"It's Time That Writing Took Something Back From the Internet"

Gchatting with "Books of Numbers" author Joshua Cohen



Gideon Lewis-Kraus /
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Audio Coming Soon

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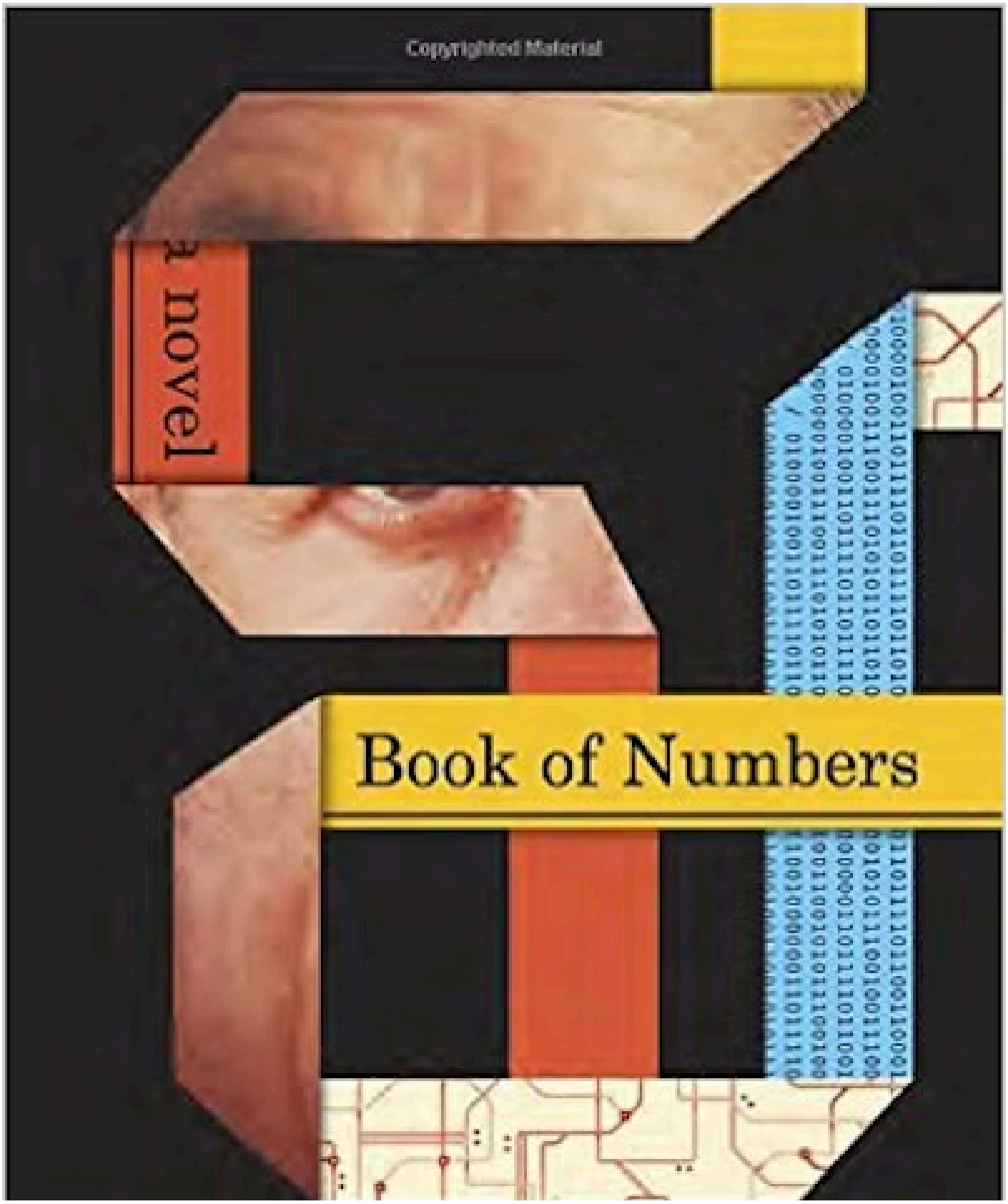
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Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers* has been ably, if lazily, described as 'the Great American Internet novel,' but for the most part these comparisons have dwelled on the book's preoccupations—distraction and voyeurism, mobility in junkspace, raids on privacy and the manic assemblage of data points that render a pixelated identity—rather than the book's style. He has taken the internet on its own terms, in a novel whose prose parries the obscenity, obstinacy, and sheer excess of online discourse.

