

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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FEATURE

Dave Eggers, Unplugged

Nearly 15 years ago, Dave Eggers's irony-tinged, confessional writing style made him a literary sensation. Countless projects and publications later, he's proving that what first defined him is far from what drives him now

By **HOWIE KAHN**

Dec. 3, 2014 10:35 a.m. ET

OUT IN SAN FRANCISCO'S Tenderloin, addicts fumble into corners in pairs, handing off capsules and vials as corner boys stand watch. Dave Eggers, the 44-year-old hyphenate—novelist-publisher-activist; journalist-entrepreneur; graphic designer—screenwriter-husband-father—is out here too, looking to sign a 20-year lease. In 2002, Eggers, along with the educator Nínive Calegari, founded 826 Valencia, an after-school drop-in tutoring center a mile down the road in the Mission District. It shared the floor with McSweeney's, the publishing company he'd founded in 1998. There, everyone detached from their keyboards around three o'clock in the afternoon to become the organization's first tutors. "I love the editing process and all that," Eggers says. "But sometimes you just need to get back into the mix. Saul Bellow called it 'a humanity bath.' "

Since its inception, 826 has opened in seven more locations, helping over 30,000 students a year with writing, science and math. 826 Tenderloin, scheduled to open in 2015 with a million dollars in funding already in place, will mark the nonprofit's second Bay Area location once Eggers and its top executives, Bita Nazarian and Gerald Richards, finish scouting properties. "From time to time, I'll just stand here watching the kids moving to and fro," says Eggers. "Having an after-school safe haven would really be important." Wearing rumpled jeans, beat-up boots and an untucked black button-down with embroidery across the front, Eggers leans back against a scuffed pane of glass. "826 has never gone anywhere where we're not welcome," he says.

For a decade and a half now, Eggers has demonstrated a prescient shrewdness for breaking literal and cultural ground. His best-selling debut book, 2000's *A*



Eggers sitting in his office, known as Dave's Cave. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONA KUHN FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, proved an antecedent to the rise of “reality”-based, hyperconfessional entertainment, from the *Real Housewives* franchise to every first-person blog ever created. “In the way Bob Dylan going electric allowed every other folk singer to go electric and every electric guitarist to do social content, Eggers gave permission with voice to a whole new generation,” says the writer Lawrence Weschler, an early McSweeney’s contributor.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius is Eggers's memoir of raising his younger brother and mourning the loss of his parents. Yet it is significantly counterbalanced by themes of questing for attention and influence—in it, Eggers describes auditioning for season three of MTV's *The Real World* and co-founding the failed, brashly idealistic magazine *Might*. The book made Eggers famous and mythologized, revered and targeted. The word Eggers was reportedly banned from *Esquire* after a rift with the magazine's editor, David Granger. Rumors flew, like those concerning Eggers's supposed pseudonyms, “Neal Pollack” and “Gary Baum.” Pollack, an actual person, was among the first authors published under the banner of McSweeney's books in 2000 (in 2005 he wrote in the *New York Times* about being “broken up with” by Eggers). Baum, now a writer for the *Hollywood Reporter*, was then a high school student from Calabasas, California, who tracked all things Eggers—including some of the events leading up to the suicide of Eggers's sister, Beth—on his website, FoE! Log. *FoE* stood for *Friends of Eggers*.

But Eggers's career footprint has transcended the reigning cult of the self. Gone are his 10,000-word online “clarifications,” like the one Eggers published on his website, Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency, in response to a 2001 *New York Times* profile he'd felt missed the mark. He has stopped limiting his interviews to tightly controlled, emailed Q&As. Coolness prevailed in 2013 when Eggers was charged with plagiarism. An author named Kate Losse claimed Eggers's novel *The Circle*—set around a fictional, omnipresent tech company of the same name—borrowed heavily from *The Boy Kings*, her 2012 memoir about working at Facebook. Upon hearing the allegations, Eggers put out a short statement refuting the claims while asserting that his research for *The Circle* in fact consisted of reading no related literature at all. “I avoided all such books, and did not even visit any tech campuses,” Eggers wrote, “expressly because I didn't want *The Circle* to seem to be based on any extant companies or upon the experiences of any employees of any extant companies.” The book has gone on to sell millions of copies and has been translated into nearly a dozen languages.

