



## Meet Jess Walter



Dan Pelle

JESS WALTER, a former newspaper reporter, is the author of six books, including *The Zero*, a finalist for the National Book Award, and *Citizen Vince*, a winner of the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel. His novels have been translated into twenty-one languages. He also writes screenplays, and his essays, criticism, and short fiction have been widely published. Walter lives in his hometown of Spokane, Washington, with his family. 🍷



The [                    ] Collapse *(continued)*

*Here they are again—the bent boys, baked  
and buzzed boys, wasted, red-eyed, dry-mouth  
high boys, coursing narrow bright aisles  
hunting food as fried as they are . . .*

And then the paths of the two men diverge.

The first, a guy named Matt Prior, is offered a hit from a glass hash pipe. He declines at first, but gets hustled into driving the bangers to a party. On the way, he yields to their advances, getting ripped on weed that is orders of magnitude more potent than the nut-brown shake he remembers smoking as a youth.

Over the course of—how many hours again? Twenty-four? Thirty-six?—half to completely high the whole time, Prior convinces himself that all the problems in his life, numerous and suffocating, can be solved by buying this plant-derived, hydroponically enhanced euphoria and selling it to other similarly sad middle-aged f---ups.

The second man, meanwhile, turned his back on the bangers loitering at that store, probably with a wry little triangle smile peeking from the left side of his mouth—the kind he gets whenever the world surprises him, with either its beauty or its stupidity. This man got in his crappy old Maxima and went home to his beautiful wife and children, to his beloved dog and his tolerated cat, leaving the memory of those fading kids and that 24-hour store alone in a corner of his mind to incubate.

That second man is Jess Walter, a novelist of some repute.

Matt Prior is his guinea pig.

It's 7 a.m. on a Friday in August, and Jess Walter has gotten a late start. He stands in his recently remodeled kitchen, very slightly hunched over a small black espresso machine, pulling shots for his wife Anne's morning coffee. He wears checked Bermuda shorts, worn Asics, and a black T-shirt that reads, "Movies: killing books since 1920." Walter walks his wife's latte to the foot of the stairs and calls up to her, "I'm leaving your coffee on the stairs." There's an inaudible reply. "You want me to bring it up?" Dutifully, he disappears, returning to the espresso machine armed with a dishrag.

"This thing is leaking . . ."

Before making the second latte, he carefully cleans every inch of machine and counter. Only two things in Walter's life are messy: the very slightly graying mop of dark brown hair stowed under his baseball hat and the dorm-room tornado of his work office. The forty-four-year-old Walter is casually meticulous about the things he does. He makes the coffee, cleans the machine again, then grabs his breakfast, a homemade bar modeled on his favorite treat from the nearby Rocket Bakery. If she's in the house, Jess gives

Anne a delicate, comforting peck of stalwart marital partnership. He says, “I love you.”

“You going to work?”

“Yep, going to work.”

Then he slings his messenger bag over his shoulder and walks out the door, across the back lawn, thirty yards or so, to his office.

The gangbangers inside the 7-Eleven aren’t actually gangsters. Not really. They’re stoney kids dressed like characters from *The Wire*. Halfway to becoming full-fledged burnouts, keeping the dim flame of their youthful promise alive for now with a few credit hours at community college.

He never says it outright, not in 290 pages, but the youth of the high boys reminds Matt of when he was young too and his potential, in his own mind anyway, seemed limitless. He doesn’t feel young anymore, and the unavoidable fact of his aging kills him. There are several other things, at the moment, that are killing him too.

Matt Prior is the protagonist of *The Financial Lives of the Poets*, and Walter has taken pains to ensure that Prior’s life is as shitty as a well-educated white American male’s can be. In terms of gravity, the need for milk barely registers among the pressing problems that drive Prior to the 7-Eleven that night.

There’s (1) the layoff from his newspaper job, which Matt only went crawling back to after (2) his brainchild—a financial poetry website—emerged stillborn, crippled at conception (financial poetry? seriously?) and then starved in utero from a lack of startup capital.

There’s (3) the house he’s about to lose because the mortgage forbearance some crooked-ass bank manager suggested Prior sign up for has a balloon payment of thirty grand due . . . in about a week now.

