



# Beyond the Book<sup>®</sup>



**Melville House Publishing Co-founder  
Dennis Loy Johnson:  
On Discovering Tao Lin**

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KENNEALLY: If you're shopping for a little realism in your fiction, you might want to try Kmart. Kmart realism, that is, a school of novelist and short story writers that may or may not include Ann Beattie, Lorrie Moore, and Tao Lin, a 26-year-old Florida-raised, Chinese American writer now living in New York City.

Welcome to Beyond the Book. I'm Chris Kenneally, your host. And we are looking ahead today to our annual visit to the Miami International Book Fair, and a discussion on Sunday, November 15<sup>th</sup>, at the Miami Book Fair with Tao Lin, author most recently of the novella, *Shoplifting from American Apparel*, published by Melville House just last month.

To discuss Tao Lin, his new book, and his work, we welcome his editor, Dennis Loy Johnson. Dennis, thank you for joining Beyond the Book.

JOHNSON: Hi, Chris. It's great to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's a pleasure to have you, and let's tell people briefly about you and your work, because you are both a publisher and an author. Dennis Loy Johnson is the cofounder and publisher of Melville House, one of America's leading independent publishing houses, and that's not just our opinion – we'll get into that in just a little while – where he has published among other authors, Lewis Lapham, Bernard Henri Lévy, Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész, and Jacques Derrida, who published his last work with Melville House just before his death, a book called *Learning to Live Finally*.



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Dennis Loy Johnson is also the founder of the legendary Moby Lives, one of the first book blogs. He's an author as well as a publisher, with short stories winning him both a Pushcart Prize and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. He is the author as well of *The Big Chill: The Great, Unreported Story of the Bush Inaugural Protest*, and the editor – with his wife, Valerie Merians – of the anthologies *Poetry After 9/11* and *What We Do Now*. So quite a lot of background there Dennis.

JOHNSON: And I'm exhausted just hearing it all.

KENNEALLY: (laughter) It keeps you busy. I'm sure it does. And one of the things, though, that I thought right away we could talk about is about Tao Lin. I said he's 26-years-old, he's published his first books with you a few years ago – I think he was 23 when the first one came out – and I want to ask about how you two connected.

Moby Lives was something of a legend in its time, it's – was a weekly newspaper column at first about books and writers, then began life online in 2000, and really kind of culminated, if I can put it that way, in attracting a flood of commentary and eyewitness reports from writers and poets after the terrible events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and the World Trade Center attacks. And it was from that that you first published *Poetry After 9/11* and then Melville House was born.

And likewise, Tao Lin, who came to New York at around that very time, in 2001 – he was at New York University, I understand, and studying journalism and creative writing. And even as an undergraduate, he took up literary blogging himself. And so, I wonder whether it was the blogs that brought you together. Was it one book blog or finding another? Or how did Tao find you or you find him?

JOHNSON: Well, you've basically got the history right. The Moby Lives blog had really kind of exploded. There weren't a lot of other blogs and I started doing it because newspapers were cutting back on their book coverage, and I just found that I was getting more and more readers of my newspaper articles online. So Moby Lives had a nice jumpstart on everybody, and then as you mentioned, this – the 9/11 stuff that we posted really exploded.

In fact, the day before 9/11, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Yahoo – which used to have a lot more power in those days – had picked us as the Website of the Month. And so that was the day before. So we just had tens of thousands of more readers than usual on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and it just kind of steamrolled.



Well, that inspired a lot of other blogs, and I used to just kind of cruise them and see who was doing what, and always kind of trolling for interesting articles. And there was Tao, who had started a blog where he talked about Moby Lives, and liking Moby Lives, and his blog had this great name, it was called Reader of Depressing Books.

And it looked weird. It had a weird shape to it – the text was shaped, and then he wrote like he'd do in emails. There were no caps and no punctuation. And I couldn't tell if it was accidental or lazy or purposeful, but it was really fascinating to me. He was a very interesting writer, commenting on me, among other things, and our books.

And so, at some point, he had an interesting commentary that he'd put up that I linked to on Moby Lives, and he wrote to thank me, and I was interested in him enough to keep – kind of keep him on the line. My journalism background, I kept him on the phone, as it were, and just kept him talking. I was interested in his prose style.