Despite its lasting cultural impact, Eggers's earliest work is in some ways his least defining. In 2002, the year he launched 826, he published his first book of fiction, *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, which follows two traumatized friends traveling around the world mourning the death of a third friend while attempting to give away a large sum of money they don't feel they deserve. Since then, he has shifted his attention to social issues, both on and off the page. He's also been publishing books at an astonishing rate, six books and two screenplays in the past five years.

This year's *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* deals



LIFE OF LETTERS | A variety of 826 publications by students in elementary, middle and high school. *PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONA KUHN FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*



WORK AND PLAY | A skateboard made by Spike Jonze's company, Girl, and a badminton racket are among the many objects that clutter Eggers's office. The drawing on the wall is by Eggers. *PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONA KUHN FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

with gun control, police militarization, congressional impudence and the state of contemporary mental health—entirely in dialogue. *The Circle*, from 2013, reads like a tragicomical and propulsive treatise on digital human rights. *A Hologram for the King* (2012) takes an elegiac stance on American manufacturing set against a backdrop of shifting global markets, tanking economies and a Kafkaesque shell of a Saudi Arabian city.

“*The Circle* and *Hologram* are very important, morally dead-on,” says Weschler, adding, “Eggers is producing at the rate of a latter-day Trollope.” Spike Jonze, Eggers’s collaborator on the screenplay for 2009’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, marvels at the author’s productivity. “I learned to be a lot less precious from him,” says Jonze, “to get stuff down on the page, to produce, to write by actually just sitting down and writing as opposed to my tendency to think about things forever.”

Through his 10 books, Eggers has joined a tradition of activist-novelists. But unlike two of his self-professed heroes of the genre, Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer—both relentless contrarians—he’s going about it by being the nice guy. Conversations often circle back to his suburban Chicago high school shop teacher, Mr. Siden, who taught him to build stereo cabinets; his 10th-grade English teacher, Mr. Ferry, who still reads his work; and his first-grade teacher, Mrs. Wright, who guided him through the editorial process on his first-ever book, a marker-illustrated allegory called *The Monster Mash Mash*. In other words, it’s hard to imagine Eggers, entering middle age, ever head-butting another writer—as Mailer did before he and Vidal appeared together on a now-famous segment of *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1971—or running for office, as both Mailer and Vidal did, unsuccessfully.

‘Dave is able to see the world as it is, while also holding onto his vision of how the world should be.’

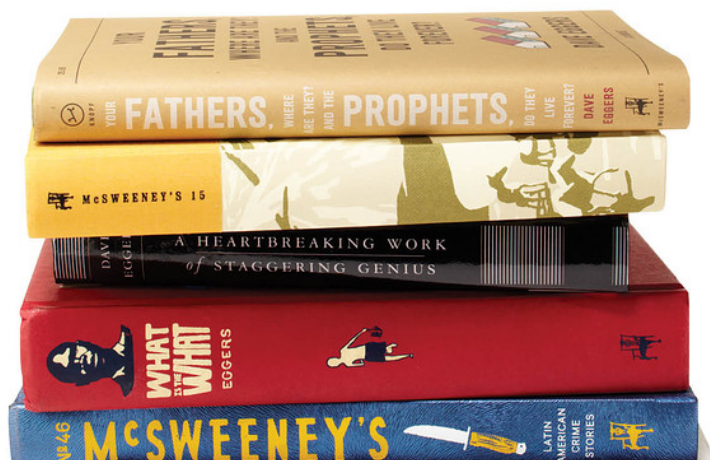
—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