There’s (4) the house itself, worth a shred of what he owes on it.

There are the (5) media and (6) financial stocks that Prior, being a romantic at heart, can’t bring himself to sell, even as they drag his net worth toward absolute zero.

There’s (7) his financial manager, who’s just a complete moron.

The biggest problem of all, though—the thing that will ultimately drive Prior back to 7-Eleven time and again, even when none of these other things is bothering him—is that Matt is quite sure (8) his wife Lisa is cheating on him. (9) With her high school boyfriend.

(10) A guy named Chuck.

The lumber king.

And all Matt wants to do is tell her: about their money problems and how he knows about Chuck and how none of that would matter if she’d just look at him the way she did when they were young and in love. But he can’t, because he thinks the money and the love are tied together somehow. Indivisible. ►

## The [ ] Collapse (continued)

And so, to the already looming financial crisis that has destroyed Matt Prior's portfolio, add these other crises, which somehow never get reported on CNN: the crisis of early middle age, the crisis of estranged love, the crisis of mistaking objects for security and of mistaking security for happiness.

The crisis of thinking that things are substitutes for people.

But the above would misrepresent Walter's latest novel if I didn't say one last thing: *The Financial Lives of the Poets* is a comedy.

Jess Walter spends his thirty-yard commute telling me about his kind old dog, a pound puppy who was afflicted with wanderlust as a stray and, though he now has a stable home, still vagabonds around Walter's neighborhood, splitting time at three different houses.

Upon reaching Walter's office, the carriage house at the back of his property, we climb the stairs—avoiding a thirteen-inch television that blocks part of the landing (the wood paneling on the sides and old-fashioned knobs put the vintage at 1988, at the least) and the single cross-trainer shoe that sits atop it—and duck inside. The space, he tells me, is meant to look as much like his college dorm room as possible. He has kept this desk, the bookshelves and posters (Kerouac behind him, Sonic Youth to his right) and ratty old easy chair. They are the bits of his old self, from a time long before his marriage or his children or his mortgage, that he allows himself to cling to. “Anne never comes up here,” he says. “It’s my little clubhouse.”

It's only once he's ensconced in his writerly Neverland, out of earshot of his adorable family, that Walter tells me he's hungover. Catastrophically so.

With scheduling conflicts on several sides, his weekly poker game hadn't happened in more than a month. Last night, he and his buddies made up for lost time. He pauses to moan with delight at his first sip of coffee. Then he wolfs down a third of his cookie before coming up for air: “God, that hit the spot.”

The game went way late, and Walter got a smidge hammered, but he ended up taking the pot, spoils he left on his wife's nightstand like a dutiful Neanderthal hunter. Supplementing the income from his novels, screenplays, and book reviews with the occasional game of ultra-low-stakes poker, Walter is a much more diversely invested writer than Matt Prior.

And more dogged. Every day, even when his head swims, even in the blush of a \$100 windfall (sometimes more) at the card tables, Walter makes the trip to his backyard office, and he writes.

Walter is a binge writer. In the sway of a great idea, he can propel himself through dozens of pages of text. He finished *The Financial Lives of the Poets* in mere months, the ideas and words pouring quickly and fluidly from brain to fingertips. Sometimes, though, the words don't come at all. And of course, if he doesn't write, he doesn't get paid. This was a much bigger problem early in his career. Like the year he made \$11,000.

“That was the year I was worried Anne would say, ‘Why don’t you go get a suit and we’ll do this like normal people?’” Walter says. But of course he didn’t want to be normal people. Already a successful writer by age thirty—he had a book deal for a piece of nonfiction on the Ruby Ridge standoff, a screenplay deal, and a share of a Pulitzer Prize nomination—he had fiction-writing aspirations that dated back to his childhood in the Spokane Valley. “Kids don’t say they want to be novelists,” he says. “They want to be basketball players. Still, even growing up, that was the thing I loved.”

And so the tradeoff of living the life of a writer is that Walter has to treat it like a job. It’s a job he’s gotten better at in fifteen years. He no longer cracks his skull against stories when inspiration fails—the way he did in those lean early years between quitting the *Spokesman-Review* and selling his first novel. Now he’ll shift gears and work on another project—a different novel, a book review, a new script.

