

RIGHTING CRAFT INTERVIEW: PREFACE (22 Sept 2021)

The following two-part interview first appeared online at *rightingcraft.com* and is reposted here with kind permission (© Righting Craft Publishing, 2021).

Sally O. Witman (Southwest Correspondent for Righting Craft) reported that while she was transcribing the recording of our initial in-person interview (Feb 2020)—editing out extraneous social niceties, the usual interruptions, and no doubt some redundancy on my part—more questions arose for her; after re-reading the first three volumes of the novel under discussion, a second interview seemed to her imperative. However, for over a year, the COVID-19 pandemic and related public health policies wrecked all plans to meet again, and I was disinclined to hold our second conversation on ZOOM™. Instead, sensing that we would likely meet again face-to-face one day, I sent her an advanced draft of Volume IV and suggested she take advantage of the shifting and frustrating shelter-in-place protocols to read the novel's last book in manuscript.

As travel restrictions relaxed in May 2021, Ms. Witman ventured back to the Bay Area and conducted the second interview. On that occasion, we ambled and lazed about Berkeley's UC Botanical Garden in a cool, bright, breezy Strawberry Canyon, where masked and non-masked personages played out a masquerade under the malingering mish-mash of rules, regulations, and personal choice. Again, she recorded our conversation and lightly edited it for posting at *rightingcraft.com*.

The supplemental piece, POSTSCRIPT, reproduces a subsequent exchange that transpired only in written form, presenting a set of questions and answers as they appeared in an email exchange (Sept 2021).

This aging and largely unheralded author feels grateful to have had such a keen, sharp, respectful, younger reader—and playful mind!—paying attention to his work, and he wishes to express his deep gratitude and appreciation to Ms. Witman, who can be reached at [*salwit@rightingcraft.com*](mailto:salwit@rightingcraft.com).

RIGHTING CRAFT INTERVIEW: PART ONE

FIRST SET

Sally Witman: So, how would you like to start?

Peter Boffey: You've traveled farther than I have. You go first.

Okay. Then how about the title?

That's already a lot!

THE THREE NAKED LADIES OF CLIFFPORT [3NLs].

And A NOVEL IN SIX BOOKS. Don't forget that part.

How did you come up with that one?

Which, the title or subtitle?

Either, both. At what point did you think those up?

I forget when they came to me. I didn't sit and think them up, not all at once anyway.

Taken together, they're intriguing—

... not intimidating?

Not to me. They're intriguing, which I guess good titles should be. No, not intimidating, especially not once I'd read the back cover blurb and started reading the first book. But the allusion to "a novel in six books" still perplexes me.

Me too!

One novel, six books, four volumes...?

Like a lot of this project, the title evolved over time along with the plotting, composition, revisions, the printed presentation. Co-evolved, really.

I can imagine. How long have you been working on it?

Since 2014. That I can date since it was after I'd put out my first standalone novel, TWO HALF BROTHERS, OR SEPARATING OUT. I forget now what else I may have considered entitling the new novel. You see, when I finished Book Four, I thought I'd done with the 3NLs. I still like to believe that there's a sense of closure at the end of Book Four. Or at least a coming full circle, what with the two companion BOOKENDS rather obviously framing the first four books. But at that stage, those four books seemed too short to print as separates and too long to print as a bulkily

bound four-in-one paperback. So, we decided to offer the first two books as Volume I and the next two books as Volume II. I think that sort of decision-making has been a fairly standard operating procedure in the printing and publishing industry. At least once upon a time it was. It was a matter of expedience, really, not part of some grand marketing plan. But the three naked ladies of Cliffport were not done with me, and it turned out there was another kilo weight of their story to be told. Books Five and Six have turned out long enough to be printed and bound separately so we present them as Volumes III and IV. If I had to do it all over again, if I'd known, etc. I don't think the numerical nonsense is a game killer. It is a nuisance though, isn't it? But you seem ready, willing, and able to have soldiered on.

I am, I have. When will Volume IV become available?

Should be ready for print-on-demand sometime late next year, 2021.

Cool. I wonder if you ever considered or might still be considering making the novel available as an e-edition?

To be read on a handheld device? I've considered it. I myself don't do any long, serious reading—certainly no fiction—on my smartphone or tablet. And with all the back-and-forth page turning between the books, which I encourage—and which 3NLs may at times require, for optimal appreciation—would that be practical on a small handheld device or a small screen? I'm sure it could be made more practical if some sophisticated techies laid out the book for e-reading, but I suspect the benefits and rewards of old-fashioned book reading would have to be sacrificed, and for what?

Exposure to a larger audience...?

That'd be nice.

An audience on the move and in a hurry to—

... whoa, stop right there, please. I'd venture a guess that no one in a hurry will be reading 3NLs in any medium any time soon. Going paperless, shipping-less, that'd be nice in terms of reducing the carbon footprint. Portability? Sure, a bound book is only one more thing to lug around while on the run. But I've never been able to justify making the conversion to an e-book format. If speed and mobility are the key values to e-publishing, then maybe 3NLs is just not a convenient time-killer of choice. I've already suggested that I don't really know how to navigate those reading apps and special devices dedicated to e-reading. And as the novel evolved, my book designer and I employed maps and other graphic elements embedded in the narrative text. Would they show to their best on a small screen? Anyway, I don't think 3NLs' dyed-in-the-wool pre-e-novel nature lends itself to much quick, down-and-dirty mass exposure. Where's the instant pop appeal? There goes my fame, alas! I have enough trouble trying to hone some sort of so called elevator speech to deliver in response to the basic question, "What's it about?" If at all possible, I prefer taking the

stairwell at greater leisure. Most people don't make the time for that or have the interest. So there goes my fortune, too!

I want to ask you about those graphics. I first noticed them popping up, as it were, in Volume III. Of course, I haven't seen Volume IV yet....

Oh, you must mean Book Six ... *just kidding!*

(laughter)

So what about those illustrations? They have nothing to do with contemporary (once-futuristic) graphic novels. They still only act as graphic elements, as you said, in a verbal text. But still...?

Well, first, they're not intended to function as illustrations proper. They're meant to be extra-verbal evidence. There are even more of them in Book Six, more quasi-documentary evidence designed to confront the reader.

Quasi-documents...?

Evidence. I provide specimens of pseudo-documentary evidence. I'm not dumbing down with illustrations but inviting the reader to confront some of the same material that a character is having to deal with. Sometimes we've placed my facsimiles of written documents in a NOTES section. Other times, as I said, the graphics are embedded right there in the narrative line, and their precise placement has to be strategic, for maximal effect.

And the effect is...?

To draw the reader closer in. To give them the felt experience of the greater fictional "lie." A lie not meant to deceive but to momentarily seduce or distract, certainly to engage. Fomenting disbelief. Of course, wink wink, it's really all absolute truth, whatever I write, that is, wink wink.

Awesome. I'm not sure I get all that about the graphics—

...and those e-reading devices, which got us onto the subject. You see, there again I am not sure that the relationship of the documents in the NOTES to the text in the main part of the narrative wouldn't be lost fiddling around on a phone or a tablet or a Kindle or whatever. Maybe not so much on a larger laptop. For many readers, learning to navigate and to enjoy the novel's structure in a printed format is already daunting. E-navigation might prove deadly. In any case, it'd be a different experience than holding a book in hand, a different flavor. I believe some of the nutritional value would be lost, the imaginative value. Maybe I'm just being a vestigial holdout here, a late adapter or a non-adapter.

But you were suggesting that on a desktop pc, online or on-screen reading might work out, right?

I don't know, would it? I'm ready for sponsors of such a project to step up. I'm still available for endorsements!

(laughter)

Besides all these issues—of accessibility, really—I think that the sheer size of 3NLs puts off potential readers. I'm sorry, but four volumes...?

Oh, yes, I'm sure it does. Are Cliff Notes still put out? I'll have my people give them a call. Sorry about that length ... and the wooden joke.

That's cool. But I think it's a common enough misperception among young readers, new readers, maybe even among some aging avid readers, I don't know. That the length, I mean, is forbidding. It does represent another obstacle, like: Why should I commit to this great big, long unknown?

That's too bad. It's as long as it needed to be. Of course I understand what you're saying but, taken as a whole, it's not so long compared to some fiction out there, especially fiction published in series.

It's not too long for me.

But this entire issue is premised on the assumption that people still do read literary fiction, do read long, large, complicated literary fiction in any form.

I know I'm really looking forward to reading the next book, the last book.

Yes, but you might as well be my paid shill! By the way, do you mean Volume IV or Book Six? *Just kidding again!* Same difference, as for some silly reason we sometimes say.

Rightingcraft.com subscribers still read literary fiction and criticism.

To my delight!

And I personally think you're right about any overemphasis on the overall length of 3NLs, that it's a mistake.

But the length does narrow the potential readership, even if the cumulative length or word count or whatever doesn't exceed that of any series one gets hooked on—

... like Simenon's MAIGRET!

Yup! Or the complete works of any single prolific author—

... like John Le Carré!

Guilty on both counts! Both those authors take up long shelves in my bookcase.

Not megabytes in the Cloud...?

Now you really are goading me. Or is it goating me? No, stop, don't look that up! It's goading, I'm pretty sure. The Cloud...? Oh my, to be a bestseller and exist on both bookshelves and in those ethereal Clouds. Sounds transcendental. The sweet scent of success—tantalizing!

I didn't expect to be focusing on the novel's length, but—

... big, long novels push me to the edge of nostalgia. I don't want to fall off the precipice, but I can recall the joys of first reading long, large, complex written works. *LES MISÉRABLES*. *THE JOURNALS OF SIR WALTER SCOTT*. Exhaustive writing, exhausting reading, there's nothing like it! *THE CAIRO TRILOGY*, in translation of course. Paul Scott's *RAJ QUARTET*. Come to think of it, in my junior or senior year at the New England prep school, from which I was, thankfully, expelled, I wrote some sophomoric book report on *THE ALEXANDRIAN QUARTET*, not that I really understood then much of what Durrell was up to.

Do you still immerse yourself in such reading?

I do. I want to. Being largely retired from many worldly responsibilities, I do, while I still have the mental stamina.

Non-fiction too?

Biography, history, natural history. I liked Browne's double volume on Darwin. Any of Worster's historical treatments of people, places. Things like that

Any fiction writers whose work you follow?

Oh, some ... I guess.

Like...?

Let's see. I suppose I'm awaiting whatever Richard Powers puts out next.

Now there's a prolific author!

And prolix! Put prolific and prolix together, and we're talking serious lengthiness! But not along the lines of some of the new autofiction—spare me that wrongheaded verbosity!

Perfect!

But the frequent soaring of Powers' sentences makes me forgive him all the rest, the prolixity, the longueurs. Typing is not writing. Hypergraphia is not literature. Most paper will not refuse ink. No word processing program refuses another run of fingertips across the keyboard. It's my impression that serious fiction only got longer when word processing came along, but I may be wrong there. Someone your age may not remember what typewriters were about, and onionskin

and carbon paper and white-out. Do you remember when the first progressive electric typewriters incorporated a narrow window above the keyboard for elementary word processing?

No.

And the generation nipping at your heels, its readers won't even know what a standalone word processor was. But let's get back to books or something. Can we?

Here's something related: Do you think traditional editing has in some way suffered as a consequence of the quickly and easily generated processing of words?

I trust the editors at Right Craft won't allow—

... it's Righting Craft....

Oh, that's right, *righting*. Sorry.

But really, I've heard it said that the word-flow is so easy to produce, the critical editing has grown lax. Certainly, the self-editing.

I don't know. Hasn't the whole hierarchical power structure of publishing been imploding and realigning in narrower pyramids then exploding then imploding again etc.? Doesn't the Balkanization and/or Egyptification—

(laughter)

... of the publishing industry mean that the ideal editor-writer relationship had been displaced or dispersed? Do author-editor interactions reside in many places now or nowhere at all? Of course, I'm not talking about commercial trash and the blockbuster merchandising of the written word. I wish I had an old-fashioned editor to interact with, instead of pestering my friends, which usually only amounts to vetting advanced drafts in bits and pieces, mostly for things other than the prose.

Such as...?

Oh, some body of information they have, some *métier* or matter they know more about than I do. I have to guard against generating outright blunders, you know, in the usages, the lexicon of a subject where I'm just parroting something I've heard or read.

Novelist as imposter...?

Goes hand-in-glove with novelist as story thief, doesn't it? In any case, I am cheered that you value an old-fashioned novel like mine.

Old-fashioned? I don't know. Innovative, I think.

Go on, go on, it's music to my ears!

I've even come to understand why you encourage what you call "recursive" reading.

I do!

Right there in the opening note to the reader at the start of Volume III, you do.

Well, that'll probably drive as many candidates away as draw them in. I suppose it sounds pretty presumptuous of me, but attentive readers, readers such as yourself, once they get hooked—they might want to apprehend more than one pass allows for. They might find what they're after by revisiting parts or re-reading the whole. We listen to pieces of music more than once, don't we?

For me it'd be like visiting old friends: Katie, Elisabeth, Jan....

And I hope Pieter Tuelling will grow on you too, you know, in Volume IV. *All* men aren't villains in the book or in life, just most of us.

No, I can see now why you are not rushing to promote 3NLs in electronic format. Of course, it's become a cliché to remark that there's so much information and so many forms of information competing for our attention, and that our attention—collectively and individually—has been conditioned for fragmentation, fracture, bits and pieces, skipping here and there and getting nowhere, hurrying on—

... to process yet more information! It's addiction. Data is not necessarily useful information and information doesn't necessarily lead to knowledge, certainly not to wisdom. What you describe, it's a global pandemic with variant forms in a zillion locations. I don't know how this tsunami of disintegrating attention will ever be turned back.

So, I do see why, with the type of the reading we've been discussing, the type of writing you're producing, there is no uncomplicated way to enter the electronic arena and guarantee a greater readership.

No good reason, really. I remain excited about 3NLs, but it really is somewhat passé, isn't it? The possibility of "a novel in six books" never even occurs to most readers, even educated readers of literary fiction.

SECOND SET

Sally Whitman: I'd like you to talk about some of the novel's other complexities, besides the title and length and all.

Peter Boffey: Oops! Sounds like more obstacles to easy reading! Okay, sock 'em to me.

You play with narrative time, developing characters while shuttling between backstories and current day conversations, current actions. Yet, in all, you deliver a credible and coherent chronological sequence—

... just not chronologically!

Right, but traceable through the lives of each of the characters—especially the three ladies. At the same time, you end up covering a large swath of recognizable California history.

From about 1880 to ... well, Volume III concludes at the end of 1974. The final volume brings us to up the present, 2020.

But none of it reads like a straightforward linear chronicle of either the characters' lives or of collective California history, and that keeps it lively, unpredictable. In Elise's NOTEBOOKS it does get more strictly chronological; her account is handled as one thing following on another.

Yes, it is, as a memoir of the first 28 or 29 years of her life—the age of her daughter to whom the memoir is addressed as a letter, really. Well, good—I'm glad it works for you: the insistence on the past as a living presence within the present. Even with the NOTEBOOKS, after the back-to-back presentation of NOTEBOOKS numbers one through four, the present begins to intrude upon her composition. Not just influencing her reminiscing, but as a counterpoint to her retreat into the past. And her diary entries, while ostensibly tangential, they dovetail with the end of her composition of the memoir. That interleaving allowed me to play off her reflections upon her recollections—which ones to censure, for instance—against her recollections.

You make it sound like pretty heavy going!

Heady going anyway! But I think, if you take a step back, consider how many novels are some mixture of action and reflection upon that action—reflections of the characters and/or of the author—this interaction between the memoir and the diary just take it a sidestep farther by revealing Elise's reflections upon her reflections. You know how some movies are all action with no reflection on anybody's part—especially the movie makers? I wanted to tip the scale a bit in the other direction, but not so far that reflection loses all relation to action. Just playing with the ratio, I suppose, and creating a variety of ways of reading, and changes of pace. I think you'll find that as the novel culminates in the sixth book, the more contemporaneous action becomes uppermost, and the accounting of it naturally gets swifter. It has to, to keep up with the dramatic events. By then, Katie's the only naked lady left, and her backstory has already been fully filled in; it's already known. Instead of a *mélange*, equal parts action and reflection, the narrative tends to push ahead in the form of episodes cascading increasingly, one upon another, until a particularly 21st century caper concerning environmental malfeasance plays itself out. And by then the character of Pieter Tuelling more or less shares center stage with Katie.