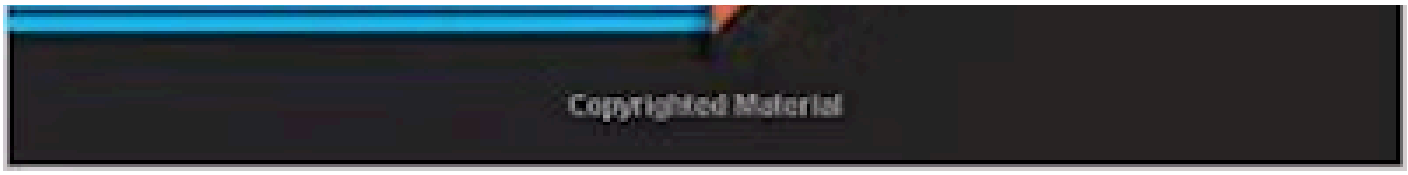
Its language is willfully anti-lapidary for an age in which no symbol of scarcity seems appropriate. But the book's defiance and perversity is all surface form, and each vulgarity is a metaphor. *Purdah*, for example, the Islamic virtue of modesty, exists for the narrator—the book has two, and they are equally unreliable—as both an actual dogmatic defense against modernity and a figurative way to talk about the persistent obscurity in our objects of desire. The mechanism both provokes and satirizes.

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Cohen himself is a nice Jewish conservatory graphomaniac, who spent the last ten years coming up through small presses and supporting himself (barely) as a book reviewer of outlandish range and appetite. In the last year alone, he's written about Toni Morrison, Heidi Julavits, Silvina Ocampo, Allyson Hobbs, Saskia Goldschmidt, Eimear McBride, W. G. Sebald, and Joan Rivers.

He and I have been friends for a few years. Cohen wanted to conduct this interview over whiskey, but whiskey only exacerbates his profligate tendencies. I thought that an internet novel would best be conducted over chat. I also thought it would delimit his answers. In the chat itself, he pretends as though it was his idea all along. Yet another evasion. But I got to reconstruct the conversation as I remembered it. I'm sure each of us thinks he got the last laugh.—*Gideon Lewis-Kraus*

Joshua Cohen: So who's starting? Did I just start?

Gideon Lewis-Kraus: so

JC: You're not going to use capital letters?

GLK: I can capitalize later on for both of us. So we live just a few miles from each other, but you insisted that this interview take place over Gchat. Why did you insist on that form?

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2. Because I want to be able to search stuff up (and lie that I haven't searched anything). I love watching Nabokov giving interviews on YouTube, btw—he's constantly looking down at his lap as if he's thinking, but really he's reading his notecards—his prepared responses.

GLK: But you've made my life impossible by insisting that this chat is "off the record," meaning it won't be saved in my chats. I won't have anything at all to show for it.

JC: Thank God, or Brin/Page, for that.

GLK: Is that just concerns over privacy? After all, your book is in part about how the novelist might react to the problems of surveillance.

JC: It's that, and the Reagan problem, too: Reagan being the first politician who had to change his stump speeches, because they were broadcast. He couldn't give the same speech twice and just sub in "Hello, Des Moines"!

So the Internet makes the writer work harder—I have to say things here I've never said before, or else be caught out in repeating myself. But this way, if I'm caught in an infelicity, or in an incorrect fact—or, again, if I'm caught repeating myself—it's your fault!

