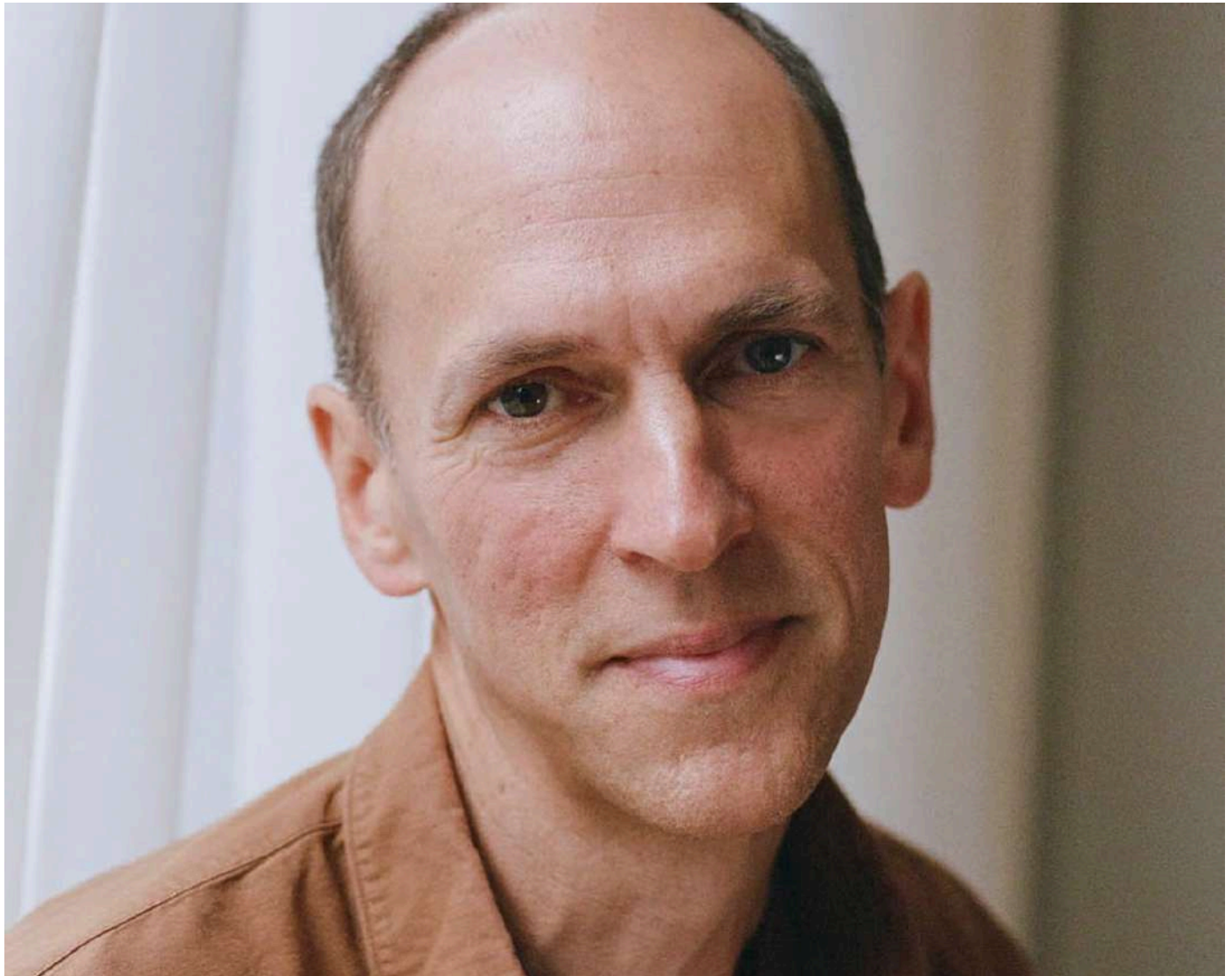


The books of my life Books

Ben Markovits: 'I used to think any book concerned with people falling in love can't be very good'