I may have asked you this already: Did you plot out such a complicated progression in advance?

No, not in advance. Along the way. And I came to learn that suspense could only be sustained over the long run if I were vigilant about monitoring what information is supplied by whom and when. It was only along the way that the overarching themes—the reiteration of behavior over generations, of successful and not so successful surrogation, of farewell to the 19th century and hello to the 21st—those larger ideational sweeps only came clear to me in the process of the composition. Then those clarifications informed the later revisions, of course, constant revisions. We’ve talked about the central, crucial role that Ms. Caitlin Liliane Lowrie plays throughout the saga. Just as Katie struggles to span communications between the other two gals, between Elise and Jan, so she struggles to bridge the two centuries. Pretty successfully, I’d say, for herself and others. It remained a stiff order, to make one character carry all that much traffic, but it was always Katie’s individuation I had to follow most thoroughly. Even when Elise and Jan are taking their time telling their own life stories in first person, it was really Katie’s growth and development that led me on.

“Led you on...?”

Led me on, led the writing, led the storytelling. Not the other way around.

Katie’s story led the order in which you wrote, do you mean?

Well, actually the muse made her demands and I simply complied. I’ve had to take my marching orders from the muse, for my own good!

In any event, your M.O. seems to have served your narration. However large-scale the time frame and variegated the literary modes, the overall movement feels organic not contrived.

That is very gratifying to hear, and I couldn’t have said it better myself! I have sought for all the pieces to fit but not in a Protean sort of way. Fortunately, being off the commercial grid, for better and worse, I’ve been in position to let the best self-ordering principles of the piece emerge from a kind of imaginative anarchy. That sort of a writing practice has to be cultivated and given time, lots and lots of time. And rewriting.

Well, Katie is one extremely well-drawn character. I get the sense that she does have a life of her own off the page, outside your imagination. Is she based on any one person you have known or studied or heard about, can you say?

Before I even start answering that question, I’d better fetch another chair so my alter-ego can sit in on this part.

That sounds promising! Katie just keeps becoming. That sounds so trite—

... no, go on.

Well, with Jan and Elise, there's a certain wall we run up against in terms of plausible possibilities for them. They are also extremely well drawn, credible characters, and sympathetic human beings, at least to me—

... to me, too!

But with Katie, I'm never sure what she's capable of, what comes next.

So, she's alive for you. Yes, she came alive for me from the inception and stayed alive. I could never kill Katie off the way I've had to do the—

... no spoilers!

Oh, that's right, sorry. But I've tried to show all the characters, even minor characters, as products of their times. Nothing particularly visionary about that. The challenge has been to make the results convincing, persuasive, not merely constructs of sociological, statistically verifiable information. I don't know that anyone would put the 3NLs in the category of historical fiction, would they? I do know that much fictional writing and much factual writing—non-fictional histories and biographies—seem often to suffer from a half-baked processing of sheer information. Regurgitation of research materials. I'm all for an author's self-indulgent digressions and passions included in a text of fiction, but any large blocks of informational prose need either to be integrated seamlessly into the narrative flow or else presented as sidebars. That's where the NOTES came in, starting with Book Five. That was my main motive when I started excerpting passages from the storyline and presenting them as NOTES. But I don't want to leave the impression that I ever once sat down and said: Okay then, let's have this cast of characters all of whom are emblematic of their times. We'll need a this and a that, etc. No. A vivid, valid character, one who is not a cardboard figure on a gameboard, one who is not the embodiment of a symbol, some abstract idea decked out in flesh and clothes—those characters don't take on lives of their own. I suppose it sounds esoteric to someone who's never experienced anything like it, being swept away in the creation of one's characters, I mean, swept away beyond the point of no return. As has often been said, characters sometimes seem to start living with their creators. Psychologizing fictional characters as mere projections of the author's psyche—that description doesn't seem to me to capture the essentially original nature of good fictional characterization. Or explaining all the connections with those characters that readers can make on their own.

Once the germ of a character starts growing in you the author, how do you make that happen? How do you let the characters grow into themselves?

Their language grows. Take Jan, who was born down on the farm, so to speak, in 1885. Or Elisabeth, born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area in the first two decades of the 20th century. First and foremost it is their language, their uses of language, which expresses their differences. Isn't that elementary? Isn't language the raw and refined material we work with? People don't talk and write the same over time. Interesting individuals don't talk and write the

same as one another. An omniscient or semi-omniscient narrator doesn't write the way the characters talk and write. At least, I should hope not. Oh, I suppose, if there's some narrative experiment happening, say the character is serving, either naively or in some sophisticated way, as the author's strict *porte parole*. Or say, by irony, the protagonist is designed as some kind of an unreliable narrator. In those cases, the conflation of a narrator's and a character's linguistic expression may be half the game—for the reader and the author. But despite appearances, the 3NLs hasn't much to do with any house of mirrors. My own strengths and weaknesses are in a more traditional arena. An echo chamber, maybe...? Anyway, the prose style of Elise's memoir, and in her diary and her letters, when she speaks—it's often a fundamentally antiquated rhetoric, from our perspective. Completely charming to my ear but antiquated, fixed in time. Jan McLoughlin's usages are likewise not simply influenced by her history; they embody her history and reveal it, lousy with relics of her rocky transitions from the barnyard to the Barbary Coast then into the Roaring Twenties then through the 30s and 40s. Of course, she was hooked on keeping up with trends, so she picked up a lot of timely lingo and it stuck.

Trends in fashion, you mean? In her clothes designs?

There, and in business, in her modern woman's business ambitions. By the time we hear her account of the Belcanto Cosmetic Company, most of her business practices are *passés*, and she knows that. That's her final dilemma, right? She feels *passé*, passed over and *passé*. Katie's expressivity, her verbal expressions, they probably resonate with more readers because her times are closer to ours. Even as far apart as yours and mine may be!

When was she born? I'm sorry, I forget exactly....

1936. Four years after her brother, Jody.

Who dies when—

... unh-unh, remember, now: no spoilers.

Oh, that's cool, sorry.

In addition to listening to their lingo and *hearing* their written words, another way for the reader to compare and contrast our three naked ladies' differences are their various kinds and levels of formal education. Katie's mother, Elise, was formally educated up to graduating from teacher's college or normal school, as they called it then. Yet she kept self-educating well after that. Her intellectual foundation and her educability—is that a word?

Perfect!

Her educability had been laid down by her mother, Lilian Piagère. Katie's maternal grandmother had instilled the values of continuing education, so to speak; she had modeled that practice, after finding herself the estranged scion of a highly cultured European family of the *haute bourgeoisie*.

And Lily's good manners remained a device for measuring human dignity for her daughter, Elise. Regardless how groundbreaking their respective lifestyles were as young adults, regardless how desperately penurious both their economies were as young adult orphans—twenty years apart—even as a pariah from the Old World, Lily taught her daughter how to learn. And despite their outsider status, or perhaps because of it, civil protocols sustained them both. For each of them, courtesy and modesty remained touchstones of a person's character for as long as they lived. And such value placed on etiquette didn't interfere with an appreciation of the relative resourcefulness of any persons under consideration either. If they were innately smart or stupid, I mean.

They were both orphaned as pretty young adults, weren't they?

Yes, if one takes into account Lily's disownment by her family and Elise's blood father's denial of paternity. That's where a native resourcefulness became essential, a resourcefulness that Aunt Suzanne remarks to Katie seems to be wanting in the generation coming of age toward the end of the 20th century.

I don't remember that. But Suzanne is not really her aunt, is she?

No, she's not a relative by blood, but she's the functional equivalent of an aunt. A positive surrogate. But it must be in Book Six and, of course, you haven't read that. So, it's significant that Elise acquires her mother's good manners from early on and inherits her smarts.

And relies upon that resourcefulness that exceptional women, women without conventional protections, without a situation quote unquote needed to survive.

Yes, that's it. But I'd hazard a guess that resourcefulness was once more widespread, part and parcel of an earlier era in our frontier history. Some survives in the rural West even today, I think, and always has in certain urban and suburban individuals of course. But that's a positive aspect of our legacy, a bright spot in the Euro-American settler's darkly checkered history. Resourcefulness. Not just making do with what you have but making new, too. Producing rather than consuming. Or producing what one consumes, not just all the time buying this, buying that, producing money money money so you can buy this, throw it away, buy that. But I digress! The point is, when we get to Katie's era and Katie's generation and those that follow—well, all bets are off, as far as her grandmother Lily's graciousness and her mother Elise's deportment are concerned. Not *all* bets, I should say, but many. Katie does not adopt the good manners, at least not in the first part of her life. The first third, let's say. Oh, no! She rebels full-throttle against them. Later on, we see how she falls back on a few of the old mores and customs ... but no getting ahead of ourselves in the synopsis, eh?

And Katie doesn't have the formal education either.

Nope. She's what I think the Brits used to call a "commoner." But she does have the resourcefulness, she does have the smarts. Does she even graduate from high school? She does, just barely, seventeen years old and pregnant quote out of wedlock unquote.

Ouch!

It's her son, DD, who never gets beyond his junior year. And never acquires good manners either. And I think it's fair to say, squanders whatever smarts he was born with, adding whatever brains he once might have had. Drugs. Drink. Damage.

What about Jan? Not much formal education there, as far as I recall. Maybe some business college courses, I forget.

No, no formal education to speak of. A smattering of rural one room schoolhouses in her childhood. But loads of informal, practical homeschooling. There's Mrs. Ida MacKenzie in old Cliffport Town—

... I remember her!

And all the homemaker skills introduced at her mother's knee, and the woodlore from her father, and business practices in the store and at the old lodge. But of course she wants out of "chicken kitchen" and off the farm and out of little Cliffport ASAP.

And she gets out, also single and pregnant.

But wait, that's not quite right.

What's not quite right?

While Jan does run away pregnant, she remains legally married to Bill McGrath. She runs away from what she sees as an horrific future with her husband, but without that legal marriage she would never have had the right to return to the place and make her claim, totally disrupting the Lowries' life at One Grade Road.

Where Elise had made a home for the Lowries over the intervening years.

About forty of them! But what Jan lacks in formal education, she makes up for in her native smarts and ambition, as I said. Desperate, driven, and married, as it were, to Mary-Helen Belcanto's adventurism. There's more than a post-doc's worth of a career in her life experience. Not that being a clever, feisty scrapper prevents her from making some big dumb decisions.

Like her over-dependence upon that woman—

... Mary-Helen Belcanto—

Right, their co-overdependence.

And her overdependence upon her relationship with that woman's son, Mills.

Mills....

THIRD SET

I'd like to get back to the intersection of your narrative's timeline and the historical one, the well-known historical incidents of different periods in the history of the West. You said you didn't plot that out in advance.

Right.

People seem to get left behind; events are touched upon but left suspended. Then they are picked up again, but not in a clumsy way, an obvious way. The intersecting timelines of the characters and history ultimately fall into place.

The important ones do, I hope.

How did you make it all cohere if you didn't plan it?

First, I trusted in the organic evolution of the first drafts: what mattered would come to the fore. I put my artistic faith in revision. A lot of revision. And there were always opportunities that called out for recursive treatment, the circling back round again we spoke about earlier, when we talked about discovering and creating the story along the way. Jung wrote somewhere that quote The Way unquote is not straight but spirals, and on each turn manifests another opportunity for clarification. Of course, that's all vague as hell and concerned his idea of Individuation. Anyway, I like that image of something traveling in a spiral direction, hopefully upward and, while making a circuit, returning to the same place but at a higher level. Or another level anyway. Unless you're some sort of invertebrate creature moving horizontally in the abysmal depths.

I don't think I am....

(laughter)

Anyway, I think I see why you kept the title—

... although it raises eyebrows!

The way people and places and themes reappear, like your naked lady bulbs.

Oh, the title's preposterous, isn't it? But it's a preposterous novel—

... *in six books!*

And with the ridiculous subhead and all, the title's almost a takeoff on the wide-open grand literary novel of the past. And an awful teaser, too, but an online search would seriously disappoint

individuals with a predominantly prurient interest. No naked ladies; no semi-naked dancing girls; no stripteasers—bummer! I suppose I’m just being mischievous, eliciting that bogus titillation. Or brazen, challenging the 21st century status quo of what is and is not politically correct. But once again, I shall plead innocent: that title chose me.

And you kept it, you like it.

Nolo contendere. Silliness, as I said. Good for sales? I can’t think of anything I’ve ever done that’s been especially good for sales! But I don’t mind a bit of controversy. That title satisfies my need to be iconoclastic. Then I get to be pedantic while explaining it all.

(laughter)

Of course, coming from the likes of me, it’s politically incorrect. So, I’m making light of standard-issue feminist perspectives, perhaps at my own expense. At least it might look that way at first blush.

So to speak.

What...? Oh, I get it: “... naked ladies ... at first blush.”

But one glance at the covers—the front covers’ pictures, the back covers’ blurbs—that should have the militant-minded laying their arms aside.

But you do see how I’m flouting contemporary mores and manners, right? That a tall, educated, older WASP male should trifle with a topic involving naked ladies. Oh my my my! Such things aren’t done with impunity, “not no more.”

I’ll have to think about that. After getting to know the three main protagonists, I can’t see any cause for alarm. By the way, do you have any naked lady bulbs in your own garden? You must grow naked ladies.

My garden? For the last 22 years our condo garden has consisted of sixty square feet of dirt in two narrow L-shaped patches, half in the front patio, half in the back. And some clay pots. *Voilà, mon jardin.*

And naked ladies?

Two years ago I put a dollar bill into a bushel basket full of huge, dormant *Amaryllis belladonna* bulbs at what’s left of Luther Burbank’s experimental farm in the Gold Hills section of Sebastopol in Sonoma County. That’s pretty good pedigree, by the way. But my one bulb hasn’t sent up any flower stalks yet. It’s put out its fleshy, strap-leaf foliage twice now but no snaky, phallic flower stalk. I’ve been told that, once disturbed, lifted out of the ground, they can take a while to bloom again.

Aren't naked ladies invasive in the wild? One of my friends who gardens told me that.

Invasive? I wouldn't call them invasive. They do create these bulging clumps, often in neglected, out-of-the-way sites like untended ditches and partially tended street medians. Many naked lady colonies we see abandoned about in the countryside are leftovers from pioneering Euro-Americans who once lived there then moved on or out or whatever. Up through Sonoma and Mendocino and Humboldt counties, you'll also see them used as borderlines defining yards. Up throughout the true North Coast, the roadsides and driveways and outskirts of towns are just lousy with naked ladies. But the likelihood of naked ladies being invasive enough to disrupt any significant natural ecosystem seems farfetched to me. Pampas grass, yes. *Arundo donax*—wild cane—yes. The Scotch, French, Spanish brooms, yes, yes, yes. Cheat grass and buffelgrass and English Ivy, yes. But *Amaryllis belladonna*? I think not. Have studies been done to show a stand of naked ladies extirpating a special micro-endemic plant in situ? Maybe. Regardless, any plant of South African origin is just not going to fit into the “natives only” mindset of some plant police. So, here we are again. As politically incorrect in the field of vegetation management as in the chambers of feminist ideology—double damned! But the title's a hoax, a red herring. Come on, people! The novel's not a peep show and it's not a scientific treatise on geophytes either.

Geophytes...?

Geophytes. Plants that spend prolonged periods of their lives entirely underground, invisible or nearly invisible to the naked eye. As a bulb, *Amaryllis belladonna*'s heaves its topside above ground but it's almost inconspicuous when not in leaf or in flower. Even when it's just a bunch of green spear-like leaves, people probably mistake it for a wayward clump of agapanthus, that so called lily of the Nile so widely used in commercial landscaping. But in late summer and fall, when its inflorescence appears from the bare bulb on some hillside or behind some dumpster, that's what catches the eye—and what allure! Do you recall in the novel when Pieter and Katie visit that strictly natives nursery in West Marin? That's in Volume III, so you've read that far. When the Dutchman is leading her on their one last field trip during her education as a nurserywoman.

In Bolinas, isn't it?

Near there, yes. In that passage I was attempting to mount a sendup of the whole situation: straitjacket botanical ideology versus a more flexible attitude. And—I don't expect you to remember these details, really I don't—but at one point Letitia Morales de Novato—the young Coloradan, a Chicana of Mexican extraction—

... Letty? I remember her!