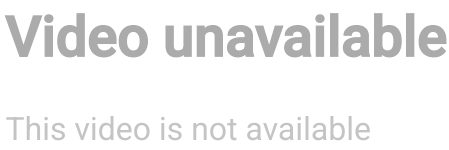
GLK: So you license me to recreate this to the best of my memory? Why give up that autonomy?

JC: 1. Because I trust you.

2. Because, to paraphrase Vidal Sassoon, if I don't look good, you don't look good.

Also—the recreation principle is beautiful. There's nothing more poignant than a man talking to himself, who doesn't think he's talking to himself. That, of course, is the position of every writer. Consider me your character.

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That's it.

GLK: I don't believe you.

JC: I swear. And this document I'm typing up—from a notebook.

No porn.

Chatting with you requires both hands.

GLK: Which echoes the opening line of your book: "If you're reading this on a screen, fuck off. I'll only talk if I'm gripped with both hands." It's a crude joke, but it also sets us up for the central conflict of the novel as the one between the book and the screen. The Book of Numbers refers to the fourth book of the five books of Moses, which in the original Hebrew is titled "In the Wilderness."

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GLK: There was a bit of a pause there for that explanation. Was that to consult Wikipedia or a Hebrew-English dictionary?

JC: No Wikipedia! I just went to find my cigs.

GLK: I didn't mean to insult you! I only asked because this is an extremely erudite novel, each sentence teeming with arcane allusions, but then there's a long section toward the end where the narrator is forbidden from going online, and the joke is that he loses a lot of his acrobatic energy.

JC: Exactly. I wrote that section, and edited that section, without searching anything up.

Information being the enemy of the novel.

GLK: Anyway, the stuff about the wilderness is a reference to the forty years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert before they were allowed into the Promised Land – not by Moses, who had to die as a member of the Jews 1.0, but by his successor, Joshua, the representative of Jews 2.0, who did not remember their slavery in Egypt. Your *Book of Numbers* is a record of the conversations of two forty-year-old Joshuas, talking in a hotel room in the desert. The writer JC: is ghostwriting the memoirs of the tech billionaire JC:. So what comes after the desert?

JC: In the novel, the Promised Land is up for grabs... The 40 years in the desert is analogized in my book as the 40 years between 1971 and 2011—the span between the advent of personal computing and, say, surveillance culture—or the public awareness of surveillance culture. The slavery in Egypt is treated (tongue firmly in cheek) as slavery to the culture of the book—the culture of the codex. Freedom, the Promised Land, is online... an idea almost as crazy and fraught as the "original" Zionism...

GLK: So, wait, if the Promised Land is an online Zion, then what's with the writer JC:'s sexual preoccupation with *purdah*, with the Islamic restrictions on how women

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JC: The writer JC—while conducting interviews for the ghostwritten memoirs, while avoiding conducting interviews—becomes fascinated by *purdah*—by wandering around the Emirates and seeing all these women, but not seeing them.

GLK: His greatest turn-on isn't the plenitude of the Internet—he's landed himself in a kind of helpless porn ennui—but the artificial scarcity under purdah. With the idea, in other words, of things that are kept secret, hidden.

JC: Part of his fascination—and he's aware of this, of course—is just a matter of metaphor-making. He's concerned with secrecy, with hiding things himself. And he thinks to himself, at one point: these are just about the only women I've ever been around whom I can't look up online.

GLK: He's drawn to creatures that protect themselves from surveillance.

JC: Yes, that's his *eros*: the forbidden, but not the old Orientalist forbidden—or not just that. Rather the new forbidden is that-which-can't-be-known. Because it can't be searched.

GLK: This comes through most clearly not only the book's language, which is so vital and sui generis, but even in its orthography. Puns are the things that can't be machine-processed, and so many compound words are run together without hyphens.

JC: Metaphors, similes, puns—all manner of metonymy—I'm interested in language that cannot be parsed by a machine—language that can only be understood through acculturation. The problem is it's a closed-system—people learn to use the language best-optimized—the technology comes to teach the user the language, when it should be the other way around.