And he said he was an undergraduate at NYU and he was taking some creative writing classes. I said I'd love to see your work. And one thing led to another, and here we are, four or five books later.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, when you're an undergraduate in creative writing, and I've got the diploma to prove that I committed that crime, nothing sounds better than an editor or anyone saying, can I see your work? So it must have been very exciting for him at that moment to have someone like yourself looking seriously at what he was doing.

**JOHNSON:** Yeah. Well as you maybe can imagine, I get flooded with manuscripts – especially now, I get flooded with people who want to write like Tao Lin. But back in the day, maybe it wasn't such a big deal. Melville House was pretty new when we found him and hooked up with him.

But I don't know. You'll have to ask Tao that one. It was exciting on my end, I can tell you that.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, I'll look forward to asking him as we will do in Miami in just about 10 days. But let's talk about *Shoplifting from American Apparel*, which is the new book. It's described, it says, by the author as two parts shoplifting arrest, five parts vague relationship issues, and –



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JOHNSON: Yes.

KENNEALLY: – in fact, I think that’s about right. It’s something of an autobiographical work. But what’s interesting is that it has come as part of this ongoing series that you began at Melville House a few years back on the *Art of the Novella* that’s published both classics and contemporary works.

JOHNSON: Yes.

KENNEALLY: And this novella runs about – what is it? – 103 pages. So just in that form – longer than a short story, not quite long enough to be a novel. What’s so compelling to you about the novella, and is it attractive to writers today?

JOHNSON: Oh, I love the form. I just love the form. Like you, I went to school for creative writing. I went to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and –

KENNEALLY: The legendary Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

JOHNSON: I forgot. That is actually part of the name. The legendary –

KENNEALLY: That is part of the name. Yes.

JOHNSON: – Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

KENNEALLY: (laughter) And indeed, maybe people of the sort of writers that Tao Lin seems to sort of descend from, I believe, attended the school there.

JOHNSON: Yeah. Well, one thing Tao and I have in common is we were inspired by a lot of the same writers. I became a short story writer, a fiction writer inspired by Ann Beattie mostly in the ‘70s, when I was a college student. I just thought she was great. She was exciting in breaking news in the literary world at the time, and she inspired me.

So I was intrigued that Tao felt that she was one of his most inspiring writers, and in fact, on our first publishing project, we imitated her and published a book – Tao’s first two books with us, a novel and stories simultaneously –

KENNEALLY: Yes.

JOHNSON: – as she did. But anyway, so I went to the Writers’ Workshop, and a lot of us were writing novellas. And it was kind of this hopeless thing that everybody



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was doing whereby you wrote this thing that you couldn't sell to a literary journal, because it was too long, and it was too short to sell as a novel.

So it was this kind of very pure thing to me that a lot of people were doing just because they had to, like writing poetry. There was no real reason to do it other than for the – for art's sake.

And as I got out in the world and then started reading more, I realized that a lot of writers had done that, and I eventually became – after I graduated from Iowa, I became a writing professor and ran a creative writing program of my very own, and then taught subsequently at several other writing programs.

And I began teaching the novella as kind of a seminar, literary seminar, and I put together a little collection of them. And I just have always really dug the form.

And so one nice thing about having your own publishing house is you can make books. If you're the kind of person that walks around saying, there ought to be this kind of book or that kind of book, well, by gum, you can do it.

So I decided that we would launch this classics line, and we would do it the way I want to do it, which is no kind of ancillary material. No introductions to explain to you what you've just read, or afterwards, or anything like that. Just let the text speak for itself in these very simply designed little things.

And it was nice because it took off. People really, really liked it. And it's kind of a classic paperback. It's just a cheap, small, wonderful piece of literature that you can fit in the pocket of your jeans.

And so that went so well that we decided it was a way to approach another publishing problem we have with contemporary fiction, and that is that we like to do a lot of international fiction, and a lot of what people might call difficult fiction or avant-gardist fiction, and stuff that frankly doesn't sell really well.