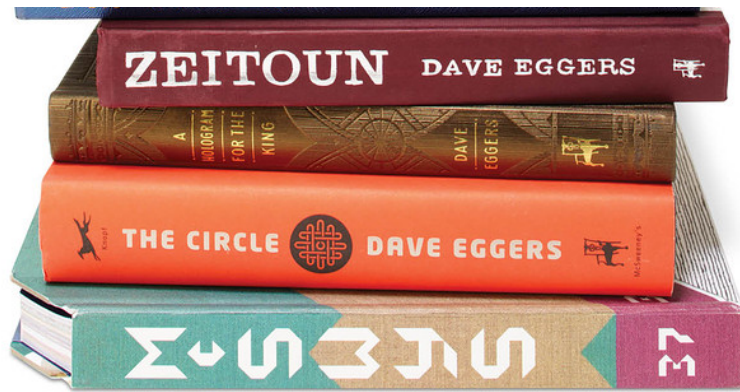
“I’d never in a million years run for office,” he says. “It’s just not my way. I have problems existing within certain systems. There’s nothing harder than existing or functioning within that system and trying to get the things done that you want to get done.” Eggers says he’s results oriented rather than process oriented, which helps explain his tremendous work ethic. Walking between potential locations in the

Tenderloin, he smiles widely at the idea of demolishing old sheetrock himself. “Dave doesn’t have any of the patronizing and blinded-by-ideology goodwill that one sadly and too often encounters in activists,” says the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. “In fact, Dave is not at all in that mold. He is able to see the world as it is, while also holding onto his vision of how the world should be, and I do think this is unusual. It makes him a wonderful mix of a cleareyed realist and a dreamer.”

Eggers credits his turn toward issues-based novels to his roots as a journalist. But he doesn’t mean *ESPN The Magazine* or *Esquire*, where he spent time in 1999 before his reputed blacklisting (that hatchet was buried in 2008 when the magazine named Eggers one of the 75 most influential people of the 21st century). Rather, he gives credit to his reporting gig at his college newspaper, *The Daily Illini*, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “My first feature was about a woman who needed a double lung and heart transplant,” Eggers recalls. “She was trying to get college kids to put the organ donor sticker on their driver’s licenses. Immediately, there was a spike in interest and people were getting the sticker.” Eggers shifts into the second person, betraying his tendency to make things both more inclusive and more instructive. “You get hooked on moving the needle,” he says, “on making an impact.”

WE’RE IN THE Pirate Supply Store. “Stand here,” Eggers says. I move where he tells me. A rope is pulled, a crate is dumped. “You got mopped,” Eggers says, as I remove some scraggly mop heads from my shoulders. Eggers laughs. Nazarian laughs. Richards laughs. The gag serves as an introduction to 826 Valencia and to its storefront, a pirate-themed retail space. “What does this do in terms of education?” asks Nazarian. “It shows that 826 is a portal for creative thinking, and it gets people in here.” Eggers adds, “It pays the rent. It always has.”





WORKS OF STAGGERING GENIUS | A small sampling of Eggers's prodigious literary output, including his most recent novel, 'Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?' *PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONA KUHN FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

The store, with its playful prosthetic hooks and lemon drop candies marketed as scurvy pills, leads into the tutoring center in the rear of the space, where several dozen students are diligently at work. This is the model for all 826 locations: child-friendly retail concept upfront, learning in the back. “My favorite is Boston’s,” Eggers says, “the Bigfoot Research Institute.” Other 826 retail spaces include Liberty Street Robot Supply & Repair in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Los Angeles’s Time Travel Mart. Eggers will take credit for some of the humor and for coming up with the overall mission, but management, he says, isn’t his strong suit—even if leadership very much is. “I tend to sometimes come up with a germ of a notion,” he says. “And then better people come in, make it a real idea and professionalize it.”