The same purdah-obsession is there earlier in the novel with the idea of a firewall—a word we use without thinking of its origins. The writer JC searches it up, using his employer's technology, and finds himself back in the Austro-Hungarian theater,

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Rehistoricizing dead language to make it live again—that's his credo, and mine, too. That and Keep Drinking.

GLK: So the firewall is the thing that protects us from the spectacle—a spectacle that can incinerate us. To confuse Google further by mixing all the metaphors we're juggling: there are two options available to us in an increasingly monocultural world you call, at one point, "rezoned for lobbies." The first is the burqa or and the second is the novelistic use of language. Is that fair?

JC: Fair to whom? To me—as a white male novelist? But I get your point: either you can hide, cloak, obfuscate—give all your efforts to your own protection and elevate that protection into a theology that governs your every act. Or you can hide, cloak, obfuscate as an artistic response.

Obviously I side with the latter.

No one ever FORCED anyone to become a novelist.

GLK: Or just that there's retreat and there's attack, and that this book, unlike so many arguments for the novel in the age of the internet, is not written in a wistful tone. This isn't elegy. It rises to the challenge of internet language, rather than whines about it.

JC: I retreat in what I'll lazily call my "private life." I have a credit-card, and a phone —I answer emails—I answer questions on chat in the middle of the day. Then, late at night I write against other people who do just that.

I also think—the Internet has taken so much from writing—it's time that writing took something back from the Internet. I like to think of my rage as "reclamation."

GLK: Well, it's like Wittgenstein says, a language is like a city, with a labyrinthine old center, laid down with haphazard alleyways, and it's surrounded over time with a rational boulevard grid.

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JC: But while writing this book I also thought of the language in computational terms.

Consider the Arabic numerals: they encode integers (i.e. 6, the numeral, contains six ones: 1+1+1+1+1+1). And language, for me, operates similarly: each word in the book was chosen not only for its meaning, but also for its historical referents—there are "secondary" meanings packed into my sentences in the same way individual integers are packed into "numbers." The novelist is the person who chooses what "state" each bit is "in"—and is free to flip at his/her discretion.

The idea that meanings are packed into words—this isn't some antiquated graybearded spiel. This is life.

GLK: Except that any given word can carry near-infinite meaning.

JC: Except, I believe in cultural context. Or I believe I live in a cultural context.

And that each novelist creates his/her own context with each book.

For example: read this thing as a tech tale, read this as a biblical allegory.

Read this as an Arab sex romp, or a treatise on How Not to Ghostwrite.

The idea was to do this not just with language but with fictional tropes:

How to collapse all these genres not with trickery, but in a way that mirrors and critiques the online experience.

And reclaims that reading-mind, that reading-time, for the book.

GLK: Can I venture a comparison?

JC: Venture! Venture!

GLK: Well, this book has already garnered comparisons to take your pick of the Big

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power. But that now power is laid bare; the networks are no longer hidden, and we ourselves fill in all the details.

JC: Paranoia is so over. That's what you're saying, no?

The only thing to still be paranoid about is that there might not be anything left to be paranoid about.

Everything has "come true."

GLK: So that this novel, instead of uncovering a secret, uses pun/allusion/allegory to multiply the possible meanings, whereas the paranoid style is figuring out what's going on behind the scenes.

JC: It's the transference of omniscience. That's how I think about it.

In mid-20th-century America it could be argued that the novelist still had the most claim of anyone to omniscience. Whatever he/she couldn't prove, he/she could gesture at.

The writers—not just the novelists but the writers—had won this power from God—way back in the time of the Enlightenment. And the later in the last century it got, the more that power was eroded.

GLK: So far, so Wood.

JC: Suddenly, everyone was omniscient.

Or could be.

Suddenly, the collective Wikis—our amateur intelligence agencies—were God. At least, the professional intelligence agencies were.

They saw and heard all.

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GLK: Sage? Mystic? Oracle?

JC: The dreamer. The prophet.