It’s imperative that he work this way, Walter says, because the novels construct themselves differently every time. Sometimes it’s painstaking. A story might have a dozen characters, time jumps—countless moving pieces that throw up innumerable roadblocks that require Walter to carefully cast and recast a story and its characters over the course of years. Sometimes he abandons the thing completely, only to pick it up again when inspiration strikes. Sometimes inspiration doesn’t strike.

But then, sometimes a crazy lady calls him on the phone, tells him she doesn’t understand a word of his work and, within months, Walter has another novel written, shopped, sold, and at the printer.

At the time *Financial Lives* was coalescing in his mind, Walter was feeling relatively removed from the heart of the carnage that had begun to topple banks and car companies and the real estate industry. And yet things kept happening that tugged him closer to it. The all-night cable news stations went on 24/7 crisis coverage. His home began losing its value. Walter’s old paper began hemorrhaging good people—his friends in many cases. Anne feared for a time she might lose her job too, which would have left the family scrambling for health insurance.

And, then, one day last fall, a homeless couple moved onto the bus bench outside his house.

Walter swears he didn’t intentionally make Matt Prior’s life look like his—“It never even entered my mind”—but there they are. The house, the car, the erstwhile profession, the tendency to quill flippant or comical poetry, the late-night milk runs. It’s a common writerly trick—fill a book with trivial details from your life so you don’t bog down the writing of the larger narrative while you decide on the love interest’s eye color. Happens all the time. The fact that Walter left those details in this book rather than ►

The [            ] Collapse (*continued*)

changing them—it's no trick to make the Maxima a Saab, the hundred-year-old mansion a sprawling ranch home—is one final, perhaps subconscious, nod to his mind-set at the time.

"I was fascinated by how close to the edge we all are," Walter says—even himself and Anne and the kids and the beloved dog and the barely tolerated cat. The Walters were certainly not the Priors, patriarched by that hapless buffoon of a man, but how far could they slip before they got close? How far could Walter let himself slip?

"Great literature should name something," he believes. As for the society-deep mania surrounding our migrating market bubbles (junk bonds, then dot-coms, then real estate), which turns into society-wide ennui when they burst, which immediately begets another worldwide gold rush for the next big bubble? "There's not even a German word for whatever that is."

That mania led to a collapse that got even Walter himself worried—"this unsustainable mania that is untreatable and will run us into the ground." But there's something smaller too, something Walter learned from poor, dumb Matt Prior as the latter tries to right his finances and, thus, his marriage. "It was illuminating to see how this financial crisis was really a family crisis," Walter says. "Did I know that before? I don't think so."

Walter gets up to show me some of his journals from that period—a mash, he says, of stock analyses, musings on failure, and poems about women's underwear. He digs through a box and looks in a bookshelf that contains the international editions of his novels (*Over Tumbled Graves* became *Il fiume dei cadaveri*, "The River of the Dead," in Italy), but he comes up dry.

"Shit, I must have left it at home," he says.

And he's all the way at work already. What's he going to do? Go back and get it?

Unlike Matt Prior, who will spend eternity suffering these financial and nuptial indignities whenever someone cracks the spine of the book, Walter has moved on.

Unlike the unemployed, unemployable former reporter and financial poet, Walter still has a job to go to. He's in the speculation game, putting in literary work on the hunch that someone will find value enough to buy it. For five or so months in 2008, Matt Prior's undoing was Walter's job. Now he's on to new work.

And where the Matt Prior job was a breeze, Walter has been punching the clock on his next novel—which has already been sold, unfinished—for almost a decade. This next book is the most structurally complex narrative he's ever written. Even today, with the end in sight, he says, "it feels like this big, delicate thing," with a dozen moving parts and themes that elude him for

long stretches of time. He's taken trips to Italy, where part of the novel is set, for atmosphere and inspiration, but something has always cocked it up.

What gets Walter through those times is the belief, honed by trial and success, that time, patience, and determination can break all blockages.

