

# [***Paul Auster, prolific and experimental man of letters and filmmaker, dies at 77***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BXM-T9B1-DYMD-62GD-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

NEW YORK — Paul Auster, a prolific, prize-winning man of letters and filmmaker known for such inventive narratives and meta-narratives as “The New York Trilogy” and “4 3 2 1,” has died at age 77.

Auster's death was confirmed by his wife and fellow author, Siri Hustvedt, who said that Auster died Tuesday at their home in Brooklyn. He had been diagnosed with lung cancer in 2022.

“The long, rich, often funny, intimate dialogue we had for decades is over,” she said in a statement, “but Paul continues to speak, and he continues to tell stories in books that have been translated into over forty languages and are very much alive in me and in the readers who have loved his tales all over the world.”

Starting in the 1970s, Auster [*completed more than 30 books*](https://apnews.com/a27cc401fc404e2db59d199a46c32a0b), from memoirs to novels to poetry. A longtime fixture in the Brooklyn literary scene, he never achieved major commercial success in the U.S., but was widely admired overseas for his cosmopolitan worldview and erudite and introspective style. He was named a chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government in 1991. He was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize and voted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Called the “dean of American post-modernists” and “the most meta of American meta-fictional writers,” Auster blended history, ***politics***, genre experiments, existential quests and self-conscious references to writers and writing. “The New York Trilogy,” which included “City of Glass,” “Ghosts” and “The Locked Room," was a postmodern detective saga in which names and identities blur and one protagonist is a private eye named Paul Auster. The brief “Travels in the Scriptorium” wraps a story inside a story as a political prisoner finds himself compelled to read a series of narratives by fellow victims that will eventually include his own.

“He was a wonderful storyteller in the postmodern vein,” the Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Richard Powers said Wednesday. “He would take you through all these twists and turns and loops and still make you keep reading.”

The author’s longest and most ambitious work of fiction was “4 3 2 1,” published in 2017 and [*a Booker finalist*](https://apnews.com/article/b834c24b8cdd468f847f0ecf1898c9fe). The 800-plus page novel is a tale of quadraphonic realism in the post-World War II era, the parallel journeys of Archibald Isaac Ferguson from summer camp and high school baseball to student life in New York and Paris during [*the mass protests of the late 1960s.*](https://apnews.com/article/columbia-gaza-campus-protests-1968-505f9da3aef5ce7a9f7d6eb962dacb5d)

“Identical but different, meaning four boys with the same name parents, the same bodies, and the same genetic material, but each one living in a different house in a different town with his own set of circumstances,” Auster writes in the novel. “Each one on his own separate path, and yet all of them still the same person, three imaginary versions of himself, and then himself thrown in as Number Four for good measure; the author of the book.”

His other works included the nonfiction compilations “Groundwork” and “Talking to Strangers”; a family memoir, “The Invention of Solitude”; a biography of [*novelist Stephen Crane;*](https://apnews.com/general-news-e098c4b5a83345e98f766e7cb974a765) the novels “Leviathan” and “Talking to Strangers” and the poetry collection “White Space.” In his most recent novel, “Baumgartner,” the title character is a widowed professor haunted by mortality and asking himself “where his mind will be taking him next.”

Auster was so much the old-fashioned author that he worked on a typewriter and disdained email and other forms of electronic communication. But he did have an unusually active film career compared to his writing peers.

In the mid-1990s, Auster collaborated with [*director Wayne Wang*](https://apnews.com/hub/wayne-wang) on the acclaimed art-house film “Smoke,” an adaptation of Auster’s humorous story about a Brooklyn cigar shop and a certain customer named Paul. The film starred Harvey Keitel, Stockard Channing and William Hurt among others and brought Auster an Independent Spirit Award for best first screenplay. Wang and Auster quickly followed “Smoke” with “Blue in the Face,” an improvised tale which returned to the Brooklyn cigar store and again starred Keitel, along with appearances by everyone from Lou Reed to Lily Tomlin.

Auster eventually made the movies himself. Keitel was featured in “Lulu on the Bridge,” a love story released in 1998 that Auster directed and co-wrote with Vanessa Redgrave. Nine years later, Auster wrote and directed the drama “The Inner Life of Martin Frost,” starring David Thewlis as a novelist and Irène Jacob as the woman with an uncanny connection to the story he’s been writing.

“The four times I’ve worked on movies, I’ve never had a problem talking to actors,” Auster told [*director Wim Wenders*](https://apnews.com/hub/wim-wenders) during a 2017 conversation that ran in Interview magazine. “I always felt in great harmony with them. It was after those experiences that I realized there’s a similarity between writing fiction and acting. The writer does it with the words on the page, and the actor does it with his body. The effort is the same.”

Auster married Hustvedt in 1982 and had a daughter, Sophie, who appeared in “The Inner Life of Martin Frost.” He also had a son, Daniel, from an earlier marriage to the author-translator Lydia Davis. Daniel Auster would struggle with drug addiction and die of an overdose in 2022, shortly after being charged with second-degree manslaughter in the death of his infant daughter, Ruby.

Paul Auster never commented publicly on his son’s death, but he had written often about parenthood. In “The Invention of Solitude,” published in 1982, he reflected on the “thousands of hours” he spent with Daniel in the first three years of his life and wondered whether they mattered. “It will be lost forever,” Auster wrote. “All these things will vanish from the boy’s memory forever.”

Born in Newark, New Jersey, Paul Benjamin Auster grew up in a middle-class, Jewish home torn between his father’s thrift, to the point of miserliness, and his mother’s urge to spend, to the point of recklessness. He would soon feel like an outsider in his family, soured by their materialism and more inspired by James Joyce’s “Ulysses” or the tales of Edgar Allan Poe than by the security of a traditional job.

His ideals would be well tested. After graduating from Columbia University, Auster struggled for years before he was able to find a publisher or earn money from his books. He wrote poetry, translated French literature, worked on an oil tanker, attempted to market a baseball board game and even thought of earning income by growing worms in his basement.

“All along, my only ambition had been to write,” Auster wrote in a brief memoir, “Hand to Mouth,” published in 1995. “I had known that as early as 16 or 17 years old, and I had never deluded myself into thinking I could make a living at it. Becoming a writer is not a ‘career decision’ like becoming a doctor or a policeman. You don’t choose it so much as get chosen, and once you accept the fact that you’re not fit for anything else, you have to be prepared to walk a long, hard road for the rest of your days.”

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AP journalist Matt Kemp in London contributed to this report.

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