He-who-fights-against-God.

But this change in the novelist's task hasn't much been remarked-upon.

It seems to me that if the novel has any future it's to scrutinize how we continue to live and write in a world that so relentlessly *scrutinizes us*—for ways in which to turn yesterday's suspicions into tomorrow's news.

Before this digital omniscience the novel could ask, "Is this true?" After, the novel should ask, "How can I live with it?"

GLK: SOMETHING LIKE- You're really trying for the prophet job, huh? Seriously, though, the book draws interesting parallels, both implicitly and explicitly, between religion and the internet.

JC: Just think about sin, right?

All those laws about not eating this, or not eating that, or no jerking off. That's because God can see and hear you at all times.

For a significant portion of human history this seemed to bother many people. And still does. Now, though, we're aware that "everything" we do can be seen and heard.

By an entity that has proven itself fairly Old Testament in its notion of random or arbitrary "justice." (The U.S. govt.) What is the response of the American public?

Overwhelmingly the response is "eh." Or "feh."

GLK: So in a sense your response is that nobody is ever going to be persuaded to take the bunker option, but that people might just be convinced to take the linguistic one

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JC: Yes… If "they"—whoever "they" ever are—appropriate your language, you have to speak in a new one. Or redefine all your terms to make a new one.

Detournement is what it's called, with an accent over the first "e" that I can't type. French, '68.

GLK: You're looking things up again.

JC: There's no way you can prove that.

What I'm saying is, nothing of the material changes—only the use of its does. And the use, in turn, changes the material. But this, incidentally, is how anyone figures out how to write. You take what you can from what you read, and then present it as your own by moving the margins.

For example: how to write about a world in which there's no paranoia because everything is true would've impossible for me without Pynchon, DeLillo, etc.

It's not a bad exercise for writing a contemporary novel: just pretend that all the '70s novelists were "right."

GLK: Except that everything they sought to uncover is now just being done in the open.

JC: "The content doesn't change, just the context…" And now I sound like a CEO.

GLK: One of the great pleasures of this book is that you've split yourself into two JC:s. You can talk at once in the mode of the CEO JC: and in the mode of the Jeremiah, the writer JC:. And suggest that in fact these are two faces of the same person.

JC: That was revenge: on all the other JCs in this world. Or "Joshuas Cohen."

And also it was an attempt to safeguard the multeity of existence from representation online.

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The double-naming in my novel is an attempt preserve that depth. Doubles stories are trying to tell us exactly the opposite of what the Internet tells us. The Internet says: see, you're the same as everyone else, or you can be. Doubles stories say: you're not even the same as yourself.

Literature respects the split in the soul.

GLK: But, from the beginning, this is a much more playful doubling than anything we get in Dostoevsky: it's just two Joshes joshing around.

JC: Sure—it has to begin as shits and giggles.

GLK: This being the great irony of the internet: the thing designed for multiplicity has become such a great leveling force.

JC: Absolutely. It levels. But to my mind that's not the primary danger.

Rather it's the novelty—the neolatry—the worship of the new.

GLK: But your own book is full of neologism.

JC: But that's the thing about neologism: you can't understand one unless you understand the "antelogism."

Think of the Jewish-American novel. Whatever the fuck that was.

GLK: The difficulty is always the assimilation, you mean.

JC: Exactly.

Jews writing in American English had a ball for a couple of decades.

How? They were translating Yiddish, if not the language itself then Yiddish-mind-patterns, into a new language. Their readership understood the translation-process—they got what was being transported, and they got the tension of the transport. But

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GLK: So this book, which is already being called the "Great American Internet novel," is actually just a new version of the immigrant novel?

JC: I mean, that's the dominant analogy—the generation liberated from Egyptian slavery = the generation enslaved to literature, and the Promised Land = online. So yes, it's a migrant story. All of Numbers, the Biblical book, is a migrant story. The people wander—they pick up strange traditions—they experiment with different gods—they refashion themselves, or they try to, and in the process of refashioning, they die.

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