And so we would publish this great, new, first novel by an exciting young German writer, and we'd pay a lot to translate it, because translated books cost more than doing regular books. And we'd get the typical three weeks in a bookstore and out, and nothing would happen. And we'd get no reviews or anything like that, and it was killing. But like what's the point of having a publishing company if you can't publish books like that?

And so we wanted to find a way to stick to it, and we decided that if we launched a contemporary version of the novella line – one, they're shorter, so they're less



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expensive to produce and to translate, and two, they might stay in the stores longer, because we found lots of booksellers just loved the series so much, they would order the whole thing and just keep it stocked. And so that was the plan with going contemporary.

And so it's a real mix of again, books we love but that might be difficult to sell if we only have the typical three weeks in the bookstore. So we're doing translated fiction in it. We're doing avant-gardist fiction in it. We're doing reprints of books we think shouldn't have gone out of print. Like we just published a great book by Lore Segal, called *Lucinella*, which is a – just a kind of a classic love story to the New York literary scene. It's kind of a cult hit book here, but it's been out of print for 20 years.

KENNEALLY: What were – ?

JOHNSON: So we're doing – we're finding homes for these wonderful books and finding ways to keep them in the bookstores.

KENNEALLY: Well, I hate to say it because it sort of betrays a kind of – I don't know, laziness, but there is something attractive about a book that is just right for reading on an airplane ride or a long bus trip –

JOHNSON: Yeah.

KENNEALLY: – or something like that.

JOHNSON: And we do sell a lot of them at airports. It's true. That's been a recent phenomenon. We never had the – Melville House is a pretty small press, and we never quite kind of had the oomph to get into the airport stores, because that's some pretty pricy real estate, as you can imagine. But lately we have managed to get in there simply because the owner (laughter) of one of the chains that sells in bookstores – most of the American bookstore – airports, just saw the books elsewhere, and fell in love with them, and starting stocking them. So we got a –

KENNEALLY: Well, it's a –

JOHNSON: – we got a break.

KENNEALLY: It's a great story, and let's try to help people sort of preview for them what they might be getting themselves into with Tao Lin. As we said, he's a novelist, a short story writer, now a novellist (sic.), if I can call him that, as well as a poet. In your words, as an – as his editor and as a fan, what can people expect



from his work? It's been labeled as Kmart realism. Is it realism or is it something else?

JOHNSON: Well, I'm not sure about the Kmart realism label. It's a – that's a relatively new classification for what I would call my generation of writing, people like Ann Beattie and then subsequently Raymond Carver were kind of the leading lights of it. I think Tao is more kind of like Donald Barthelme – or Steven Barthelme, or Robert Coover or people like that who are maybe equally minimalistic as the – as Carver and – or at least early Carver and Beattie, but I think a bit more playful about form and what they can do with their prose. And also just kind of lighter hearted, and funnier, and interested in wit and precision.

And so basically, yes, Tao is a minimalist. His prose is really kind of stripped down. There's not a lot of extra adjectives, a lot of extra description. There's not a lot of wasted prose. There is a lot of dialogue. There is a lot of conversation being held the way we hold conversations today, which is in email, or texting, or on cell phones.

And his desire, I think, with his prose is to present a story that has no kind of false drama to it, no shaped form that gives a thing kind of a narrative compulsion. He wants to present a real, honest situation that may not have a rise to a climax, but in that way, seems more – just more realistic. So –

KENNEALLY: Right. Well, I have to admire what I found you could call a kind of a – a tremendous amount of control in the writing. When one thinks of minimalism and just contemporary work, a lot of people dismiss it as being rather lightweight. But this seems to me to be very, very controlled, very thoughtful, very precise. Is –

JOHNSON: Yes.

KENNEALLY: Is that something that, when the manuscript arrives, it's already like that, or do you work a great deal with him to achieve that kind of finely honed work?

JOHNSON: Well, it's really varied from manuscript to manuscript. Tao and I have done, what? Five books now. We've got another book from him coming out next year called *Richard Yates*, which is a novel that has nothing to do with Richard Yates, but Tao just wanted to name a book after him. But that's done and in the drawer, so we've edited that.

So we've had several different experiences together now, and some have come in damn near perfect and others have needed much more back and forth.