Right. When Letty asks Katie, “What's a native? Am I one?”

Now I'm beginning to wish I'd been paying more attention in high school biology.

So, enough amateur botany and vegetative ecology. We're supposed to be discussing the making of a novel, aren't we? That title has hijacked us both. Oh, the analogy to the three main characters couldn't be more obvious. It's too bonehead simplistic, actually. But I couldn't resist. The fact that the leaves and the flowers appear in separate seasons indicative of imperceptible changes in the plant? No, I couldn't resist. That phasal growth cycle so befits the rhythm of my long, complicated story—and Katie's resilience.

I wonder if there's a *Biology for Dummies* book.

Sure there is. Everything's for dummies nowadays, but you ain't one! You said you wish you'd learned more botany or biology.

I do.

I wish I'd learned Latin. That would've been a help along the way. By the way, geophytes actually come into play as a plot element in the big environmental crime caper in Book Six. You'll enjoy that.

In Volume IV...?

Of course, what could be simpler? Book Six, Volume IV—same-same.

(laughter)

FOURTH SET

Who did you write 3NLs for, other than yourself?

A question I've often asked myself, wondering why I've not just given up and slunk off, pining away in obscurity.

(laughter)

I have no grand, established readership, that's for sure. I'm not catering to or answering to or pandering to any particular audience. Or having to string along readers or publishers for my own financial gain. Posterity? Dead authors? I really don't know. And neither does my wife!

Certainly, this novel is not written for just anyone, or everyone. But you must have some "reader" in mind.

I do seem always to be writing and especially rewriting with some anticipated reader looking over my shoulder. Not a censor or a literary critic or an English prof, although those phantom figures do weigh in on my decision-making. Some vaguely ideal reader, I suppose. Then there's the old chestnut about how one writes the book one would like to read but no one else has written.

So, can you describe your "ideal, anticipated reader?"

She'd be educated in the arts. She'd be a curious person, an openminded person. An avid reader. What else? A gardener...?

(laughter)

Might be a fan of regional literature, local history. I can't describe her exactly. A glutton for punishment...?

(laughter)

I don't think I would've been able to read 3NLs when I was younger. It's pretty demanding, apart from the length.

But now I want to point out, even after admitting that the novel can be challenging to read, that the six books do extend considerable courtesies to our anticipated reader. There are ample tables of contents and maps. Explicit headers on each page let the reader know just where he or she is within the structure of the whole. Even with the vocal polyphony of the many characters and the multiplicity of subgenres, there are those pseudo-scholastic NOTES in Books Five and Six and footnotes for the quick translation of foreign words. It's all one big traditional novel, after all. Not always conventional but definitely traditional. Literary realism. Come to think of it, there is one trait that our ideal, anticipated readers should possess, without which I don't think 3NLs stands much of a chance.

Which is...?

Readers who don't somehow "hear" words as they go must lose all interest or never find much interest in 3NLs. I don't mean remedially sounding out the words, whispering and mumbling them below one's breath. I mean a curious sort of auditory hallucination taking place between the ears. I don't see how reading 3NLs could be sustained, or sustained with any enjoyment, without the exercise of this ineffable capacity. Is it innate? Acquired? Both? I don't know. Is it what people refer to as a "gift" that can be cultivated? The aural features of the written word. Does all this sound terribly arch to you?

A little...

Or corny then! Hard to explain since I don't completely understand it myself. I'm not talking about the strictly musical aspects of the language or any eccentric fun and games with phonology or amphibology. Joyce took that puny express to the limits and rode off into the sunset with the WAKE in his saddle bags.

Which I've tried and never been able to sit and read.

I haven't read much either, even with my lively inner ear tuned up a peg. But I can sit back and enjoy hearing long chunks of it read aloud, you see? Joyce, I think, had what Pound called a sense of *melopoeia* in extremis.

Speaking of Joyce reminds me of that multiplicity of subgenres you just mentioned. Did you mean like in ULYSSES, where the chapters are keyed to various elements including the rhetoric of different genres?

But before ULYSSES, wasn't the novel shown capable of accommodating many forms within one work, many facets?

Anyway, in 3NLs they all seem to come together. I wonder if you always had in mind to create such a large-scale mosaic. Especially in the first two volumes, the first four books, it's as if you are deliberately setting up this dialectic between warring rhetorics.

The clashing voices of clashing characters.

But it all hangs together. As whole, the story embraces these conflicting perspectives, these conflicts of interest.

Even within single characters, too. And literal conflicts of interest, when it comes to real estate wars, water wars. "Hangs together." That I like, like a mobile rather than a mosaic on a wall or on the floor. A mobile composed of tile pieces suspended and turning about one another rather than tile pieces fixed in relation to one another along one continuous plane. The essential thing about all the variety and variegation—for me the essential thing—is that as an author I sit within range of many characters' voices, and I feel obliged to make each of those voices heard or at least audible for anyone who cares to listen. The disparate characters dictated their own stylistic variances to me. That description comes closer to the process of writing the 3NLs than my acting as if there were any purely deliberate intellectual agenda set in advance. I wasn't intending—I'm not capable of—showcasing a gallery of historical literary genres in some virtuosic coup like ULYSSES.

I'm sure I couldn't have understood any of this when I was much younger.

Had enough for today?

No ... yes ... not if you still have time...?

I do. You're the one who'll have to get a move on soon; I'm close to home. But I have to tell you it's been a pleasure having someone your age paying so much attention to the novel. I doubt many people younger than you ever will. It is demanding, damnit. It does require paying close attention over a long haul. The kind of attention typically reserved for reading poetry or when approaching a script, not when plowing through journalistic prose, discursive prose, general prose. I'm not ambiguous or inconclusive in certain passages for no reason at all. There are connections I leave for keen readers to make on their own. I just refuse to spell it all out right there in the books. I'm not obfuscating, I'm not. It's just that I refuse to dumb down in order to spoon feed passive readers. There's plenty of that baby food on publishers' backlists and bestseller lists. One friend suggested I employ an annotated list of the characters so the reader can keep track.

Awesome. Like in 18th and 19th century novels. The Russian classics—

... and the English and the Spanish and the French. That might be okay in an antiquarian sort of way. I have had to keep track of many things by making my own lists, charts, diagrams—dates, names, spellings, historical research points. But those were for my working purposes. Family trees, chronologies of each major character. Otherwise it would have become one great big self-indulgent and inconsistent mess, and disrespectful of the characters themselves. And disrespectful of the Californians who actually did suffer in the 1906 fire and earthquake, the 1955 floods, the 1918 Influenza—that so called Spanish Flu. 3NLs will engage readers who are somehow up to creating their own version of the story, their own master narrative, which can incorporate our collective history. Fiction can do that, you know? And we don't need to relegate close, creative reading to poetry. Even the graphic elements that come into play in Books Five and Six, they're not merely illustrations. They're not provided as shortcuts.

I want to ask you more about those images. The maps were great, by the way, helping to orient and remind me what goes where.

The lay of the land, the buildings and outbuildings, the locations of settlements and trails in relationship to one another—they were all crucial to the plot, and the book didn't need even more verbal exposition when schematic maps could do the job.

But aside from the maps, in the first four books there aren't really any illustrations.

None except those line-art depictions of Amaryllis belladonna at distinct stages in its yearly life cycle. And those spare drawings really function as supplementary fillers on the printed page, not as illustrations of particular passages in the text. I guess we could have written "This page or this portion of the page left intentionally blank" but the drawings seemed more elegant.

(laughter)

Another form of courtesy to the reader, really.

Can you say why you only started using graphic images in the last two volumes?

For the same reason I started recreating the legal documents and other business communiques as fully realized, standalone written texts. They're another form of documentary evidence that the reader must confront just as the characters do. I suppose it hadn't occurred to me before then. And I'd like to correct you if you don't mind. You keep calling them illustrations. They're not exactly illustrations. It took my graphic designer and me a while to hit this sweet spot where the objects were not fully illustrated in the usual sense, rendering a three-dimensional impression on a two-dimensional page. If I wanted an image of a see-through barn, for instance, that didn't mean he was to sketch or fully draw a see-through barn. He could've done that, but I was after something else. The picture would be most importantly another firsthand piece of evidence. It seemed relevant to present readers with these pieces of evidence without any specific authorial interpretation,

pieces with which they must come to terms just as the characters—usually Katie—must come to terms with them. That’s why the images are often embedded right in the narrative flow. All part of my campaign encouraging the reader to discover and create his or her own story. The graphics are not there to relieve readers of their duty to participate as producers and not just consumers.

No slackers!

That’s correct!

(laughter)

So, does all this explain why my book is so darned under-read and under-understood? But I’m not claiming to be generating Holy Writ. I’m not exactly the best candidate for that, in any case. 3NLs is imaginative fiction, a long letter sent to readers inviting them to join in on their own journey of active imagination, as Jung put it. When readers do inform me that such and such a passage or scene or whatever touched them deeply, that’s as close to the feeling of receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature as I’ll ever get. I hope I’m making some sense to you, am I?

I think so. Maybe not as much as the novel itself does but yes, I get your drift.

Then I should shut up. I can do that, you know.

Oh no, not just yet. I need to hear more about this notion of “evidence.” Graphic images as “documentary evidence.”

It’s not so esoteric as I make it sound. At a certain stage I realized that whatever is presented on any given page—for the moment let’s stick to any *printed* page—

... okay.

Whatever it is, whoever the speaker, whoever’s point of view—it becomes evidence to the reader. An oil painting, whatever else it is, is oil paint. Film is celluloid and flickering light—at least it used to be! Similarly for all media. Of course, oil and flickering light are not all that painting and film are, despite the perennially tiresome efforts of some myopic visionaries. Likewise, a written text is words, language. That’s not esoteric as all.

And...?

And I find it liberating to present the ideal reader with evidence in many forms—words and graphics, facsimiles of legal documents, faked journalistic pieces. It helps to induce the co-creative process at play. As author, I feel it’s my job to make the evidence on every page as credible as possible, as compelling as can be. For instance, a letter from an office of the County of Santa Cruz looking just as it might in so called real life.

Go on....

If it's a letter or a cover letter, a chapter in a memoir or a diary entry, spoken dialogue, internal monologue, a journalistic summary, a verbatim transcription of counseling sessions, the oral history interview, or even a specimen of country porn—whatever it is, on the page it's evidence and it must be both raw and fresh. Fresh, raw material intriguingly served then cooked to a finish in the reader's mind. Every page counts. I aspire to making every page worthy of attention, No snoozing at the wheel. Now, in Book Six you'll find it reads smoother with fewer bumps in the road. Although slightly tongue in cheek, in Book Six I lay down some highly serviceable prose, "good solid writing" I can imagine some English teacher say. Of course, it's just another dialect of the authorial voice.

You were suggesting that the last book's timeline also flows more straightforwardly than in the previous books.

Yes, that's one way to look at it. By the time we reach Book Six and the 21st century, all the backstories have been folded into the present. We talked about this earlier. That's why I could let the last several chapters, all but the very last, become an action-driven caper. The closing chapter turned out be a summing up, the author's thinly veiled *envoi*—

... sssh. You're giving too much away!

But don't stop me now!

(laughter)

I like to think of much of Book Six as an exciting caper, and that the summary afterward—almost an afterword—does do justice to Katie's life. The overarching tensions—the war between David and Goliath, the battle between mother and son, the remnants of Katie's internal debate about "the marriage question" and the end of her family line, and the place of music in her life, the vital role it plays despite her missed career—these tensions are credibly resolved. I left answering the greater philosophical questions—How to live? What are moral values? What does it all mean?—to others. Didn't want my book to be too long.

(laughter)

Well, now that you've already given everything away—

... I've given nothing away. The reader has to read the book itself for the story to come alive.

Would you say 3NLs ends on a note of comedy? Will there be a happy ending?

You'll have to let me know what you think once you've read it all. With Jan's bleak, embittered worldview, with Elisabeth's elegiac tone, with Pieter Tuelling's bonhomie laced through with melancholy—

... it is hard imagining a purely happy ending, I guess. But I don't mean a Hollywood ending or a pat ending. It was a stupid question Let's forget it.

Not stupid. But just remember that I never set out to create Katie's story as some sort of quid pro quid for any programmatic idea: modern women's history writ small or local environmental activism writ large or something like that. When I mentioned that I think you'll find the reading gets easier, I only meant to suggest that a friendlier narration escorts one along the way in the very last book. For optimal reading, I've relegated a lot more material to the optional NOTES. I like to think that's more user-friendly but maybe it's not. Maybe it's just confusing. Then there are the two chapters in Book Five which I've excerpted altogether and put on my website as appendages rather than making them part of the print-on-demand version of the book.

I have to confess that I haven't seen those yet.

They're posted as links located in the dropdown menu under Novels, I suppose. One chapter is constructed with idiosyncratic syntax, eccentric grammar, meant to bring to life DD's dreamlife. The other has a unique layout to it. Both come across as experimental, in the best sense of the term, I like to think. Experimental, but not as a synonym for *failure*. You'll look at them one day, I hope, and let me know.

I will. On the plane back to LA, I'll jump right onto your site.

Well, there you are again, my ideal reader!

(laughter)

Speaking of which....

You'd better get going.

I should, shouldn't I? But after the last book comes out, after I've had a chance to read Volume IV, and those two chapters on your website, can we somehow continue this conversation?

That'd be nice for me. And I trust the pleasure will not be all mine.

[end first interview]

RIGHTING CRAFT INTERVIEW: PART TWO

FIRST SET

Sally Witman: On the train up from LA yesterday, I re-read our first conversation as it was posted on rightingcraft.com. So, now I've read all four volumes of the novel, and I have to say I think the six books work just fine in relation to one another.

Peter Boffey: Brava!

You said that the last two volumes came as something of a surprise to you, that it was only after the fourth and "final" book was done you still felt the need to write the rest of your story—

... the rest of Katie's story.

Yes, that you found out you weren't done with her, or she with you.

That's true. And do you agree that Volume III becomes a fine place for a new reader to jump into the series?

I've thought about that and yes, I do. There may even be a beneficial side effect to starting THE THREE NAKED LADIES OF CLIFFPORT [3NLs] at Book Five: it's easier to read.

"Easier...?"

It's not so steep a climb as at the start with Book One.

Right! After I realized that the homicidal investigation of Jan's death provided me an opportunity to recapitulate the prior plot in the broadest of strokes, I went with it. So, a newcomer benefits from that concise presentation of the big picture.

Of the Lowries' situation in Cliffport...?

And its historical context. Of course, a reader starting with Book One will know far more about what's being referred to throughout the last two volumes. But the myriad first-person points-of-view in Book One do pose a stiff challenge right out the gate. Beginning with Volume II would likely turn off new readers, with that monolithic block of Elise's first four NOTEBOOKS. Most impatient contemporary readers wouldn't stick with it.

Starting with Volume II would've thrown me off, without any background to justify the old-fashioned rhetoric involved.

And you're my ideal anticipated reader, remember?

(laughter)

I remember.

Yes, I agree. Even someone like you might be disheartened by having to deal right off the bat with the NOTEBOOKS' density of content. With Books Five and Six the reading does become easier, because I'm also playing off some more familiar genres: police detective stories, action stories, amateur sleuthing, soft porn, the road trip to Reno with its risks and recklessness. Looking back, I still like to think that the steep climb from the trailhead at the debut of Book One does deliver one onto an elevated imaginative plateau and sets the stage for further significance right out the gate. The first BOOKEND, acting like a prelude or overture, was designed to inform readers with enough landmarks to navigate the rest of the terrain as they proceed. What's the alternative? To begin the whole saga with a lot of character sketches and a general description of Cliffport, lots of background information told point-blank? Ugh.

And you do always encourage a recursive approach to reading the 3NLs.

I do.

*

So, when you got to writing the last two books, you didn't know where they would lead, how the story would end. Is that right?

Yes, that's right. I didn't know.

With the first four books, you had the structure of the two BOOKENDS to work within. You knew from the start how they would end within that framework.