The British-American author on arguing about Jane Austen, the joys of Jerome K Jerome, and revising his opinion of Philip Roth



📷 'I remember feeling sad I'd never again read *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time' ... Ben Markovits. Photograph: Kat Green

Ben Markovits

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My earliest reading memory

I used to read Donald Sobol's Encyclopedia Brown stories with my mother. It's a classic American kids' series about a boy detective and his brilliant sidekick, Sally, who protects him as they tackle their arch enemy, Bugs Meany, a kind of high school bully version of Professor Moriarty. We'd sit in the kitchen together and try to solve the crimes. Of course, for me it was also an opportunity to hang out with my mom. I'm one of five kids; attention was hard to come by. But I was also drawn to the picture Sobol paints of small-town all-American life, which I don't think I ever felt a part of. We moved around too much.

My favourite book growing up

I remember finishing JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* at elementary school and already feeling sad about the fact that I'd never be able to read it again for the first time. I have a dim memory that I was in school, because the feeling has something of the flavour of the school hallway and the bright lights on the shiny tiled floors, and the general sense of being shut in for the rest of the day. Some of my older brother's friends had already introduced me to *Dungeons & Dragons*, which shaped the next few years of my life. Most of my favourite novels started with the idea of some lonely figure wandering out into the world to see what the world would do to him. (Later, Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* was another favourite.)

The book that changed me as a teenager

Goodbye to All That, by Robert Graves. I was 17 and my parents had just moved us to Berlin for the year. Part of the appeal was that Graves had a German background, too, but I think I was also responding to the conversational style. As a book, it was very good company. I had just moved school and didn't know anybody.

The writer who changed my mind

When I was a dumb kid I used to get into arguments with my big sister about Jane Austen. I think I had just read *Pride and Prejudice* in school. I thought, any book that's so concerned with people falling in love can't be very good. Later, my sister became a professor of 19th-century literature. It was from her that I first heard Austen's account of her own virtues as a writer, that famous line about the two inches of ivory on which she produced her effects. Most of my favourite writers now work in that tradition.

The book or author I came back to

My wife and I were briefly part of a book group in our 20s; I don't think either of us often read the books. But somebody picked Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, and for whatever reason, I got through it – even though I didn't like it. It sounded

too much like the academics I knew from my parents' dinner table, trying to make big statements about America. Later someone suggested *I Married a Communist*, and I changed my mind – it was just the range of things Roth had thought about, and could speak of with feeling.

The book I reread

Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*. In my 20s, I sent it to my mother to cheer her up after she'd just had some bad medical news. Years later, during the pandemic, my son listened to the audiobook endlessly – I think we first played it to the kids on long car rides.

The book I discovered later in life

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne. For some reason, I never read it in high school, which is where it usually gets ruined for most American kids. Then, about 10 years ago, I assigned it for a class without having read it on novellas. It turned out to be much longer than I expected, and much, much better. Just a wonderful, tough novel about how to deal with the fact that who you are in the world isn't who you want to be.

The book I am currently reading

Cousin Phillis, by Elizabeth Gaskell. Another recommendation from my sister, and another writer who works those two inches of ivory.

My comfort read

The World of Jeeves, by PG Wodehouse, my favourite selection of his stories. I've been reading it now for almost 40 years. Sometimes I have to leave it alone for a while, because the gum has lost its flavour. It's always a pleasure to come back to it, though.

● *The Rest of Our Lives* by Ben Markovits is published by Faber. To support the Guardian order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.

At this unsettling time

We hope you appreciated this article. Before you close this tab, we want to ask if you could support the Guardian at this crucial time for journalism in the US.

In his first presidency, Donald Trump called journalists the enemy; a year into his second term, it's clear that this time around, he's treating us like one.

From Hungary to Russia, authoritarian regimes have made silencing independent media one of their defining moves. Sometimes outright censorship isn't even required to achieve this goal. In the United States, we have seen the administration apply various forms of pressure on news outlets in the year since Trump returned to office. One of our great