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But it's a real process of chiseling with Tao. You don't usually – I haven't really ever had to go in and say, look, we need to totally reconceptualize your opening here, or change this scene, or move this scene, or alter the ending. We're not really making those kinds of changes usually. It's usually more discussion of, is this little quirky thing he's doing with the semicolons working?

So we'll have a discussion as – I'll be asking him, what exactly do you intend by that? Why do you keep repeating that? What is the goal with that? And then I can tell him, well, I don't think it's working. We can try it this way. Or yes, it is working.

So it's a very kind of – they're usually very precise conversations about some minute matter of punctuation.

KENNEALLY: So you're not Gordon Lish to his Raymond Carver, then?

JOHNSON: No. He's Gordon Lish to his Raymond Carver.

KENNEALLY: (laughter).

JOHNSON: He really is a – he really spends a lot of time on a manuscript before he gives it to me, and I really appreciate that. He does not rely on me to help him kind of create his own understanding of what he's doing. He relies on me to already understand what he's doing and make sure he's doing it in a completely entire way. He wants his theories applied consistently through a book.

KENNEALLY: Well, it occurs to me that Carver was a poet as well as a short story writer, and maybe it's that sense of control that poets have to have to be successful that he carries over into the prose work. Something I will –

JOHNSON: It's hard to talk about Carver, though, isn't it? Because there's such a reconceptualization of him –

KENNEALLY: That's right.

JOHNSON: – and he has two such distinct periods. I remember when I was a young writer, I was – I really loved Raymond Carver's work and – I'm talking about his first few books now, and I remembered seeing an interview with him or hearing an interview with him where he said that a story to him was never done until he'd gone all the way through it, taking out every single comma and then putting it back.



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And he really made me – inspired me to reenter my own stories at the time and just really looked for every extraneous thing and take them out. And, of course, now here's his wife reissuing those books that meant so much to me, where she's put back in all that stuff.

KENNEALLY: All the commas are back there. (laughter).

JOHNSON: (laughter) She's put them all back in!

KENNEALLY: That's right.

JOHNSON: And it's exactly the opposite of what he said he believed in. So there's two Ray Carvers. And, as I said, I think if we're talking in context to Tao, he's, I think, actually from a different kind of strain. Ray Carver probably never really believed in what Gordon was doing. He went along with it. But I think Ann Beattie was more sincere in that style. And they hearken, of course, from Hemingway.

KENNEALLY: Right.

JOHNSON: So I think that's really Tao's kind of literary grandpa.

KENNEALLY: Right. Well let's speak briefly about Melville House itself, which, in 2007, won something called the Miriam Bass Award for Creativity in Independent Publishing. That's a annual award for small presses and others that AAP gives out, and it's kind of the Indie Publisher of the Year thing.

How does an indie publisher – first of all, how do you – what kind of crazy mood were you in to begin this back in 2000?

JOHNSON: (laughter).

KENNEALLY: (laughter) And –

JOHNSON: I blame my wife. It was her idea.

KENNEALLY: And – but what makes it successful seven years later?

JOHNSON: Well, thank you for bringing up that award. That award was really shocking to us, and we thought that maybe they made a mistake, and it was really great. And then this year, we just last week were named the Small Press of the Year by The Village Voice. So it's really – those things are really rewarding and make you



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feel that it's worthwhile, because this is a really, really difficult business and it's hard to be a leftist publisher, and publishing difficult avant-gardist work in America. So it's really rewarding stuff.

But we truly did not know what we were doing. Neither one of us had a background in publishing. I wrote about the book business, but I didn't really know the intricacies of publishing, and Valerie, of course, is a visual artist – a sculptor – so she didn't know much about publishing either. We were just – we like to read a lot. That was what we knew about publishing.

So – yeah, I'll tell you a quick, funny anecdote. Right when we were starting the company, I had just reviewed a book by André Schiffrin, the great publisher of Pantheon and then The New Press. And it was called *The Business of Books*, and it was about what – how publishing worked in America and being that kind of publisher I just described. And I thought it was a really inspiring book.