"They should call it 'writing block,'" Walter says, placidly, "not 'writer's block.' Your fingers don't forget to find the keys." The inspiration dries up, though, and so you switch projects. Of course, that means you'll need tons of ideas for new projects, so Walter collects story ideas like stamps. A lot of those end up being worth less than the brain matter they're imprinted on, but it's important to test them out. No matter what, you don't stop writing.

Even if, at some point, he has to endure another \$11,000 year—so long as his wife is onboard with near-poverty—Walter will still be writing. He has never had any greater aspiration than to be a novelist. Well, except to play basketball.

And as edifying as the prospect of publishing is, it's the act of writing that keeps Walter writing. "There's a point where what you've written is reduced by that fact that it has been written," he says. "Like, 'Shit, I created life and it's four and a half inches tall and only does one thing?'" He talks of the postpartum depression writers get when they send their little midget offspring into the world, and how he'll cure himself by diving back into the work.

Chances are, then, on that morning when he turns in the Italian novel, Walter will already be on his next project. He'll get up around 5 a.m. to make coffee for himself and maybe for Anne. Then he'll grab a cookie, sling his messenger bag over his shoulder, and begin the short walk across his lawn. He'll take the stairs to his carriage house office, avoiding the TV and the cross-trainer on the landing before setting to work writing his next novels which will, with incisive wit and tenderness—the kind of careworn cynicism that comes from being a continually disappointed but still bullish idealist—make complete mockeries of our ability to understand our world, or even ourselves.

Chances are Walter will continue doing these things day in and day out, as though creating brutally personal stories and putting them to paper is the most natural thing in the world.

And for him, increasingly, it is. 

*A slightly longer version of this piece appeared in The Pacific Northwest Inlander, September 10, 2010. Used by permission of the author.*

## This Is Sort of How This Book Came About

by Jess Walter

SOMETIME IN 2007, I was reveling in self-importance from the warm critical response to my last novel, *The Zero*, when my phone rang. I answered it. The voice on the other end was crisp, elderly, female.

“Is this Jess Walter?”

“Yes.”

“The writer?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Hello. I’m eighty-six years old and my book club is reading your novel, *The Zero*, and I have to tell you, I don’t understand a word of it.”

“Oh. Uh . . . I’m sorry about that.”

“It makes you wonder what kind of crap they’re giving prizes to these days.”

“Oh no . . . it . . . didn’t actually win the National Book Award. It was just a finalist.”

“Well, thank goodness for that.”

“Yes. Thank goodness.”

“You seem like such a pleasant young man. Why would you write something like that?”

“I’m not sure what to tell you, ma’am. I know it can be a difficult book, but for a lot of readers, it’s their favorite of mine. You know, the *Washington Post* called it—”

*She interrupted me.* “What am I supposed to say at my book club?”

“Ah, well, I suppose you can tell them I was trying to capture our fractured sense of reality after the terrorist attacks in New York. I felt as if, culturally, we were suffering some sort of national post-traumatic stress disorder, some collective break from reality. So Brian Remy, the protagonist, suffers gaps in his consciousness, in his broken experience of life. It’s really an investigation of our own lurching grief, our misguided sense of vengeance, and those things

we clung to for phony salvation—a kind of consumer nationalism, a shallow, elementary-school patriotism, the promise of wealth that came with the housing bubble. These were insane responses to an utterly insane act, and they are what ultimately exist in the gaps of Remy’s understanding. In this way, Remy is an allegorical figure, meant to stand in for all of us: his disorientation is our disorientation, his mangled grief is our mangled grief, his culpability is our culpability. Unlike, say, Kafka’s characters, who are tested and tormented by absurdly inhuman bureaucracies, we were tormented and made superficial by ourselves, by the truth-defying culture we’ve created, by our own surreal mythologizing.”

*There was a pause on the other end of the phone as the weight of what I’d said sunk in.*

“Huh,” *she said finally*. “Yes. I’m afraid I didn’t get a word of that either.”  
“Ah.”

*Now we were both quiet.*

“But I have a theory.”

“Yeah, what’s your theory?”

“I believe your book is about 7-Eleven.”

*Now there was a pause on my end of the phone.* “Do you mean 9/11?”

“What did I say?”

“You said 7-Eleven . . . which is a convenience store. 9/11 was the date of the terrorist attacks.”