McSweeney’s publishing operation moved out of 826 and across the street into a former

furniture store at 849 Valencia late in 2004. “We’ve always wanted to build a tunnel to connect the two,” says Eggers, opening 849’s door. Inside, he offers a tour.

ScholarMatch, founded in 2010, occupies the space closest to the street. It grew out of 826 Valencia, in the hopes of sending more of its students to college by crowdfunding, matching them up with individual donors. “Its executive director, Diana Adamson, is the only tidy person we’ve ever hired,” Eggers says, before pointing out where his McSweeney’s designers and editors sit, and where their magazine, *The Believer*, co-founded by his wife, the writer Vendela Vida, is assembled. Its National Magazine Award nominations hang askew on a tall brick wall surrounding a life-size poster of Michael Jordan’s wingspan.

Books clutter every available surface, a sampling of the nearly 250 titles McSweeney’s, its quarterly review and its children’s imprint, McMullens, have generated over the years. Many of the defining writers of our time are represented: Jonathan Lethem, Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace and Joyce Carol Oates. Eggers’s celebrated design sensibility is also on full display: the assertive typefaces, anachronistic graphics and notched flourishes that populate McSweeney’s covers and spreads are everywhere, lining the path from one workstation to the next, giving visitors a sense that, here, every story feeds another.

On one side of the room I’m introduced to Carrie Clements. On the other, Mimi Lok. Each woman directs one of the thirteen 501c3 nonprofits Eggers has helped to establish, a group that now includes McSweeney’s publishing, which officially converted its status in October. Clements runs American operations for the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, which built a school in South Sudan. It is named for the main character in Eggers’s 2006 fact-based novel about Sudan, warfare and displacement, *What Is the What*.

Eggers met Deng after receiving a letter from Mary Williams, Jane Fonda’s adopted daughter and the founder of the Lost Boys Foundation, in 2002. She had read *A Heartbreaking Work* and wanted to see if Eggers and Deng, a Sudanese refugee, could collaborate. Eggers took several trips to Deng’s home in Atlanta over the course of 2003 and eventually decided to take on the project. “The book was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” says Eggers. “That one almost killed me. I thought it would take a year—because I was a journalist I thought I could get things done—and it took four. All the while I was feeling like I was disappointing Val, letting him down and delaying his plans for the school.” Once Eggers turned the book from a purely reported work into a novel, the words came easier.



DRAWN TOGETHER | A recent note to Eggers from a drop-in tutoring student at 826 Valencia. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONA KUHN FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Deng controlled the best-selling book's profits—a decision he and Eggers made together before any writing started—and with the money, he began to address the dire educational needs of his village, Marial Bai in what is now South Sudan. Deng made Eggers the school's co-founder, and their foundation now raises approximately \$400,000 annually, while the Marial Bai Secondary School is among the premier educational institutions in the country. "Students will follow the teachers around until it's dark, and if there's a light in the dorms, they'll study until the generators go off," says Eggers. "The level of passion is incredible."

On a reporting trip to Marial Bai to gather material for *What Is the What*, Eggers realized that there were more stories about the region worth telling. That led him to commission an oral history from the writer Craig Walzer, *Out of Exile: Narratives From the Abducted and Displaced People of Sudan*, and to found another McSweeney's publishing arm, *Voice of Witness*. Lok became its executive director in 2008 and just released VoW's 13th title in November: *Palestine Speaks: Narratives of Life Under Occupation*.