And then coincidentally, when we were trying to think of, did we really want to put our money into this company and start a company, a friend of mine said she was having dinner with André Schiffrin of all people. And I said, well, that's fantastic. Tell him you know two people who may be starting a publishing company and see if he has any advice.

So she called me the next morning and she said, he said, whatever you do, don't do it. (laughter).

KENNEALLY: (laughter).

JOHNSON: And then about six or seven years later, we published André's memoir, and I reminded him of that advice. And he said, well, nobody ever listens to me.

So it is a very, very difficult thing, and probably, if I knew now what I knew then, we might not have done it because it's a – it just sucks all your money out of you, and all your time, and it – it has its ups and downs, and it's been a very difficult culture to be a literary person in, or to be interested in leftist journalism, and etc.

Publishing in the age of Bush was difficult, but here we are and it feels great to have all this kind of attention that you mentioned. And I think if we can point to whatever makes it successful is that we just kind of stuck to our guns, and maybe not exactly knowing the proper way you're supposed to do something turned out to be advantageous to us.



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We always – for example, in the way we design our books, we always kind of followed our heart, resisted making commercial-looking packages, and doing the things you’re supposed to do, and have the kind of big, front cover blurbs and things like that. We always kind of went more heavily into the design, and trusting our designers and our own design impulses.

And I think all that stuff kind of made us unique in a clichéd world and helped us to survive in the end.

KENNEALLY: Well, I read in an interview that you did a little while ago that you talked about a faith in the book. That must be hard. It’s rather like one of those prophets out in the wilderness somewhere trying to maintain faith in something that seems to be beating him up at every opportunity.

JOHNSON: Well, you mean a faith in the format of the book? In the faith of all the – ?

KENNEALLY: Well, what did you mean? You said you had faith in the book.

JOHNSON: Well, I think it’s an invention that ranks up there with the wheel and fire, and it’s just the best possible way to deliver a certain kind of artistic expression or a certain kind of information. It’s a great bit of technology, and it’ll never be outdated.

In fact, all the new technologies that are supposedly going to replace the book, I think, are inferior. The Library of Congress is – has a basement that’s full of books you can’t read anymore and movies you can’t see anymore because they’re on outdated devices.

So I think it’s a thing that changed the world and still can change the world, and when we were, for example, trying to publish books that made up for what we thought were the failures of our media during the administration of George Bush, it was great to be able to put out a book that spelled out – we had, for example, hired – we contracted with the Center for Constitutional Rights to spell out the case for impeaching the president and opposing the war, legal reasons to do so. I think that that was a really important thing to be able to do and to form those kinds of protests.

America was inspired by a book in the very beginning – Tom Paine’s *Common Sense* is what kept the troops going, and a book that sold I think it was 300,000 copies in its first month of life.



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And it's a really kind of a fundamental form in our spirit that never seems to fade. All these people that are excited about eBooks – and I'm one of them – but still a lot of those people come to us and say they've got a book they'd like to publish (laughter).

KENNEALLY: Well –

JOHNSON: We'll do a panel discussion, for example, and somebody'll stand up and yell at me and call me a dead tree murderer, and that I got my head in the sand, and we're dinosaurs, and this, that, and the other thing, and on the way out of the hall, they'll pitch me their novel.

KENNEALLY: (laughter) Well, we believe in the book and Copyright Clearance Center, obviously at Beyond the Book. And Dennis Loy Johnson, it's been a pleasure speaking with you.

Dennis Loy Johnson is the publisher of Tao Lin, whose book – novella, I should say, *Shoplifting from American Apparel* is going to be the subject of discussion at Miami Book Fair. I'm looking forward to meeting Tao Lin on Sunday, November 15<sup>th</sup>. And if you're in the Miami area, we hope you'll join us for that.

Dennis Johnson, thank you so much for being on Beyond the Book today.

JOHNSON: It was fun. Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And again to everybody, if you can join us in Miami, we'd love to have you: Tao Lin and I talking about *Shoplifting from American Apparel*, his new novella just out from Melville House Publishing. Everything online you want to know about that book and all of his other books, at [MHPBooks.com](http://MHPBooks.com).

This is Chris Kenneally for Beyond the Book and Copyright Clearance Center. Thanks for joining us.

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