Not really. Duane's oral history interview with Jan was originally conceived and composed as one uninterrupted foreword to the 3NLs. The notion of splitting it into two BOOKENDS only came later. And I enjoying playing with the oral history format to render the realism of so called real history tainted with imperfect memory and fabulated renditions of the truth. A pseudo-document of "real" history. That oral history form, at the time it occurs in the novel—in the late 60s—oral history proper hadn't really hit its hugely popular stride, had it? It's my impression that transcribed oral histories and transcribed interviews, for that matter—haven't they only gained credibility as a legitimate pop genre since then? Of course, I was drawn to the PARIS REVIEW interview format early on—all those brilliant egos running rampant across page after page! Nowadays there are podcasts and Vimeos™ and what not—you'd know more about all that I do, I'm sure.

But about the pair of BOOKENDS. Re-reading the first two volumes, it struck me as odd yet oddly effective, how the first BOOKEND reflects the first half of Duane's visit to "999 Zelkova Street" before lunch and then, after lunch on the same day—and decades of recollections—the second half of his visit is presented. That's pretty rad.

"Rad...?"

Radical. Extremely cool, in my opinion.

(laughter)

Well, it was a little “ballsy” as *some people* used to say in another era.

(laughter)

But step back and you’ll see it was not so original of me. Far wilder twists and turns have been made of narrative timelines. In fact, my ploy was pretty simple. The material in Books One through Four becomes, in effect, one big flashback that takes about 900 pages and covers about 80 years of collective California history. But I tried to make BOOKEND ONE intriguing enough to engage a reader’s curiosity in the first place. BOOKEND TWO then operates as a sort of mop up, bringing the narration back up to and into the present time, that is, July 1967. But haven’t storytellers been using variants of that old A₁–B–A₂ time structure forever?

I’m trying to think if there’s some parallel between the split structure of the BOOKENDS and the way our conversation has been interrupted by the pandemic and all.

Maybe so. I’m glad it didn’t take us 80 years to meet again, however.

(laughter)

That reminds me, I wanted to ask you: similes, metaphors.

What about them?

In all of 3NLs, you don’t make much use of them, it seems to me. For an author with a huge vocabulary and of such a long work, there are precious few similes and almost no metaphors.

I know. I hope the ones that are there are precious enough to warrant having been left in.

So, you did take a lot of similes and metaphors out as you edited, is that true?

Yes, I think so. I deliberately did. Especially anything hackneyed. There are a few surviving conceits based on pottery. Probably some extended metaphors related to the redwoods. It’s not that analogy doesn’t come easily to me. It’s second nature to me, easier than logical argument, that’s for sure. Sometimes I think I am cognitively more analogical than logical. A-logical, in any case.

(laughter)

But reliance upon implied comparison can be so overused, so clichéd unless it’s truly fresh. I try to practice a judicious use of similes and metaphors. Of course, the dialogues themselves are full of clichés. We all speak analogically, at least the characters in the 3NLs do, but it’s like—you see? “It’s like....” *It’s like* an overabundance of common adverbs. That can be very, very, very, very annoying.

(laughter)

It all has to do with choosing the right word, not spoon-feeding the reader—

... **“not spoon-feeding the reader....”**

For instance, describing a character’s first appearance on the scene. To introduce a character by saying that she looks like Elizabeth Taylor in *BLUE VELVET* or John Wayne in *THE SEARCHERS*—isn’t that a little cheesy? Doesn’t that rob the reader of an opportunity to imagine what exactly this Liz Taylor lookalike or that John Wayne lookalike look like? That’s one of the main distinctions between movies and literatures, right?

But if I were to go through the 3NLS and jot down all the descriptions you do give us of Katie, either directly or indirectly through her own self-observations in the mirror or in conversation with her mother, for instance—they’re a lot of them. I’m not sure, if I were an artist, if I could even draw her. Could I draw a coherent composite image of Katie Lowrie? Obviously she’s not conventionally pretty.

She’s no cover girl anyway.

And there’s quite a bit of material revolving around her self-image, her body image, how she isn’t a beauty by usual standards—

... but wait. Some characters do see her as naturally beautiful.

They do? With her crossed right eye and her “mule ears” and her ironing-board chest and—

... her little boy’s butt, I know, I know.

In one episode she’s an oddly attired local yokel, and in the next you make her look like she’s posing for a Levi Strauss commercial or a glossy Wrangler ad.

But that’s the point we’re circling around, right? She can do that. Some men are *very* drawn to her, others not. Her lovers, however few and far between they may be, they’re all attracted to her. Some not-so-very-nice men are drawn to her with this need to exploit her curious sex appeal or extinguish it.

Like that French Canadian guy—

And Richard, the father of her son. Her mother and her Aunt Suzanne worry about the liability of her attractiveness combined with her adventuresomeness—

... and a strain of self-abuse that makes her so vulnerable.

Yes, there’s that too. But I hope you don’t expect me to explain all the dynamics of allure or appeal or something between the sexes? Or within the sexes.

I'm not asking for all that, just—can she really be both goofy looking *and* beautiful?

Yes. Plenty of photogenic stars have that particular charm. Audrey Hepburn? If you take apart some of her features or Lauren Bacall's or Katherine Hepburn's, if you were describing their individual features in words, would they always come across as so appealing? Yet on the screen, watch out! I do have Katie broaching the subject of her own peculiar façade, and I do have other characters comment on its peculiar charms. Jan McLoughlin, movie-star-struck connoisseur of women's styles, she sees a native beauty in Katie's head and Katie's carriage. Of course, it just kills the old fashion hound that Katie remains an unrepentant tomboy 90% of the time.

What are you thinking?

I'm just trying to think if I might be able to remember some lines from Robert Creeley's poem "The Finger." Under the influence of LSD, in rapid succession he sees his wife as a crone and as a nymph and as a little girl. "She was young, / she was old, / she was small. / She was tall with // extraordinary grace...." And ... how does it go...? "I was not to go / as if to somewhere, / was not in the mind / as thinking knows it, // but danced in a jiggling / intensive circle / before the fire and its heat / and that woman lounging." Oh, what an extraordinarily beautiful poem. Music, imagery, logic—"The Finger" has it all in spades, to coin a phrase.

I don't know it.

There's much more than that. It's a long one by Creeley's standards and it all coheres without being forced to.

I'll have to check it out.

Do. I do "... again and again and again..." Oh, Sally, I just don't have good answers to all the great questions you're raising, like this one about reconciling what may seem like contradictions in my depiction of Katie's outward appearance. That's probably why the Creeley poem came back to me. But, you see, the poet's hallucinations recounted in that poem, as he struggles to reconstitute his trip and make meaning of it, they're manifestations of his intimate relationship with his wife of longstanding. They're projections grounded in carefully observed intimacy. As if by that stage in his relationship—I think they had a twenty-year run at the marriage experiment—her identity was thoroughly confounded with his perception of her. In the process he found himself mesmerized yet articulate. Less cryptic than usual, anyway!

(laughter)

Mesmerized. Is that the way you felt about Katie...?

Yes, fascinated. So, what you may experience as a shortcoming in the optics, I will defend as a healthy aspect of the work, that basic premise of mine about my relationship as storyteller to listener. In the 3NLs, I attempt to bring scenes and situations to life in detail vivid enough that the

reader can interpret the phenomena presented and put the pieces together. I'm wary of producing discursive passages. I see little room for authorial abstraction in the 3NLs. In a novel of ideas—I'm thinking of all those Aldous Huxley novels I devoured as a bookish teen—or the novels that Marylynne Robinson keeps putting out. I suppose there both the characters and the narrators—when they can be differentiated—they have a right to indulge in elongated displays of abstract exposition and ratiocination. But in the 3NLs? We do witness Katie talking to herself, trying to figure things out. Certainly Elise ruminates philosophically in the NOTEBOOKS. But I've tried to steer clear of too much authorial intrusion upon the particulars. I've tried not to lapse into facile generalizations. I don't want the author or the narrator to pretend to some grand, objective perspective on the goings on. In a weird way, the narrator assumes something like the status of the reader or one of the characters. An omniscient point of view is still ultimately in charge of the narration but dethroned from having the final word on its interpretation, on what the meaning to the reader might be. Is this making any sense?

“No ideas but in things.”

Why, Sally! Or is it Sal?

Either way.

“No ideas but in things.” That's it. William Carlos Williams. That's absolutely what I take away from that dictum. And Robert Creeley, he did too.

Perfect!

Awesome!

(laughter)

But perhaps your initial question—about the inconsistent visual descriptions—is reflecting your felt sense that something doesn't quite work, even with a participatory reader like yourself.

I'm not sure what you mean.

I'm getting at the issue of tension in her sexual or non-sexual relationships with men. I've tried to treat it fully. It's a charged issue even in her relationship with Pieter T.

I never get that she sees Pieter T. as a sexual partner. Doesn't she even rule out that possibility early on, in conversation with herself?

Yes.

And he never considers it as a real possibility either. He seems resigned to being a bereaved widower for the rest of his life. I don't see any room for love interests in his life.

Right. I wanted to clarify the question of sex between Katie and Pieter early on, right from the start, in fact. There's that triangulated tension when he attends his first Sunday supper at the Lowries. Almost equally spaced in age between Elsie and Katie, mother and daughter, he's quite cognizant that any fantasy of a love partnership with either will and should and really must remain just that: fantasy. He and Katie are sorting it out from the beginning, even out loud sometimes. Their relationship, their profound friendship, is based on the development of other affinities. They play many different roles with each other. He's her educator in all things horticultural. She's his morale booster but successfully resists her own maternal instinct to take charge of his welfare. Given his big-bear bearing and borderline housekeeping and questionable self-care, it's tempting for her to take over, but she knows she mustn't, for everybody's sake. Except when he becomes self-destructive, she refrains from playing any traditional woman's role as savior, soother, reformer, or whatever, in some self-sacrificing manner.

I like the way you show them figuring it out, without any explicit discourse on some self-help program, going into an essay about it—

... or going on at length about it as we are now! Their mutual affection and their mutual need for companionable company gets them through their spats. I wanted to explore the genesis and development of a genuine friendship between an unlikely couple whose members have no investment in sex or playing gendered roles. At the point in each of their lives when they meet, they are able to begin forging such a deep friendship, not one that makes up for other losses in their lives but one that becomes a living thing, a source of new life for both of them.

And sometimes almost threatens to take on a life of its own, as if it might overtake one or both of them. But they dodge the bullets.

They are on guard for a long time until, ultimately, they can let those guards down. Trust grows. But they are both mature individuals when they meet, and somehow—in spite of superficial barriers—a bond beyond mere camaraderie does take hold.

I'm just remembering how, during their very last encounter, Pieter remarks to himself something about her mouth, her lips, her two recessed front teeth—"still sexy after all these years"—or something like that.

Good reading and good memory!

At first reading, the notion of his viewing her as "sexy" in any way seemed out of character and, I don't know, some part of their very ancient history past. Then I saw how it is a nonattached fondness. He's observing her without needing to possess anything. It's quite sweet, really, given their respective ages and the stage in his own life journey.

The next-to-last stage, you mean.

Yes. And she doesn't know it's the last time they will ever meet.

*

Would you describe yourself as a “writer’s writer?”

“Describe” or accuse? Would you?

I don’t know.

I know I’ll take any intelligent *readers* I can get. I have had some fairly naïve readers of fiction report enjoying the 3NLs, but I recognize that it is probably those readers educated in some English-language fiction, if not steeped in it, who would get the most out of the novel, certainly from the point of view of appreciating its craft, grasping its meta-structure. Does that make me a “writer’s writer?” Maybe. I like to think a traditional novel still has the capacity to subsume a lot of specialties, including those of specialized “literary” reading, some overly attenuated reading of modern and post-modern fiction. 3NLs is hardly designed to address an academics-only crowd. You know, my motive is actually not to avoid a readership or to drive potential readers away. I just can’t seem to cater to set expectations, is all. Now, have I put my foot in my mouth, after first shooting myself in both feet, of course? You can see how a literary agent would flee from me as soon as I opened my mouth. Blame it on my status as a reactionary son of a Madman.

You mean the TV series?

I mean the reality show, in my own case. My father was an adman on Madison Avenue. The real deal. I continue to abhor cat-and-mouse rituals of hidden persuasion. I admire subtlety. Irony is my home base. I appreciate suspense. In my writing I often aspire to implementing all of those. But selling someone something under the guise of telling them something. Oh, you know, the doorbells rings: “Oh, sir, but I’m not selling anything,” they say, ignoring the NO SOLICITING sign on the patio gate or simply unable to read it. “I just want to let you know what’s available.” Yuck.

But going door-to-door, that’s a far cry from sophisticated corporate advertising, isn’t it? Or media-mediated marketing.

Is it?

So, your father was a Madman...?

He was. An old-fashioned one. Lived by the swords of double-martini lunches and 2 and 3 packs of smokes per day. Died on the ends of those swords, too, at a relatively early age. But that’s a whole ‘nother story, as they say.

*

We spoke about the low frequency of similes and metaphors in the 3NLs. I noticed a similar absence of grandstanding prose, flights of pure linguistic lyricism. The writing can become

lyrical, but it's restrained. You seem to be refraining from the sheer abandon one finds in passages by Powers and Le Carré, for instance, two writers whose works you said you admire. Or Pynchon, T.C. Boyle, others.

That's a keen observation on your part. I do feel the need to keep a tight grip on the reins.

As author, you never let your narrator's lingo go unfettered.

I like your analogies! How about this one: Like a conductor keeping the first violinist in check—for the greater good.

But so many writers of modern fiction do let fly with great abandon while swashbuckling through a passage or to the end of a series of passages developed around a theme or an insight. As if the sheer velocity and floridity of their prose were a substitute for the exposition of a valid idea.

Or an exhibition in and of itself...? It may be a flaw of mine. I don't know. I don't slight authors who break all conventional rules of grammar, punctuation, syntax, not for the shock value or the sake of being novel but the better to convey whatever they're driving at, the better to tell their tales. As you've said, I tend to hold my narrator's prose closer to my vest, maybe too much so. But, after all, it's the characters themselves who must convey what I'm driving at. If I'm any good at what I'm after, they do. As I am vigilant against the lazy word choice or the facile reference, so I don't give into any—what did you just call it, “swashbuckling?” Sloppy language, sloppy thought. That's another good one, Sal: “swashbuckling.” To think I once thought all the world of the American Beats—when I was in my adolescence. If there's any bravura in my writing, it's in the realm of the themes at work, the not-so-secret sympathies laid on the line, my implied reckonings of the events brought to life. The discovery and invention of wisdom.

No wonder the songlike portions—the poetic and occasionally rhapsodic portions—seem spare to me. Not un-lyrical but somehow taut, reserved. Certainly infrequent.

Hearing you, I wonder if I'm still adhering in my heart of hearts to my infatuation with Pound's principle of *condensare* as the irreducible element in poetry. Could be. I wrote poetry long before I tried any prose fiction.

I don't know about that principle.

You don't have to. It was one of Pope Pound's Principles expounded in the ABC's OF READING, I think it was. Those principles have actually gone a long way with me, helping me sort out different sorts of literature, prosody, “style”—whatever that is. Melopoeia, logopoeia, phanopoeia—like in Creeley's poem, “The Finger,” where he's firing on all threes.

*

Did you ever consider film work?

What, as a scriptwriter or as a director or something? I did make films once, you know.

You did?

(laughter)

Yes, for a few months in my twenties I carried a Super-8 camera in the satchel along with the nickel bags of marijuana I was selling. I shot some *cinépoèmes*. That didn't last long.

(laughter)

You see, I've made all the usual mistakes of my generation and then some.

(laughter)

But I never got serious about getting on the productive side of film. I'm still just a critical consumer, often a jealous, envious one, since I do seem to get what it takes to make a narrative film work. Besides a lot of money. But I've never acquired the skillset for any film work. And, of course, I have zero connections in the industry, whether mainstream, independent, or hors de concurrence. I'm out of the running.

So, you've always watched movies. Not just the art house variety?

No, all sorts. I have my favorite types and favorite films. Like anybody else, I'm a fan of some actors and directors and cinematographers. But film as lit, Andrew Sarris's *auteur* schtick—that hit me hard when I was coming of age in and around New York City. And Pauline Kael, too, on the same island of Manhattan—her swashbuckling columns!

“The Village Voice” and “The New Yorker”—

One in one back pocket and one in the other. Actually, I was wont to wear an unpressed corduroy jacket and blue jeans. Loafers without socks. Let's see, what else was de rigueur for a wannabe New York City bohemian?

