schedules, their dinner together every evening, their nights splayed out on the couch, watching old movies. There was no mention of the fact that Auster had a son and granddaughter nearby. Did Auster ever visit them? Did they visit him?

Some people, placed in Paul and Siri’s shoes, would’ve been monitoring developments in Daniel’s household at least once a day. Why didn’t Auster feel moved to do so? Or it is possible that it never occurred to him, not even for a fleeting moment, that Donald Trump might not be the deadly monster of Hillary’s and CNN’s and the Democratic Party’s fantasies and that his *own son*—the son who hadn’t grown into an upstanding citizen like Don Jr. or Eric Trump, but into a self-destructive ne’er-do-well—might in fact pose a deadly threat to his own little granddaughter?

Even now, does Auster realize that Donald Trump was a better father—and president—than he, Paul Auster, was a father and grandfather?

Or does the smug, narcissistic leftist mind just not work that way?

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