“Oh yes, I meant that one. The nine. Yes, thank you.”

“Well . . . uh . . . then, yeah. That is . . . what the book’s about. 9/11. You know, that and the crap I said about Kafka and mythologizing. You know, and some other stuff.”

“Excellent, then that’s what I’ll say at my book club meeting. 9/11. Yes, let me just write that in the margins. Thank you so much, young man. You’ve been most generous. And please tell me: which of your books *would* I like?”

*There was another pause on my end of the phone.* “Gosh, I don’t know.”

*We said goodbye.*

*I hung up the phone.*

*I stared out the window.*

*And I thought, maybe she’s right.*

*Maybe I should write a book about 7-Eleven.*

*Maybe that’s how you get at America, not through fractured surrealism, but through munchies and Slurpees, through overpriced milk and a big-ass 72-ounce Sprite at two in the morning.*

*So . . . that’s what I did.*

*Then the economy started cracking and shaking around me, and my friends and relatives began losing jobs and having their lives eroded out from under them; houses began going back to banks and those banks began failing and I saw that my 7-Eleven book was actually about that, as if every secret, every hypocrisy, every clue to our consumer culture lay in the overpriced, snack-filled aisles of a convenience store. So I made the book about that. And my old ►*

“ And I thought:  
what if instead  
of re-creating it  
later, I just stick  
my head out the  
window and  
describe what I see  
as we go barreling  
off the road? ”

**This Is Sort of How This Book Came About**  
(continued)

*profession, journalism, was dying and it broke my heart, so I made the book about that, too. And pot. And marriage. And children. And parents. And unraveling. And life, as it often feels, a few degrees too precarious, too sweet, just as it felt to me in that summer, fall, and winter of 2008. As it feels to me now.*

*I wrote quickly, because all of this seemed to be happening all around me and it seemed like an opportunity to do something novelists don't always get to do. I had this image of the social or cultural novelist as a detached bystander who usually comes across the scene of an accident after the fact and tries to reconstruct what happened based on the wreckage, the skid marks, the injuries. Here, then, is my novelistic assessment of the Cold War, etc. . . .*

*And I thought: what if instead of re-creating it later, I just stick my head out the window and describe what I see as we go barreling off the road?*

*So I did.*

*And that's about it.*

*Except this: if you're still out there, 7-Eleven woman, I'm still in the phone book. And maybe this is the book of mine you'll like. ♪*

# Have You Read? More by Jess Walter

## THE ZERO

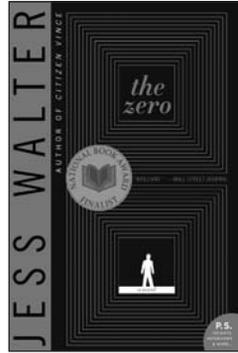
- National Book Award Finalist
- Winner of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award
- *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Finalist
- PEN USA Literary Fiction Award Finalist
- *A Washington Post, Seattle Times, and Kirkus Reviews* Best Book of the Year

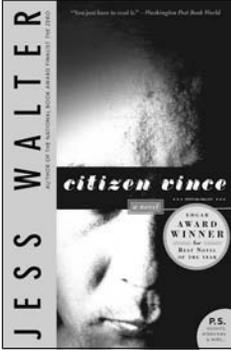
Hero cop Brian Remy wakes up to find he's shot himself in the head—so begins a harrowing tour of a city and a country shuddering through the aftershocks of a devastating terrorist attack. As the smoke clears, Remy finds himself lurching between moments of lucidity and days when he doesn't seem to be living his own life at all. The landscape around him is at once fractured and oddly familiar: a world dominated by a Machiavellian mayor known as "The Boss." With a new girlfriend he doesn't know and a son who pretends he's dead, Remy chases a trail of paper scraps for a shadowy intelligence agency known as the Department of Documentation. Whether that trail will lead Remy to an elusive terror cell—or send him circling back to himself—is only one of the questions posed by this provocative yet deeply human novel.

Likened to the works of Franz Kafka and Joseph Heller, *The Zero* is an extraordinary story of how our trials become our transgressions, of how we forgive ourselves and whether or not we should.