(laughter)

As I said, all the usual mistakes. Hey, I've always just wanted to belong *somewhere to something!* Still haven't really figured that one out.

Well, corduroy goes in and out of style.

Don't all the classics? And those jacket pockets did hold magazines folded lengthwise and broadsides and any number of City Lights Pocket Poet Series editions. But let's get back on track, shall we?

That's my job!

Well, then you're not doing a very good job of it!

(laughter)

But just one more ... off-topic, okay?

Okay.

I once heard it said that one telltale sign of an intellectual was that she or he always carries paper and pen on her or his person.

Well, I wouldn't have guessed that you're that old.

(laughter)

Wouldn't it be some brainy hands-off electronic device or other nowadays?

And probably a customized computer chip under the skin in the very near future!

Oy.

So, back to film as lit—

... or lit as film. Listen, I'm hopeless sorting this stuff off in a definitive way. The first movie I ever saw in my life was HIGH NOON a few years after it came out, and I've been swept off my feet by cinematography ever since. Whenever I did consider getting involved in moviemaking in some professional capacity—well, I had to recognize that I just don't work that well with so many others. I couldn't go down that path. Same thing, in college, when I finally realized that there was a difference between psychology and literature. I had to choose a major and opted for English rather than psychology or rather clinical psychology, to which I was drawn—for all the usual reasons.

(laughter)

I recognized I was simply too nutty to pretend to be helping other people in any of the settings I would have had to train for. So, some personality traits, recognized early on, have endured. Not that I spared myself the consequence of some crazy decisions in my adulthood.

So, you ruled out becoming a psychologist or a filmmaker...?

I'm certainly not the first misfit individual to choose writing for its solitary setting. And not commercial writing. Certainly not journalism. Thinking of deadlines, oh my God. And with movies, thinking of budgets. I don't believe that my own strain of creativity fits in with whatever it takes to make a career in film or journalism or clinical psychology.

Are you sorry?

About not pursuing film? Somewhat. But at one point it cleared for me that literature lends itself more readily to reflection upon action than movies do. Of course, there have been zillions of attempts—1001 experiments—committed to blurring any hard and fast line between cinema or at least cinematography and literature, writing. You're from LA, you know this stuff. I figure I'm about equal parts Apollonian and Dionysian if that makes any sense to you. But given all the personality constraints described above, the choice of literature and the value I still do place on characterization in story has meant that I've been better able to explore and perhaps reveal a character's inner life in writing than otherwise. At least, it's been more easily handled in writing, let's say, given my limitations. And as far as pursuing clinical psychology goes, I don't regret giving up on that delusion. Understanding, predicting, controlling—aren't those the modes and goals of clinical psychology, the basic underpinnings, regardless the school or movement or flavor *du jour*? That's not what gets my own creative juices flowing.

And, as you mentioned, in your writing, in the 3NLs anyway, you leave many elements to the reader's imagination. The way a character looks upon first impression, the spatial arrangements during many verbal exchanges, the mises-en-scène—you give us just enough to go on. You don't avoid clarity. You often enough do flesh things out. But sometimes there are definitely elements left for the reader to fill in.

For example?

In the dialogues. Some of them are pretty bareboned. No descriptions of what the speaker or listener is feeling. Or wearing. Or where the conversation takes place. No stage directions.

Sometimes, when I can get away with it, not even the "he said/she said" indicators of any kind.

Right!

Is that a mistake on my part, do you think?

Actually, it doesn't bother me, especially now that I hear the thinking behind some of our decisions.

But it's always clear who's speaking, isn't it? For instance, in those long AB-AB-AB dialogues and during the phone calls. I try to make it clear in each character's language, their speech and usages, their vocabulary. It's not so simple as giving characters a tic that signals the reader as to who's speaking. This goes back to what we said about characterizing through the character's own verbal expression, whether on the page, as in their letters or their diaries, or in the air, as in their speech. The exchanges between Richard and his bartender and his career counselor—they're stripped of all supportive cues except the references within their spoken words. If a reader can hear the voices, then hearing the tones of voice follows suit, and so on. Of course, the author has to provide some clues, but I can't stand to read too many "He said, angrily" or "She said, with a whimsical smile." The interior monologues are perhaps the trickiest to pull off. If I don't somehow

really know who my characters are...? Well, those self-talk passages are giveaways of incompetence, if that's the case.

There's a tradition of writers who favor lean language, sometimes lean and mean. Mostly men, it seems to me. Elmore Leonard, Ray Carter ... well, Hemingway, of course. All bestsellers in the long run. But, frankly, I sense a short-circuiting in their linguistic minimalism. I don't sense that in yours.

How do you mean, "a short-circuiting"?

I may be off here. I know there's lots of emotion underneath and behind the pared-down lexicon and the pared-down word count—

(laughter)

... but I detect an almost conscious suppression of the exploration of feelings. Regards the use of their artistic energy and attention, a sort of denial or avoidance of complex feelings seems to be a given.

That sounds like a reasonable complaint coming from a sensitive reader—

...who's also a woman, you were about to say.

I suppose. Take Paul Bowles. For a long time I ate up his oeuvre in its entirety, but finally I also felt a suppression of feelings or at least of a wide range of feelings, or a repression. Didn't you just say "complex" feelings? Of course, the male code does allow for expressions of anger and revenge, rage, but many men can't cop to emotions other than those, and they don't admit to or sanction any but the safest saccharin of sentimental expressions. "I love Mom, etc." With Bowles, I grew tired of that narrow range of feelings and an underlying sadism, to put it bluntly, a sadism unmitigated by imaginative transmogrification, as in Buñuel, for instance. If not sadism then masochism, and if neither of those then just some free-floating gratuitous cruelty. By the way, I thought Bertolucci did a good job adapting Bowles' SHELTERING SKY to the screen.

Me, too! I can't even imagine how the breadth and depth of the 3NLs could be approached in a film treatment. Can you?

Maybe in a long mini-series made for TV...? You know, I have often thought that my first novel, TWO HALF BROTHERS, OR SEPARATING OUT possesses enough pictorial elements and depends upon enough observable action that that book might make a good movie.

I've never read it, I'm sorry to say.

That's okay, you're not alone. I could have brought along a copy for you. I'll sent you one.

Thanks!

But there are visual elements galore in that book. It's lousy with dramatic landscapes, exotic locales, vibrant local colors. At least I think they're vibrant. In the 3NLs I resorted more often to a close reading, if you will, of lots and lots of old photographs, among the other memorabilia littering the story. Not to neglect mention of the emphasis on memory, memories, reminiscing—those permeate the book. The narrative time is split in TWO HALF BROTHERS, too, but it's a much simpler scheme, chapters shuttling back and forth between one decade and another. And the commitment to depicting the main characters' interiority that runs throughout most of the 3NLs is not really there in THBs. I tend to agree with you about the implausibility of treating the 3NLs as a single film. Besides, I have a gripe about the tyranny of optics in our day and age, all the more so since the advent of ubiquitous electronic devices. Does any experience come without e-visual e-mediation anymore? Not for some people, in my observation. Somehow one has to find a way or ways to close one's eyes to get at meaning, just as I often turn off my hearing aids and put in earplugs so I can hear myself think. Even that doesn't help much in this noisy, noisy world of ours, where I still spend too much of my time.

I have to tell you—maybe I should've told you earlier—I am researching the very subject we've been discussing: the adaptation of literature to film. It might add up to a book someday.

Interesting! Go for it, Sal! And if you ever get famous, ask Kelly Reinhart why she never responded to my unsolicited mailing of the THBs book to her. I thought she would be capable of turning that one into a good film. I know she would be able to capture the settings and convey the atmospherics. The high desert of Eastern Oregon. The foothills of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. Also, I believe she could do justice to each of the two brothers' perspectives and the difficult dynamics between them.

And no response...?

No sale. Of course, she already has her own writer in Jon Raymond but still: "Put me in coach! Put me in!"

Too bad.

Well, at least I try to sell out anyway. But nobody's buying!

(laughter)

Isn't that what Katie says or thinks when she looks back on her big trip "back East" when she was checking out the folk music scene?

That's exactly what Katie says. What a pleasure to speak with someone who's read my book!

And now I'll definitely have to read your first novel, maybe on the way back to LA.

Well, if you're taking the train you should be able to get through most of it. It's not short but at least it was bound between two covers that time.

(laughter)

SECOND SET

So, I trust you liked Book Six ... in general..?

I loved it. Now I'm sorry there won't be a seventh.

Book Seven? Not on my watch!

When we talked about the obstacles to reading the 3NLs, you said Book Six would be a breeze. Once I got the hang of the extensive NOTES and learned how to read the various specimens of journalese—the Letters to Editor, that Broadside by the Friends, that crazy SMOKE SIGNALS rant, the pair of opinion pieces from the Desk of the Editors at the SENTINEL—the rest was almost a page turner, when it didn't stop to make me think or cry.

Told you! You earned the right to read that final book that way because you've done your homework: you've carefully read the first five books. But then we've already determined that you are my ideal reader. By Book Six, you were in position to grasp the greater significance of seemingly superficial incidents treated in passing, and to track the cumulative tensions demanding resolution. You knew what's at stake by then, given the background. So, when new characters—

... like that creepy Fred Miller—

... and Dieter Ruelling—

... ahh, Dieter! At last one male character who's not a complete villain!

Yes! But you were apparently able to take the late-hour inclusion of other new characters in stride—Anna, Miguel Avila, Craig....

What a relief—another pair of decent human beings who happen to be male.

And you could bring them into the fold. The villainous author had set you up for that!

(laughter)

The way you slip Dieter into the spotlight in the last part of the novel is something of a minor coup, setting the reader up for Pieter's continued yet somehow bifurcated presence in the story—

... then his absence—

... and his double agency.

No spoilers now!

No, of course not. Stop me if I do say too much. Or I'll just edit it out for the magazine post.

Aha! The villainous editor!

(laughter)

Dieter's entrance onto centerstage is a real trompe l'oeil, literarily speaking. It fooled me for a while.

Just long enough, I hope, to give you a dose of the Dutchman's particular ruse. I can't take credit for that sort of sleight of hand. It's almost a device in detective fiction, I think, deceiving the reader, creating red herrings, laying traps, and all that. That way the reader shares with the detective's own steps and missteps moving toward a solution to the mystery. Whodunit? Who's who, anyway? I know Dorothea L. Sayers pulls it off now and again. In *A MOST WANTED MAN*—in the book anyway, if not in the movie—Le Carré pulls it off magnificently when Bachmann appears as a minor player in a scene without our being informed in advance or even along the way that it's actually the main protagonist momentarily pretending to be someone else. I forget now: does he speak a single word in that scene? Exactly when we as readers pick up on the clues before the veil falls revealing Bachmann's identity—that's the fun of it for me. That set-up is brilliant, in my opinion. I hope I performed the trick to some similar effect with Dieter's entry into the plot.

It had me guessing.

But we're divulging too much. *Mon public!*

Are we? But it's such a skilled move, I had to bring it up.

Thank you. Flattery will get you everywhere. But you already know that about me.

(laughter)

Since I saw you last year, did you get a chance to spend some time with those two experimental chapters excerpted from Book Five? The two pieces posted on my website.

I did.

And...?

That's what I meant a minute ago about nefarious male characters in the 3NLs, unsavory male characters. Before I met Pieter Tuelling and Miguel, I was beginning to wonder if you just don't like men at all.

But with Pieter and Miguel I redeemed men—and myself—didn't I?

Somewhat! Regardless, I do think the experimental layout of the therapy sessions, where the typeface shows what each of the two characters says aloud as well as what each is thinking silently—simultaneously—it's fascinating. It really challenges the whole linear apprehension of the written word we're accustomed to practicing when reading standard prose.

Yes, it's meant to confound the left-to-right and back-to-left-to-right movement of the eye altogether. There I really have set up obstacles to easily reading the lines.

I'll say! Why?

I wanted the layout of the text to frustrate any attempt to read it in a linear fashion, in what might be considered a normal fashion. It just can't be done, not with the simultaneously double-columned and two-toned, if you will, presentation of what one character thinks while the other speaks and vice versa. I only latterly saw that James Dickey used parallel columns to tell parts of his story in a 1987 novel called ANILAM. I think that was done in something of the same vein but with less complications than my own and, I think, somewhat heavy-handedly. Too abstractly, in any case, for the registration of the exact language of the individual perspectives that I was after.

That's a mouthful.

An earful, you mean! Oh, I spent a lot of time—too much time—on the nuts-and-bolts logistics of that notation—as in a musical score—the notation of the language spoken *and* the language thought. It was a lot of tedious work getting the spacing to align. But I wanted the treatment to adhere to the tenets of plausibility, of realism. The timing of the two characters' utterances and silences had to match. And zero abstract commentary from any omniscient author, please.

Some film critics speak of diegetic and non-diegetic sound.

Oh? I don't. Can't. But the on-page design of the exposition of spoken/unspoken language, indicating each by alternating bold and non-bold Roman face type and some very precise spacing—that was my peculiar task while writing that “Verbatim” chapter. More than anything else, that format probably derived from having seen, at an impressionable age, a live performance of O'Neill's STRANGE INTERLUDE.

I don't know that one either!

It's a long, long play written under the influence of psychoanalytic notions of repression, suppression, expression: what we censor from ourselves, from others, and what we express.

I do get that parallel to your “Verbatim.”

I'm not saying I copied the O'Neill, although the topic is an enduring interest of mine, always ground for exploration: what we repress, what we suppress, what we express. For instance, right

from the start of the novel, Katie reports one version of her doings to her mother and a very different version to her girlfriend.

You say you came across Dicky’s page layout after you’d written the ‘Verbatim’ chapter, I think you just said.

Oh, yes, a long time after. You know, speaking of going to extremes to create documents with an unconventional registration of thought, of language, once upon a time I thought of something even wilder.

Which was...?

... ludicrously impractical. I never did execute it, but it might also be considered a tributary contributing to that experimental presentation of ‘Verbatim’ on the page now that I think of it. But it would’ve been too expensive, by my standards, to accomplish, and I’ve never had a benefactor or applied for grants or anything, which is what it would’ve taken to fund such an arcane enterprise. So, it remained a crazy scheme, a youthful poet’s pipedream.

But what was it?

Have you ever handled a book with multiple clear plastic sheets—either stitched in the binding or supplied loosely—with the sheets used as overlays on a foundational illustration? I’m thinking of atlases and medical texts.

What about children books?

That’s it! I thought it might be stimulating to take a text in French and its English translation and play with variant treatments of reading them.

I have no idea what—

... you shouldn’t. I’ve never seen it done, at least not what I envisioned. And I do mean “play,” as a composer might play with an original score, a composer who hears a certain weird music in his head and needs to create some way to notate it on paper for others to hear, to play. Again, it would require an idiosyncratic layout, especially the blank spaces, such that the text—depending upon which overlay was put to use—could be read differently than if a different overlay were used.

Sounds cool but I’m not sure I really follow.

There’d be the original French and the target English version, each of which could be read separately, of course. But I conceived of creating hybrids of the two. The foundational French would have to be arranged with blank spaces corresponding to phrases, clauses, sentences, whatever bits and pieces, and the overlaid translated pieces would fill in those corresponding spaces. It would be like taking traditional bilingual *en face* presentation of a translated text into a new direction, presenting the two along one continuous line.

How did you think of that ... experiment?

Oh, probably from childhood hours poring over those atlases and medical texts, or maybe the medical texts came later. I spent a year working in the textbook returns shipping department of a large university bookstore, so a variety of products in academic publishing passed through my hands, literally. But can you imagine anyone foolish enough to try such a project in the days of carbon paper and onion skin? I did! Later I looked for a computer program—I guess we'd call it an "app" today—designed for composers but found nothing. I played around with blank musical staff sheets. Of course, it really called for some of the computer-user tools available today, and computer-savvy collaborators, and a benefactor to actually fund publishing such an oddity. Shy all those, it came to naught but, as I said, it's likely in the deep background of the "Verbatim" chapter's freakish layout.

So, did you have a French text and your own translation that you experimented with?

Yes, I did. I made several translations of the same text, several versions.

And what became of those translations? What was it?