“Right when Voice of Witness started,” says Eggers, “Katrina hit, and that became the second book.” Abdulrahman Zeitoun, one of the narrators from the resulting compilation, *Voices From the Storm*, would then become the subject of Eggers’s 2009 book-length work of nonfiction, *Zeitoun*. His reportage portrayed Zeitoun as a tragic-heroic do-gooder wrongly “arrested at gunpoint in a home he owned, brought to an impromptu military base built inside a bus station, accused of terrorism and locked in an outdoor cage.” But in recent years, Zeitoun has faced a series of criminal charges. In 2011, after attacking his then wife, Kathy, Zeitoun was arrested on domestic violence charges and copped to a lesser charge of negligent injuring. In 2013, he was tried for attempted first-degree murder and solicitation of first-degree murder. The intended victim, according to the *Times-Picayune*, was, again, Zeitoun’s wife. Acquitted after pleading not guilty to those charges, Zeitoun found himself back in court again multiple times in 2014 and was indicted on a felony stalking charge this past June. Once more, he pleaded not guilty. Zeitoun was arrested again for violating protective orders during the writing of this piece in October. At press time, he was being held without bail until a hearing on November 20th.

“I can’t talk about Zeitoun; it’s extremely difficult,” Eggers says, “as it would be with any friend if a marriage broke up. I’m not their spokesperson.” Norman Mailer once faced a similar line of scrutiny after publishing *The Executioner’s Song*, one of Eggers’s favorite novels, and for helping a convict named Jack Henry Abbott get out of prison on parole. Abbott murdered a waiter in New York six weeks after his release. Mailer was blamed; his goodwill backfired. “It’s hard to see,” says Eggers. “As a journalist I wrote a book about a period of time, and I just have to leave it when the book ends. I guess there’s limits to my role.”

MEETINGS AT MCSWEENEY’S take place in the basement. The space feels cramped, cool and secret in the manner of the clubhouses kids create beneath their parents’ houses. Eggers is in his natural habitat here, plunking onto the cushy, microfiber sectional and kicking his feet up onto the coffee table. He writes in a similar position at home in nearby Marin County, but in the garage and sitting on a “disgusting” couch, his feet elevated. “It’s the only position that doesn’t hurt.”

As much as Eggers craves his “humanity bath,” he treats writing novels as an act of solitude. And novels, he says, will be his main medium going forward. The collaborative work of writing screenplays is over for now. The two he wrote in 2004—for Spike Jonze’s *Where the Wild Things Are* and for *Away We Go*, which he co-wrote with Vida—already scratched that itch. “When somebody adapts something, that’s so much better because actual professionals do it instead of me trying to pretend like I know what I’m



Balloons at 826 Valencia Pirate Supply Store PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONA KUHN FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

doing, which I don't," says Eggers. Tom Hanks will star in Tom Tykwer's forthcoming adaptation of *A Hologram for the King*, and Daniel Radcliffe is attached to star in writer Wells Tower's take on *You*

Shall Know Our Velocity.

Solitude also means no Internet. Eggers doesn't have it in his garage or in his home. Weschler told me Eggers drives down the hill from his house daily, parks outside a lumberyard and piggybacks off the company's Wi-Fi. "I often wonder how it's possible that he can get all this stuff done," says Weschler, "and a real reason is the fact that he is basically off the grid." Eggers gets two newspapers delivered, but he's otherwise unsubscribed. "I like YouTube too much. I like television too much. I like movies too much," he says. Though he doesn't own a TV, he has a projector on which to binge-watch DVDs. "I just did *Girls*," says Eggers.

Every time a new issue comes up—education policies, domestic violence in the NFL, the gentrification of San Francisco—I wonder whether Eggers will go home and write about it. "I've been taking notes on some things for three or four years; there's piles everywhere," he says. "Ideally, at a certain point those ideas just take off."

Currently on Eggers's launchpad are expansion plans for 826, plans to nationalize ScholarMatch and his first illustrator's credit for a volume of humorous stories by Michigan school kids called *Where Is It Coming From? Detroit!* "I'm really excited about illustrating a real book," he says. "I've always wanted to do that." Eggers also plans to release *Visitants*, a book of travel writing, next year. And he does have a new novel in the works. "It's about a family," he says, before heading home for dinner with Vida and their two young children. "Until recently, I never necessarily expected to finish any

book that I began. I always wanted to. I was determined to. And I sort of plowed through it. But only recently do I genuinely sort of feel like I know what I'm doing.”

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