"Walter is an immensely talented writer. . . . He's written a new thriller not only with a conscience but also full of dead-on insights into our culture and its parasitic response to a national tragedy."  
—*Washington Post*

Read on





## Have You Read? (continued)

“This is political satire at its best: scathing, funny, dark. Grade: A.” —*Entertainment Weekly*

### CITIZEN VINCE

- Winner of the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel
- Finalist for the ITW Thriller of the Year Award
- An NPR’s *Fresh Air* Top Ten Book
- A Best Book of the Year (the *Washington Post*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Milwaukee Sentinel*)

Darkly hilarious and unexpectedly profound, *Citizen Vince* is an irresistible tale about the price of freedom and the mystery of salvation by an emerging writer of boundless talent.

Eight days before the 1980 presidential election, Vince Camden wakes up at 1:59 a.m. in a quiet house in Spokane, Washington. Pocketing his stash of stolen credit cards, he drops by an all-night poker game before heading to his witness-protection job dusting crullers at Donut Make You Hungry. This is the sum of Vince’s new life: donuts and forged credit cards—not to mention a neurotic hooker girlfriend.

But when a familiar face shows up in town, Vince realizes that his sordid past is still close behind him. During the next unforgettable week, on the run from Spokane to New York, Vince Camden will negotiate a maze of obsessive cops, eager politicians, and assorted mobsters, only to find that redemption might just exist—of all places—in the voting booth. Sharp and refreshing, *Citizen Vince* is the story of a charming crook chasing the biggest score of his life: a second chance.

“Refreshing . . . entertaining. . . For readers who appreciate wry precision and expert timing, it may be enough to know that *Citizen Vince* arrives with sky-high praise from both Ken Bruen and Richard Russo, with whom Mr. Walter shares these qualities. For others, the book’s fusion of humor, crime, and politics may be recommendation enough.”

—Janet Maslin, *New York Times*

### LAND OF THE BLIND

In this fiendishly clever and darkly funny novel, Jess Walter speaks deeply to the bonds and compromises we make as children—and the fatal errors we can make at any moment in our lives.

“Intelligently written, bittersweet, and thoroughly absorbing . . . an affecting meditation on friendship and the price of betrayal.”

—*Seattle Times*

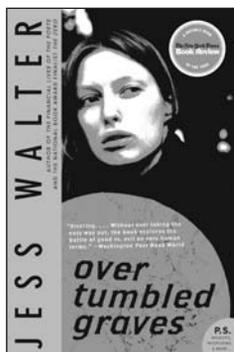
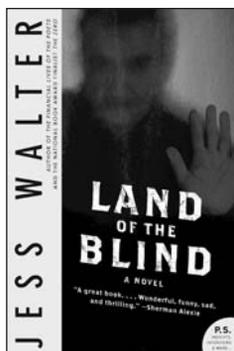
### OVER TUMBLED GRAVES

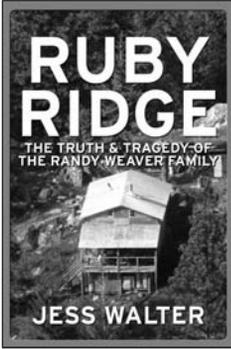
• A *New York Times* Notable Book

During a routine drug bust, Spokane detective Caroline Mabry finds herself on a narrow bridge over white-water falls in the center of town, face-to-face with a brutal murderer. As Caroline and her cynical partner, Alan Dupree, are thrown headlong into the search for a serial murderer who communicates by killing women, they uncover some hard truths about their profession . . . and each other.

“Riveting. . . Without ever taking the easy way out, the book explores the battle of good versus evil on very human terms.”

—*Washington Post Book World*





**Have You Read?** *(continued)*

**RUBY RIDGE**

On the last hot day of summer in 1992, gunfire cracked over a rocky knob in northern Idaho, just south of the Canadian border. This is the true story of what happened on Ruby Ridge: the tragic and unlikely series of events that destroyed a family, brought down the number-two man in the FBI, and left in its wake a nation increasingly attuned to the dangers of unchecked federal power.

“A stunning job of reporting.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“The definitive account of Ruby Ridge.”

—*New York Post*

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