A chapter in *LES LAURIERS SONT COUPÉS* by Edouard Dujardin which first appeared in 1887. That slim novel turned out to be one of the formal sources of Joyce's *ULYSSES* and blazed a trail for many modern authors, even if they don't know it. Based on some reference, I read the French and its translation by Gilbert but more to the point, I read Larbaud's 1925 preface to the French edition and then Leon Edel's 1957 introduction to the New Directions edition. Their point was clear: Dujardin's *LAURIERS* was a very slim tale in and of itself, but his initiative to register the workings of subjective consciousness in language right there on the page exerted a direct and profound effect upon Joyce. Joyce himself said so. And I'm not going too far out on a limb to say Joyce's *ULYSSES* exerted a profound influence upon others.

And that effect...?

Dujardin's pioneering attempts to register interior monologue eventually evolved into Joyce's stream of consciousness in *ULYSSES*.

If you assume I know nothing about Dujardin, you're right. But go on.

I can barely recall the plot of *LES LAURIERS*. It was pretty thin, revolving around this Parisian dandy's tryst with his love interest—or his sex object—or his anxiety about it. But the stunner was the author's wholly original attempt to exhibit the movement of the protagonist's first-person consciousness and to apprehend the world *only* through that first-person point of view. Of course, there were literary precedents in the soliloquies of theatre and the ruminations of fictional character. But what ignited Joyce's imagination seems to have been the handling of the language itself and the inventive superseding of the conventions of prosody. A new handling of language rooted in Symbolism not Naturalism. Even if the questionable charms of *LES LAURIERS*'

particular narrative no longer lay much claim on our attention, the historic importance of that book in unquestionable.

So, you translated that and—

... I only translated Chapter VI. Then I reworked it into a radically different—do you say “radly”?—adaptation.

(laughter)

How did you do that?

I changed out the protagonist’s nocturnal stroll in the Eighth Arrondissement in 1880’s Paris for the Latin Quarter in Paris 1965, updating the whole *mise-en-scène*; substituting the radio-broadcast lyrics of the Beatles’ “Michelle” for the street song of an organ grinder; replacing horse drawn carriages with speeding cabs, that sort of thing. It was a part of my plan to present before-and-after variants of the original, creating a sort of antithetical parallelism—something more “surrealistic” than “realistic,” I suppose. A dialectic of opposites. Again, the reader would have to participate, to be active—*proactive—or would not be*, as Breton might declare.

(laughter)

Did you save those attempts? Have you posted them somewhere on your website?

Oh, no, I set all that aside a long time ago. I don’t know if anything even archival remains. But the process had a big impact on my subsequent writing.

In the passages of language we hear inside Katie’s head, for instance?

That’s it! There, and in the unorthodox syntax of DD’s DREAMLIFE. And before the 3NLs, in TWO HALF BROTHERS, rendering Paul Landon’s mental processes in 2HBs. In one of many drafts of that first novel, written and re-written over many years, I had Paul wandering around Paris more or less wearing a tattered Romantic mantle—speaking figuratively now, metaphorically! For better and worse, I had portrayed him as a modernized, mind-blown *promeneur solitaire* in Rousseau’s lineage. But that version of the story turned out to be worse, not better, so I threw that out too. And in 3NLs, in the very first book, Dujardin’s walking-in-1880s-Paris tableau got transposed again, updated to the 1960s, when Katie is destitute in Quebec City, crashing at the YMCA, nude modeling for chump change at an artist’s co-op loft—

I remember that, of course. When she’s so desperate to make train fare to get back across the country.

To get back home, exactly. I actually went back to that Dujardin chapter as the template for one long passage when she’s out on the street. “*Snow plowed black wet street you’re walking.*” I’m

pretty sure that's how it opens. That whole passage is keyed to the Dujardin, one long spinoff on the Dujardin, meant as an homage, of course, not a parody.

I'll try to find that passage in your book and read it again.

Look in "Homing," the last chapter of Book One, when Katie has landed her job as an *au-père* but not yet reported for duty. She hopes and prays she'll be able to play that nanny game long enough to buy a ticket home. I mean she literally prays, after her fashion, for she's grown desperate. I think the passage ends with her saying, or thinking I guess I should say, something very much like, "*...believe it or not you get to go back home in the end. Oh my god somebody say it's true. Somebody please God somebody tell me that's the way this story ends.*"

Oh, poor Katie!

You've got to love her. I mean, don't you?

I do. Now what about the other website excerpt relating, or exposing, really, Donald Duncan's dream life...? How did that one come about?

Okay. While writing "DD's Flight," the chapter in Book Five about Donald's weeklong sex bout with Sandy, I was gnawing at the bit to find a way to incorporate his explosive dream life into the action. But it didn't fit into the action at all, which was already front and center, already paramount in the depiction of his late adolescent fugue, and I didn't want to break its momentum. The kid is running on testosterone and fantasies and pure sensations. Nothing is mediated by thoughtful consideration. Nothing is governed by reasoning. So, the dreams only seemed to fit as a sort of counterpoint to all the action. I mean, here's this unawares older teenager acting out his animal impulses all over the place and carrying on with grand braggadocio, all the while his dream life reveals him to be a minefield of fears and conflicts and contradictions. He certainly has no capacity to span the two lives—call them the conscious and unconscious, for now—just as I couldn't figure out how to integrate the raw material of his dreams into the text of his observable antics. As author, as narrator, I just couldn't insert the dream material like some sort of captions in a silent movie. I couldn't create some phony cause-and-effect sequencing either, as if there were a simplistic quid-pro-quo relationship between the two, between events in the waking life and events in the sleeping life, so to speak. So I just set the dream material aside and recorded it in a syntax that seemed closer to the actual phenomena of dreaming. Gerunds, abrupt transitions, broken phrases and clauses, provisional punctuation. And no interpretation. I posted it on the website where, hopefully, it can be read in tandem with the chapter in the book, for anyone who's that interested. It's an option anyway. Stream of consciousness without any intrusion by the reasoning mind. What did Jung say...? Well, he put it so many ways... about dreams as "an endless stream of images," I think it was. "... an endless river of images..." It's in one of his filmed interviews late in his life.

The dream chapter is another technical tour de force, I think. And another creepy male character....

Ah, I see....

I'm telling you, except for Pieter Tuelling, men just don't fare well in the 3NLs. And young Miguel. And there's the fabled John McLoughlin of Elise's memory. But Katie's grown son, his acting out...? Passages in that chapter almost read like porn.

Wait, please, listen. I play with some sub-literary modes in the 3NLs, that's true. But it's not meant to titillate. I may be guilty of flirting with porn there, but isn't it softcore, or eroticism, or something besides pure pornography? Ironic? Satirical?

You don't think it would pass as the real deal in some smutty men's magazine?

Really? Gee, then maybe there is some money to be made from my writing after all!

(laughter)

Kidding aside, I think there are many woman readers who would object to some of the super-masculine attitudes towards women, DD's attitude, his father's attitude.

But what about the author's attitude toward them? I take issue with those two guys' attitudes and behavior too, but that doesn't mean I can't portray them. Perhaps all too well, which might shoot to all hell any claim I could make to being a very pure male feminist! The satirist is always fascinated with the satirized, right?

This gets complicated.

It does, doesn't it?

Richard and Don, father and son, they're pretty repulsive, regardless of any ironical attitude—

And what about Ross Stewart...?

There's a case of arrested development!

But all my men aren't monsters. You haven't mentioned the psychotherapist in "Verbatim."

What's his name again...?

Berwick. Gerry Berwick. I try to show him as a complicated human being. An imperfect human being but a decent person in all. He's certainly no hero.

And that lodge master? What's his name?

Nigel. Nigel Oliveira. Oh, but poor Nigel's complicated too, isn't he? On the one hand, he's the product of an elitist, privileged breed that's still not done placing its progeny according to some arch-establishmentarian codes. On the other hand, there seems to be some ambiguity about his

personal life, his sexual life, and the perhaps outsize influence of his well-heeled European lineage on his personal development. The conformist. There are plenty of them, even if each one thinks of himself or herself as something very exceptional.

As in Bertolucci's movie...?

As in Moravia's novel. Now that parallel right there might be a good topic for some academic comparison and contrast between Mario Clerici and Nigel Oliveira.

You seem to be saying that not all your male characters are out and out villains, just most of them, and that the rest are "complicated...."

Sal, I may be helplessly mixed up about all of this, but maybe my next book—a non-fiction book I hope I'll never to have to write—maybe its title will help deflect attention from my confusion: ALL MY MEN FRIENDS ARE NARCISSISTS, subtitled WHAT DOES THAT SAY ABOUT ME?

(laughter)

A satire by one intimate with its subject matter!

(laughter)

So, what does that say about you?

That I'm complicated too. I'm self-centered. I'm preoccupied with my own reactions and responses, my inner world. Is that a prerequisite for poets and interesting novelists, to be narcissistic? I don't know. It does provide one explanation for at least some of the messes in the world-at-large.

Which is?

What, the messes or the explanation?

I think I know what the messes are, but both. Teach me.

(laughter)

Okay, here's my folksy explanation, which I happen to think applies in many cases in our culture or what I see of it. Often raised and doted upon by women—their mothers and grandmothers and aunts—self-centered boys grown up to be men who transfer that self-importance, that primacy of their egocentricity, to all their relationships with other women. The male sun remains the center of the solar system and the female planets revolve in orbits around his self-importance. At the same time, the adult male egotist—the nominally *adult* male egotist—goes crashing through the galaxy colliding with other men, other solar systems. Oh, forget I ever said any of this, will you? Edit that out of the script, please.

(laughter)

The author proposes, the editor disposes!

I'm in big trouble then.

(laughter)

*

Pieter ... what an interesting name for a main character....

(laughter)

Isn't it though? Peter the Great. Peter the Pumpkin Eater—oh, no, wait, that's probably PI! Petrus, Petrov, Pedro. "O Narcisse, how do I love me? / Let me count the names...."

(laughter)

If KT is your alter-ego, what about PT?

Oh, I'd say he's something of a chip off the old block, eh what?

(laughter)

And what a great character!

Pieter does grow on you, doesn't he?

Pieter with an "i" or just P-e-t-e-r...?

You won't let me get away with anything, will you?

(laughter)

But Pieter T. is not Peter B. This is not about autofiction, and this is not about a *roman à clef*. Nobody knows me in the literary world so it's definitely not literary gossip.

Are you of Dutch lineage?

No. I've been mistaken for a Hollander, especially when I was in the seed trade, but no Dutch blood or background or whatever.

So, the sources for your Pieter T...?

PT grew out of my memories and affection for a Californian cottage industry nurseryman who hired me as a helper when I saw his glasshouse and knocked on his door, looking for work. I was pretty down and out at that point; let's say, as regards employability, I was a long shot. But he

gave me that shot for a couple of days, and I ended up staying on for five years. He's the man I dedicated Book Six to, in fact. A wonderful stand-in for my father who had suicided one year prior, to be blunt about it. He was my idea of a good substitute father anyway.

And Pieter's immigration story, the Dutch history and language, and the Holocaust in Europe...?

You mean, what are my sources for those or my connections with those? I've confessed to you that I'm a kleptomaniac, right? An unrepentant story thief. PT's angst about his personal past and about modern history, in fact—that derives from over forty years of marriage with an Israeli Sabra who was a child of Holocaust survivors. I spent an adult year in Israel. Through Pieter Tuelling I finally found a vehicle to express my affinity for the Jewish people, my familiarity—as a metropolitan New Yorker—with Jews. And my perhaps vicarious strains of guilt, shame, suspiciousness—*l'chaim!*

Vicarious or borrowed or stolen, his story and the way it unfolds come across as very credible to me. Yet somehow he brings a certain levity to the novel—

... and gravitas. He's heavy with the old *Weltschmerz*. World pain.

And personal heartache.

And personal heartache.

Yet he does basically redeem himself in the end.

In his own eyes, he does, for the most part, which are certainly the pair of eyes counting most, given his lifelong struggle with low self-esteem.

And survivor's guilt.

And that. What about Martin Wildeman?

Who?

The sculptor who impregnated Lily, Elise's mother.

Oh, him! Oh my God! Guys like him are not being issued passes as merely charming cads anymore.

I know that. And Bill McGrath?

Bill McGrath...?

You know, Bamboo Bill, Jan's estranged husband, the grass bachelor who rules the roost at One Grade Road in the period between the old lodge and the later era when the Lowrie's take ownership.

Him! Good old Bamboo Bill. I don't think anybody would've ever called him a "charming cad," even back then. So, why do you go to such lengths to set up these thoroughly credible but execrable characters only to....

... knock them down? Lots of reasons. I hope I do manage to imply that, by contrast, the few "good guys" like Pieter T. and Craig Broughton and to some extent Gerry Berwick—it's their own personal experiences dealing with their devils that permit them to become more fully realized individuals than the other male characters, those other "bad guys."

Aha! The novelist as moral educator!

And entertainer. Educator and entertainer both, a double header. Isn't that the ticket? I don't claim to be a perfect ideologue or to be lacing my long story with some supreme doctrine for the discerning. There are plenty of reasons why 3NLs is populated with bad guys—

... and a few bad girls....

Who? Not Jan, I hope you don't mean Jan. If ever there were a "complicated" character....

I was thinking of Angelita.

Oh, Karmann Ghia Lita! Don't you feel for her? She can't help it, how she acts, the way she's adapted to survive. "I want my Porsche." You have to dig her, come on. In a sense, I tried to use Angelita and Katie's parallel scrappiness, their respective survivor skills, to allow for a bond to develop between them despite all odds and however briefly. When Angela Salomone lets her guard down, when some of her accreted armor gets peeled off, she's not all that evil.

Or a paragon of virtue either!

Exactly: she's complicated. Even Elisabeth Lowrie is not portrayed as a pure saint, although sometimes she's perceived by others that way.

Which comes out clearly at the memorial gathering.

Yes, in Chapel Grove. Say, Sal, I was meaning to ask you: what do you think about this popular campaign to de-gender or neutralize the gender biases locked into our language usages. The attack on pronouns especially. Have they issued any mandates at Right Craft yet?

Rightingcraft. No, not yet. Everyone there is left to make their own decision regarding their own company email signature, for instance. It's not exactly like working for the State of California—

... or the City of Berkeley!

No, I imagine not.

Now, do you see how you just used “they” in the old way as a singular pronoun? A perfectly acceptable and widespread usage if not grammatically correct. You see, language has always been plastic. So, what’s all this rush to revolutionize the usages of everyday speech and writing? I’m sure that politicians and literary salon chatterboxes online would have a field day with what I’m about to say next in terms of my own personal perspective, but what else can I report? I may come across to many younger people as a diehard conservative, especially in this linguistic gender war business—I better lower my voice, near as we are to the epicenter of LGBTQxy-driven politics—but I do believe that, regardless of genitalia and other physical hardware, the male and female human being share a larger common denominator, an enormously greater common humanity, than the language-gender warriors can afford to admit, lest their revolution lose its steam.

No, I wouldn’t bruit that one about too loudly, not here or where I come from in LA either.

For all the crucial and significant and profound differences that biological and cultural differences make, homo sapiens share something like 98% of their genomic baseline with chimpanzees. At least, I read that once and I think I understood it correctly. I’m sure I’m oversimplifying but molecular biology is not my strength.

I read that in Jared Diamond’s THIRD CHIMPANZEE.

Exactly. So you know what I’m trying to talk about. But I’m only alluding to that statistic for the sake of analogy: for goodness sake, let’s not murder one another or mutilate the English language and inhibit free discourse with these new draconian etiquettes of right language, correct speech. Some of these self-appointed neo-linguists may blame the language for codifying social inequalities, and that’s true to some extent. But can they claim that the English language actually fails them, or is it rather that they fail to make good use of it? English has evolved over a long time. Suddenly imposing a wide swath of cataclysmic changes in the blink of an eye is foolishness. The intention may be noble enough. The indignation is noble. But the means are too extreme to take hold for long. Sure, let’s examine how language usages may reflect and perpetuate some widespread injustices, but this crude overhaul of our everyday usages results in some comic and really pathetic communications. Diminished communications, really. Does evolution happen all so quickly? Of course there’s the slow drip drip drip of time *and* catastrophic events. I just want to point out that fashions can flare up and travel far and fast and then fizzle out.

What’s the matter?

I sound so reactionary. Who am I now, Professor Hayakawa during the student strike at San Francisco State in the late Sixties? Better take me out back and shoot me right now.

Hayakawa...? I think he was a Republican U.S. Senator before I was born. But I'm not shooting you quite yet. Maybe later if you don't mind.

No problem. Just don't miss your plane or train because of it.

(laughter)

I'll have to think about the 2% difference in genetics, between some primates and human beings—

... viva la difference!

... and its relevance to the nature/nurture dynamics of male and female human beings..

And how those dynamics show up in our language—

... and in our novels.

Yes, there too. You know, Katie Lowrie's voice must carry the 3NLs from start to finish, and she's a commoner. Isn't she what Britishers would call "a commoner?"

Yes...?

I'm thinking of class differences now and social inequities. Everyone comes from and belongs to some class or other, right? I don't submit to some half-baked idea that intellectuals are not bound by any class, that artists are somehow beyond class status. Baloney. And I think it's relevant to our conversation to remember that in the evolution of the traditional English novel, there occurred this shift from a focus upon the trials and tribulations of the elite to a focus upon middle class folks. People other than the materially well-to-do displaced the aristocrats and the industrial barons and the other privileged personnel to become the central characters in ordinary bourgeois novels. I know there are lots of literatures where commoners and peasants and bandits and outliers were always the heroes and anti-heroes of the stories and will remain so. But I'm thinking of the tamer strain of novels. It's like vernacular music as distinct from concert music. Maybe 3NLs fits best in the latter, in the libraries and museums and concert halls! *Within the bloody canon, man!*

I hadn't thought of Katie that way, but you said that once before: that she's "a commoner."

And a woman. It's an American novel not a British one but same-same: her destiny is central to the story not peripheral, not tangential.

And what a character—male or female!

Well, character trumps class every time in my book. In the 3NLs and in life, as I see it all around me.

I agree with you, and I'll pardon you your choice of verbs.

Oh, you're just bad!

(laughter)

THIRD SET

During our first conversation last year, you asked who I wrote the 3NLs for?

Yes, and that's when you came up with your "ideal anticipated reader."

Who's sitting right in front of me again!

(laughter)

But a larger question remains, at least for someone in my position: why write for others at all? After the purely therapeutic benefits, why go through all the damned difficulties of creating a respectable work of art?

Who is "someone in your position?" What does that mean?

That means most people I encounter neglect or reject my literary accomplishments altogether. I've already admitted that I've failed to create a readership. There are very few people waiting for the last installment of the 3NLs, for example.

So? Why do you bother?

To find out what I'm thinking. However trite that sounds, in my case it remains true. The basic struggle to find out what I'm thinking may not show in the final product, but the struggle to articulate experience is the motive. To articulate in language. To articulate my experience of language, in language. For me it's a wrestling match. As well as to create a communicative form, to invent forms communicative to others.

It sounds like good advice to any young writer starting out.

And to that same young writer I would add this: if you don't have to write, don't.

Why's that?

If your audience is not somehow a given, if you're not willing or able or desirous of chasing an audience or devoting considerable energy to manufacturing one, or if it simply doesn't happen—how many other sensitive artists have to create their art so badly that they invent "ideal anticipated readers" to keep them company while they labor away in solitude?

(laughter)

Of course, if you can write for reasons far removed from my own epistemological motivation, why then go ahead and apply your gift, hone your skills—your *craft*, right?—you might make money with that sort of endeavor. I became the default “prose janitor” in a small company where I was employed in sales and marketing and special projects for fifteen years. I wrote the copy for a line of retail lawn seed boxes, for God’s sale. How much more pedestrian can utilitarian writing get? But it paid. So, I guess I should say I’ve made *some* money by writing after all!

(laughter)

I hear you saying that the career of a committed creative writer can be a long, hard row to hoe, as my grandmother used to say.

And not particularly financially remunerative, unless you can apply yourself in the movie industry somehow, but we’ve talked about that. How many uncompromising writers strike it rich? Only the one-percenters in the publishing industry, as far as I can see. But I’m long over complaining with a passion about sour grapes. I’ve never been anywhere near that banquet table. Everyone has to deal with their, her, his, or its own destiny...

(laughter)

... and no one outsmarts life in the end. So, if you’re like me, you’d better have some inalterable ideals about the value of what you’re doing. How did it go...? Some lines in a poem I once wrote from a sense of utter yet somehow sublime isolation? “The ghost I dance to a peninsular end pauses / to consider how far out is.” I think that’s it. If you feel you have to write material of virtually no commercial interest? Good luck! I think of the elder Melville coming home from his day’s work at the New York City House of Customs—where the whole world paraded before him day after day—and laboring at the mostly iambic tetrameters of his last long work, CLAREL, OR A PILGRIMAGE IN THE HOLY LAND—a poem of 150 cantos and 18,000 lines. He chipped away at that mammoth literary formation for something like twenty years, serving his Muse in solitude, isolation, and obscurity at the end of his life. Sounds sad but I actually draw inspiration from that portrait of him, at least from my own wordy movie-picture-show of the man and his art.

In all, you’ve earned the freedom to write as you want.

I suppose. The Muses and me! I do hold them in high esteem, you know, and they hold me to my word, or words. I’m not complaining really, but it does take discipline, this writing for fathom others. It’s just, by now I don’t know any other way. It’s what Herman and I do, in our separate cells.

So, after our young aspirant declares that she or he *must* write—what would be your second piece of advice?

Still pro bono?

(laughter)

I'm afraid so.

Keep a journal. That's an old saw but it's been a mainstay for me, sometimes a life preserver. It's kept me in practice when not working on any writing project in particular.

Have there been long periods like that without a writing project?

Yes. Long and longer. In my adult life? When I became a father, that forced me to recalibrate—or get my head screwed on rightly enough to help support our family and raise a son. Any elective writing of poetry, prose, translations—that went by the wayside as I scrambled to keep up. That was probably the longest stretch with nothing but Dear Diary close at hand. So, I think I'd put journaling right up there with reading, reading all you can and not necessarily all you can of your contemporaries. Definitely not only your contemporaries, but that must be obvious, right?

How long have you kept a journal?

For as long as I can remember since finally being expelled from secondary school and, psychologically, “out on my own” since about the age of seventeen. My first batch, the ones from my wandering years and my college years, they were all lost to water damage in some cellar where they were stored with my college books. Since then I have filled about sixty composition books.

What do the journals consist of? I think I've read some excerpts on your website, but can you say what sort of entries you make?

Just about everything. Dream data and commentary. First drafts of inchoate forms. Therapeutic self-talk. And the talk of others, snippets overheard. Political rants for which I'd be put behind bars and under medication if they were aired aloud. Lots of notes towards possible future work. Bird lists, plant lists. Itineraries of excursions made or to be made. Arguments with myself. Stray thoughts. Recipes.

Any drawings or sketching...?

Not really, not much, but lots of scrapbook stuff. Memorabilia, I guess. Postcards, ticket stubs, bits and pieces. I have a notion of taking a razor blade and cutting out all the pages except those with the oddities pasted in the pages. The covers are plastered with images from here and there.

Do you ever mine the journals for your fiction?

Of course. I've often revisited them in the course of dredging up details or relocating my sensations in another time and place I'm trying to re-create. I recently made a six-week retreat in a remote cabin in order to systematically go through the journals and trace the leitmotifs—in the dreams, in the arguments—to index them. Partly out of sheer curiosity and partly to be able to retrieve that sort of material when I'm writing. I got about halfway through when my time was up. It was pretty intense work, concentrating like that—and lots of the handwriting is impossible or “N” as my elementary school reports read, much to my dismay: “Needs improvement.” I was somewhat

relieved when I ran out of time, frankly. It was painstaking and I haven't gone back to that job since. I still might someday. First I'll have to find me another affordable cabin with accoutrements perhaps.

But if you slash out the entries proper, it will destroy writing that might be of value or of interest to others. Those would be lost.

But Sally. I name names in there! Character assassinations abound! Off with their heads! I have always told all to Dear Diary, and it wouldn't be fair to the living or the dead to expose all that. I still feel obliged to protect the innocent too!

Even if the guilty go free!

Like Freddy the Fixer at the end of the novel!

Shush now ... remember...?

I'm not sure it matters, preserving the journals, I mean. As Paul Blackburn wrote and Dylan Thomas might've said: "(har, har, / nobody care)".

No comment. What would you say to a young writer complaining about a writer's block?

Can't help you there, Sally. I've never had one, the way I hear it described. Maybe just start writing and see what comes...? Be ready to throw out the baby *and* the dirty water. The only writer's block I've ever had has been a lack of recycled paper to scrawl across. I do write first and foremost by hand on paper, and I hate wasting the stuff, so when I have lost access to recycled paper bins in offices and all—and with the bloody world going paperless!—I really don't feel right about using new paper at all.

You mean that actually stops you from writing?

Oh, no. I'll pour the first raw material out on any surface: butcher paper, grocery bags, excess packaging. I cover them all with illegible markings scribbled out hot off the press. My wife teaches to all ages so up until the pandemic closed schooling in person, I used to have a steady supply of all the paper that children tend to waste. You have no idea of the ratio of what I keep to what I toss. It's almost embarrassing.

Any treasures on the cutting room floor?

The slaughterhouse floor, you mean? I don't think so but that's the thing: I try to save the good stuff—whatever lead might be turned to gold in the reworking. When I can read the handwriting, that is! I just seem to have to go at it almost athletically when the imaginative magna erupts. Unfortunately, my wife says I sometimes eat that way too, athletically.

(laughter)

What, you mean your table manners?

Yeah. I tell her it's just enthusiasm over her great cooking!

No sale?

No sale.

(laughter)

You haven't said anything to our young writer about creative writing programs?

I don't know anything about them really.

So you don't know if that might be a good route for an aspiring writer?

An aspiring careerist, for sure. What did Hemingway say? "Go rub yourself in the dirt." Something like that. He meant, I think, something like "Get away from formal schooling and live some life. That's a real writer's school." But you're drawing all these clichés out of my woodwork!

Maybe my questions aren't—

... no no, they're fine. Maybe I'm just full of clichés! I've only taken one writing class in my life, at college. The teacher said I better stick to prose fiction when I submitted some poetry. When I submitted some fiction, she said I'd better stick to poems. And she was a scholar of some renown, too! No, I can't say much about writing programs or grant writing or any training in institutionalized settings at all. I know successful wolves hunt in packs, but I seem to travel best alone.

The lone wolf, to coin a phrase.

The perennially hungry wolf, starving for want of suitable prey.

Which is...?

Attention. A readership. "Johnny could only sing one note / and the note he sang was 'oy'!"

So, Johnny. Let's say the journaling remains a strictly private practice except for those pieces you select for posting on your website, for instance. Have you ever considered autobiography?

No, but my wife has.

For you or for herself?

For me.

So...?

It jus' ain't-a gonna happen.

Why not?

The important parts of my imaginal life are in the writings. Maybe I'll drum up some annotated chronology for my grandson—that's my wife's main motive—but I get hives when I think of working on an autobiography if it has to be mine! For me, it would be a lot of work, and I feel I'd have somehow to dumb it down. Not for any fathom audience, just to get through it all. You see, I haven't even started writing my autobiography, and I want it over with! No, the significant parts of my imaginal life are in the writings—*mutandis mutatis*.

Which means? Footnote, please!

With all the necessary changes made.

*

Would you categorize the 3NLs as regional literature, an excellent specimen of regional literature?

You mean, West Coast USA regional or Northern California regional or some label such as the Library of Congress might tag onto it?

Yes, something like that.

If that's all that's meant by "regional," that'd be fine. But doesn't that term have a lot of baggage? Hasn't it, historically, been used as a putdown, implying that the subject and maybe the treatment are de facto provincial or insular as opposed to cosmopolitan and sophisticated? If so, then I don't buy it.

So, you wouldn't like to hear the 3NLs pigeonholed as regional literature...?

It reminds me of the old East Coast-West Coast literary culture skirmishes. Haven't those battles been laid to rest with the advent of the world wide web? I think it was sort of a false dichotomy in the first place. I know the stereotypes, including the West Coast authors with the East Coast agents, the East Coast publishers—traitors! Come on, I don't see how the older mindset about regional versus national or something generates many questions leading to edification now, unless we tear the terms apart then set them aside. There are so many prejudices associated with those terms or their habitual use. And I'm not proposing that a non-mainstream setting and dialect is either necessary or sufficient to creating imaginative literature. There's a great moment in one of James' novels or stories where I think it may be the housemaid from some rural province who remarks to herself how very provincial the Parisians she works for are, for they've never lived anywhere but Paris! Maybe it's not the maid but you get the idea. When I settled for good out West after college,

I came to spot New Yorkers from a mile away, and sometimes they struck me as awfully uninformed, almost narrow in their outlook, and of course stuck-up, just so full of themselves there was no room for anyone else. This is not about pitting the country bumkin versus the urban sophisticate. Or New York City versus Paris, etc. They may be the capitals of a certain culture but not all culture or even the most important culture, according to my lights. God help us, if NYC fashions in thought are always the last and latest word in high culture. Or San Francisco's. For me the term "cosmopolitan" has even come to carry with it a certain non-specific fungibility. It's almost a pejorative in my vocabulary. Like the paraphrase of a poem. There's a time and place for paraphrasing a poem but let's not mistake the paraphrase for the poem itself.

Actually, I was thinking more in terms of regionalism as a compliment—

I'm sorry. I went off there, didn't I? And isn't your own title something like Pacific States Correspondent for Righting Craft?

Southwest Correspondent, actually.

Southwest...?

From the Bay Area to San Diego and the adjacent Southwestern States, Nevada and Arizona..

No Utah, no New Mexico...? Colorado ... but I guess Colorado would be in the Mountain States.

And my boss lives in Salt Lake City so he covers Utah and New Mexico.

So, the Southwest Correspondent then.

Perfect.

And where is Righting Craft Publishing headquartered?

The owners and editor-in-chief live in Chicago.

Okay. And where do your paychecks come from?

(laughter)

You know, I don't know. They get deposited directly into my account.

So you see? For me, for better and worse, that's a good example of the breakdown of former barriers that brought the regionalism issue to birth in the first place. The New York City-Boston-Philadelphia establishment versus the Californian-LA-Puget Sound hinterlands. It's all nonsense now.

I'm not so sure. There are still similar assumptions kicking even if they've been shoved deep into the closet.

Oh, you're right, I'm sure. Assumptions of entitlement. Assumptions of superiority. Complexes of inferiority driving those who feel like outsiders to get on the inside, to belong. I don't know. The capital and the provinces. Maybe it's much older and not particularly American or even literary. Aesop's fable about the city mouse and the country mouse. But in speaking of authorship and evaluating fiction writers and their works, it seems to be one of those conventional usages that die hard. It's like convenience-labeling of decades in journalese and sociology. The 60s, the 50s. It's a shorthand that can bury some sloppy thinking if we're not careful. Sorry, I'm such a party pooper!

*

I think I have only one more question I've prepared to ask you.

(laughter)

Shoot!

I asked you before and now I'm asking it again; I'm asking myself, really: Does the 3NLs have a happy ending? It's hard to talk about it now without spoiling it for your readers, but I can't decide even now that I've read it all!

What's a happy ending? A Hollywood ending? Or a comedic ending in an older sense, in Aristophanes' sense?

I don't know about Aristophane, but—I want to be so careful not to give too much away for people who haven't read Book Six—

... which is everybody since it's not quite ready for POD publishing yet. But go ahead, carefully!

You know I'm not talking about some belly laughs at a grand finale. There are elements of satire in the 3NLs, but there is a consistent undercurrent of melancholy too.

Yes. Notes of the melancholic, chords of the elegiac. I'm not being facetious either. Any brave new world we're entering is not washing over us without considerable requiems in its wake.

But the tone feels just right to me. The ending actually feels good—that sounds so stupid!

Forget it, go on.

But doesn't it feel good? When Katie makes her big move and becomes almost a heroine, having lived where she loved and defended where she lived.

You have definitely read the score and heard the music. Yes, Katie's last stand is meant to be a supreme gesture of some hard-won dignity. She has that capacity to let go of what she knows best and loves most.

The way you put it sounds like Buddhist non-attachment.

Katie Lowrie, Buddhist? More like, Katie Lowrie, individuated human being. But she does want to avoid becoming some sort of branded icon. No refrigerator magnets, please.

(laughter)

And that place gets saved.

Yes, that place gets saved and, after all, that place may as well be the leading character in the 3NLs, not those darn three naked ladies. "And the winner is ... the 3NLs, starring One Grade Road, Cliffport California"—wild applause.

*

I've run out of questions.

Aren't you going to ask me what books are by my bed? Or what three literary figures I would invite to dinner? That how the New York Times rounds out its interviews with celebrity authors.

Okay then—

On, no. All that might not be news fit to print. So, we're done then...? Since we seem to be looking for a gracious exit here, can I thank my wife?

By all means.

Working on such a large project over such a long period, it can take a toll on one's personal life. The writer's widow syndrome. Not that she doesn't have a life of her own. But I can sit at my desk for days and nights on end. It's not as if I have to wait for the Muses to inspire me. I have my work orders. But that means I will sometimes be leading a second life, like a man with a mistress or a hidden addiction. A life separate and parallel to the life we share together. As a matter of fact, she leads a second life too, with her teaching career, with her communications and visits with her family abroad, with her friends and activities other than householding with me. What we have to be wary of is simply watching the trajectory of those parallel lives go off on tangential lines. But I want to thank her for her tolerance of my obedience to the Muses although it has resulted in no fame, no fortune.

But maybe it has resulted in a strain of happiness that, I suspect, makes you an easier person to be around.

Correct. That's it. Can success spoil Peter Boffey? We'll never know, will we? But we've found out that a dedication to the creative, active imagination can make him a happier, better balanced person than otherwise.

You spoke earlier about “dealing with one’s devils.”

Devils, angels, can't have one without the other, right? I'm just recalling how Louisa Strentzel, John Muir's wife, “Louie”—she learned how to preserve their marriage. Once he had proved out as the heir to her father's farming enterprise, once he had done some heavy lifting and successfully managed the operation to run without him, the mountains beckoned, and she periodically let him go off.

She just let him ... leave? He was a lucky guy....

Because he always came back. I do in fact enjoy going exploring out in the natural world in ways my wife does not: camping, hiking, open-ended exploring in California, Oregon, Washington. I hear no calling as loudly and clearly as John Muir did, but I do go out. But as often, more often, I go “in,” in terms of the solitary exercise of writing. And after I get through some paroxysm of first drafting, or a marathon of editing, or a triathlon of drafting, composing, editing—I always come back.

You mean because she lets you go off.

Because she lets me go off.

You're a lucky guy.

Lucky Pierre, *à votre service!*

[end second interview]

POSTSCRIPT

On September 1, 2021, Sally texted then emailed me with news that in the process of vetting her transcription of our second interview with her new editor at Righting Craft Publishing, he had brought up significant reservations about what he perceived as glaring omissions in her questions *and* in my answers. She invited me to contact her promptly, proposing that we talk posthaste so I would have an opportunity to respond in my own defense. For various reasons, I could not contact her soon enough, and the deadline for posting a “revised” second interview at *rightingcraft.com* passed. Instead, a few days later, I responded to her more fully by email.

(1 Sept 2021) EMAIL FROM S.O. WITMAN:

2 criticisms frm new reg. ed re interview #2 to be posted at 5pm Chicago time (3pm CA) TODAY. He charges we danced round subject of gender/sexuality but “never chose partners and danced.”

Says he might read a book titled THREE NAKED GENTLEMEN but if issues of latent same-sex attraction are treated as evasively in 3NLs as in our interview, he'll not bother. Also charges that by ending 3NLs in July 2020 not August 2020, author missed opp to exploit life-and-death situation of CZU wildfire any contemporary novelist "worth his salt" wld use as raw material so ending "utterly fails" to meet challenge legit novelist shld be eager to confront. These are his complaints not mine! PLS CONTACT ME BY PHONE (619-395-8832) IN NEXT 3 HOURS so we can talk (Zoom?) I haven't had time to think it thru but feel his charges are NOT FAIR and I want to give you chance to respond. I might be able to quick revise final #2.

(5 Sept 2021) EMAIL REPLY:

Dear Sally,

As I said over the phone, I'm sorry I didn't get to your messages and get back to you in a timelier fashion, but I have since made time to consider the charges and want to share my thoughts with you—if I may speak my mind freely (and I have found that with you as my interlocutor, not merely my "anticipated ideal reader," I can indeed speak my mind).

First, I didn't know that you "vet" your interviews with your editor. I suppose that's a reasonable working relationship. Did you do that regularly with your previous editor too? If so, I have to assume that he "approved" of our first interview. Now I see that, despite your new editor's reservations, *rightingcraft.com* has run our second interview exactly as you had transcribed and forwarded it to me.

Having read none of the novel put your new editor at a disadvantage regards his two expressed reservations; this consideration does not necessarily indicate that his accusations represent the ill-considered observations of a somewhat biased, closed mind.

Regarding the first charge: Our conversation was never meant to be about my personal life, but about the making of 3NLs—the building of it from vision to blueprint to construction. I believe that you and I did make meaningful forays into the techne and authorial intentions of that novel. However, we did not spend time generating a psychological inventory of the author's psyche. You'll recall my sensitivity toward signs of repression, suppression, and expression: we may not always choose what we repress, but if we're trained (and lucky!) we may have some say over the times and places of what we suppress and express. If the focus of our exchange had ever shifted toward a friendly exploration of my person and personality (and wouldn't Narcisse Pete be happy about that!), I like to think that I would have held my own in that arena, whether we pursued the matter à la Jung, Freud, or Adler, or according to the likes of Maslow, Rogers, and the rest. I can't pretend to know much about the new neuro-psychiatry (neo-phrenology?) or other current trends.

Your new editor's own heavily weighted preference for highlighting any homosexual orientation (signaled by his conjuring up of a novel entitled THREE NAKED GENTLEMEN) is not mine. However, it does happen to be true that, far removed from any exclusively erotic interest or

disinterest in either sex, I do lay the main blame for the ongoing mutilation of Mother Earth and the accelerating pollution of Father Sky upon the male members of our species:

The fiendlike skill we display in the invention of all manner of death-dealing engines, the vindictiveness with which we carry on our wars, and the misery and destruction that follows in their train, are enough of themselves to distinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth. [Herman Melville, TYPEE: A PEEP AT POLYNESIAN LIFE, 1846]

Let him think on that, make of it what he will, and call me what he will. Without further information, I'm tempted to caricature his riposte—but I'll be prudent with a smirk. By now you know how shy and retiring I can be, how positively reticent and laconic—utterly at a loss for words....

I think I can do a decent job answering the man's charges regarding our treatment of gender and sexuality in the second interview. I presume your editor is not referring to our sidebar-discussion of the politics of de-gendering, neutering, or neutralizing language; given the context, I think we covered that topic sufficiently in passing. But what of the deep, dark, no doubt fetid issues underlying the male author's decision (scratch that; make that *compulsion*, for in such matters there must be *compulsion*!) to make his main protagonist a female, often highlighting her inner life in first person AND in a novel engendered in and by the 20th and 21st century culture of Central Coastal California, no less! I do plead guilty to having made that decision and, as soon as I did, I found myself able to embark upon the composition and crafting of the 3NLs. Surely, there's some redeeming value in any decision that enables the creative process to proceed, even if it delivers the blatant and flagrantly sick and sordid mind of one woefully misled man. [Exit stage right: "O Oscar, where art thou? Narcisse!! Chloris!!!"]

In the Western literature I know of, the reverse has also been the case: for centuries, female authors have likewise often enough opted for male protagonists, although there have been fewer female published authors altogether. That's no simple story either. But of course I was obliged to ponder just how much and how explicitly to dwell upon Katie's sexuality and how deeply to delve publicly, that is, on the written page, into its manifestations. Does your editor want the author to provide readers with a sexuality/gender index metering Katie's hermaphroditic mix of feminine and masculine attributes in bed or anywhere else?

I do show her frustrated and satiated, in copulation and in masturbation. Perhaps the complainant would have my graphic designer illustrate pictures to spell all that out. But that would be a private limited edition printed on calfskin to be circulated exclusively among select subscribers. Barring that special edition, I do shine a light on KT's lesbian leanings toward Letty, and her fantasies about Miguel, and her ambivalence toward her elective heterosexual and asexual partners. But I don't hold that these passages should be thrust centerstage to the exclusion of others, for KT's

sexual impulses and how she acts on them—or not—are only parts of her person. You'll remember that I was preoccupied with charting the individuation of her whole person.

In like fashion but on a smaller scale, let's take the example of another character—major and female. This author did feel the need and use of disambiguating Jan McLoughlin's personal relationship with Mary-Helen Belcano. Despite all appearances, their multiple decades of intimate companionship in business and otherwise was in no way a so called Boston Marriage, that euphemistic code for lesbian partnership. Jan declares it was not and I for one have to believe her! Their fatal codependency drew on other sources binding them together—until they didn't.

In conclusion, I would tell your editor and the readers of *rightingcraft.com* that the author of 3NLs had no intention and does not relish the notion of tagging his novel as Cis-lit or Queer-lit or even what's commonly known as family saga, for that matter. Such compartmentalization reduces the possibilities of his sort of general literary fiction and demeans the capacities of his likeminded, ideal, anticipated general readership.

Of course, we could have simply spoiled it for everybody including your editor: Sex in the 3NLs? The butler did it but to whom? To the maid, or to the gardener, or to both? At the same time? Or was it the maid who did it to the mail carrier...? But that would've been over-the-top tacky, you think?

Regarding the second charge: The CZU Lightning Complex Fire started on August 15th or 16th in 2020 and was declared 100% contained 37 days later on September 22nd. More than 86,000 acres located in the Santa Cruz Mountains of San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties burned. Some 70,000 people were evacuated and over 900 homes lost. To my knowledge, one person died somewhere up Last Chance Road. All this information is a matter of public record: "facts." Anyone who had paid attention to the macro- and micro-maps in the 3NLs would have realized that "fictive" Cliffport and Fern were situated in the fire evacuation zone, as were "factual" Davenport, Swanton, and Bonny Doon—all communities vulnerable to ignition by the speeding flames and wind-driven embers by which many areas were ultimately overwhelmed.

100 miles distant, I followed the news as I was finishing one last pass at the last chapter of my novel. My reactions suddenly included a new mandate: All bets are off, buddy! You're going to have to alter the end of the story in order to address the catastrophe, period. In the novel, the places are portrayed as living agents—as active as any of its major characters—and if those places burned down? If fire took out Cliffport, burned down Monteflores Lodge West, decimated the facilities at the Nature Education Center at One Grade Road, incinerated Swanton Pacific Ranch—if the fire raged through that forest from summit to sea, I felt obligated to incorporate the destruction of those actual and correspondingly literary places in my work.

I can imagine the potential for high-stakes action fiction your new editor may have had in mind! A scene of Chapel Grove's ancient redwoods being scarred for life, its pioneer cemetery's picket

fences consumed in a flash! CALFIRE, stationed at the Whale Watch turnout, staging a battle to save the Whale Watch Shoppes—and losing! The golf courses at Monteflores become a major staging area for firefighting forces including helicopters toting ocean water up the hillside and fire crews taking respite in field tents, while the Vignettes’ own fire brigade labors to spare the Cummings Complex and the homes. What about Ross Stewart? Wouldn’t his New Hope be deep inside the same lines of the unprecedented fire burning down Big Basin State Park and vaporizing the many semi-hidden, often illegal hamlets sprinkled throughout the mountains’ gulches and ridges and valleys—remote and inaccessible? All these scenarios seemed plausible, even probable, and a new narrative could conclude the 3NLs in epic style. Perfect! I was tempted to integrate the impact of that historical event upon my fictionalized community of North Coast Santa Cruz, but it was a coarse, extrovertist impulse that drew me toward that challenge, and it just didn’t feel right to do so. I couldn’t do it, or, if I could, wouldn’t.

Your editor has never read 3NLs but you have, so will know of what I speak when pointing out that I tried to bring the long tale to a quiet, almost elegiac “happy ending,” resolving the account on a chord of notes just conclusive enough and open-ended enough to suit my sense that any actively engaged reader could imagine the future of Cliffport and environs after July 20, 2020, when the narrative ends. I suspect no reader would have prophesized the magnitude of the fire to come in August. Maybe another writer—a more popular, professional writer—would have accommodated your editor’s popular, professional demands. I could not.

But why not? Was this an imaginative failure on my part? I even considered then decided against tacking on a coda at least acknowledging the fire and perhaps supplying links to resources guiding people who wanted to help with recovery or simply learn more. However, I finally determined that if I could not treat the issue with imagination—not just clever commentary or fanciful thoughts but with Imagination as C.G. Jung or Coleridge might use the term—I would not do it at all.

The CZU fire ironically, tragically confirmed one authentic note I had struck in one of the early passages introducing Cliffport. In Elise’s fifth letter to her wandering, wayward daughter (dated August 27, 1959; presented in Chapter 5, Book One, Volume I), she writes, “Fire season is upon us....” and worries about the response capacity of volunteer fire crews from Swanton, Davenport, and Fern—should fire break out in Cliffport. “We watch the skies and pray the Lord some rain to make....” she continues, her concerns penned sixty years prior to August 2020. Does this reference make me, the author, prescient? No, simply observant of the fundamentals of the place. I find it curious and thought-provoking that, in this instance, life and art seem to be holding mirrors up to each other, as if the real events conformed to the fictional possibilities and vice versa.

Sidebar: When violent mayhem broke out at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters in 2017, the players seemed to be stepping out of the pages of my 2014 novel TWO HALF BROTHERS, set as it was in Bonheur, my fictionalized functional equivalent of Malheur. If you’ve read that book, I think you will be surprised or amused to learn that, before the “uprising,” several readers had protested that some of the ancillary characters in the novel were implausible.

“People aren’t like that,” I was informed. “People don’t talk that way.” When the upheaval at Malheur hit the national news several years later—with its cock-eyed, destructive insurrection tearing the heart of Harney County residents in two—we found out that people do indeed talk and think and act “that way”—as I had prefigured in the novel. Again, does that make me prescient? A shrewd sociologist or astute anthropologist? In fact, I would assume any novelist of import would have such qualifications as a given, but that’s not my point. I insist on differentiating a work of fiction from a work of history or sociology or journalism. The parallelisms between rural SE Oregon and Bonheur, and between North Coast Santa Cruz and Cliffport, are grounded in fundamentals. Rebellions break out; wildfires flare up. Fundamentals express themselves violently from time to time.

I cite an authority no less eminent than Jan McLoughlin, speaking during the morning portion of her interview with Duane in 1967:

“It’s the same old story. Children move away. Ships sink. Wharves collapse. Stables, casinos, they all burn down, all of ‘em. The McLoughlin dairy barn, our first farmstead? I’d bet you dollars to donuts there’s not a single sign of it today. They all fall down, burn down. I believe both Mackenzie’s mills burned down. The termites alone, Duane, the termites!” [p.xv, BOOKEND I, Volume I]

In light of these remarks, I trust you have begun to understand my own incapacity to take seriously your editor’s shortsighted accusation of some derelictions of duty on my part. At the very least, his perspective indicates a notion of the contemporary fiction writer’s role quite different from my own. Was I evading responsibility by not “exploiting” the CZU fire? If I were a reporter or historian, perhaps—but I am neither.

I like to think 3NLs comes fully alive in the metaphysical zone of the storyteller’s yarn, a zone that can only exist by virtue of a meeting—even a confounding—of the author’s and reader’s projected selves and active imaginations. The obliteration of Cliffport might be a suitable objective correlative for someone else’s novel, not mine. I’ll hang my hat on this rack if I may:

“... the main thing liberal fiction can do for a society, which is to be at once surgically anatomical in analysing [sic] a systemic social problem and willing to articulate that systemic problem through a plausible but fictional version of individual experience.” [Colin Burrow, “Fiction and the Age of Lies” printed in the *London Review of Books*, 20 February 2020, p.25]

Yes, well before your new editor’s objections, I was tempted to put to use that cataclysmic wildfire—our new Western States’ meme—but chose not to. It still seems to me it would have been an authorial *and* editorial error in judgement, an insensitive disservice cavalierly disrespectful of the real victims. Shall we profit by making hay of human suffering and enhance our art with flourishes depicting the epidemical destruction of the natural world?

May the snarky undertones of this epistle not rub off on you! And about working with your new editor—*Bon courage!*

All the best,

Peter B.

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