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Interviews with emerging novelists



Interview with novelist Eric Wasserman

"You need to want it, you need to be unflinching in your want to put your story to the page regardless of whether it's ever published or even ever read by another human being." Eric Wasserman

[Interview by author Michael Murphy](#)

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Eric, your journey has been a reverse of Manifest Destiny, West Coast to the Midwest instead of the other way around. Has your journey impacted your writing?

Well, it was really more like West Coast to East Coast, back to West Coast, and then landing in the Midwest, if you count my time in Boston during graduate school. I think it would be dishonest of me to say it has had no impact on my work. I don't know if it's true, but I remember being told that Bernard Malamud couldn't write honestly about New York until he found himself living in Corvallis, Oregon. Regardless of whether that is true or not, I think there is some truth in the idea that place and setting are important in fiction and capturing that is essential. The majority of the actual writing for my new novel, *Celluloid Strangers*, took place in Los Angeles, even though I began writing it in Boston ten years ago. But I've always considered myself more of an editor than a writer. I absolutely live for revision! The most important editorial decisions for the book were made after I was living here in Akron, Ohio. On a line editing level, the real details that drop my reader into those settings of late 1940s postwar Los Angeles came after I was no longer living on the West Coast. Getting my job at The University of Akron was probably a blessing for the novel's final polishing sessions because I couldn't just look out my door, I had to smell and taste and hear the sounds of the place I was creating on the page as I absolutely wanted a reader who had never been to those wonderful places to experience it when reading. I had to imagine!

I think most writers are outsiders to some degree, often hiding it, and they play off that strength. It may have been an aspect of them that was a handicap in their youth socially, but as artists you can't ask for a better tool because the job of serious fiction writers is to render stories that allow readers to experience the world they think they know in a way they have never considered. Somebody who has become one of my dearest friends in Ohio was born, raised and has never left Akron. I think that grounded sense of place is his secret weapon as a creative nonfiction writer, but it would be death to me as a fiction writer. He tells me after I've lived here for thirty years I can call myself a local, but I have about 24 to go. Still, not being from here forces me to consider how I am going to render the places I have lived in with a far greater scrutiny. Right now I am returning to a manuscript I had put aside with a story that takes place in the Middle East. I lived and traveled in the Middle East for a time following college, so now almost fourteen years later I can't just open up coffee table books and look at photographs. Again, I have to imagine.

Tell us about your novel? What kind of readers will enjoy it?

My first book, *The Temporary Life*, was a collection of short stories and when it was released I had a much clearer idea of who my target readership was. They were stories on Jewish themes all situated in West Coast cities and all fell neatly into the genre of domestic realism. I saw a combination of literary fiction readers and book groups,

graduate school students and faculty of creative writing programs, etc. *Celluloid Strangers* is such a radical departure from that first book. It's my first novel, although not the first novel I attempted to write. It has historical settings, political hysteria, union issues, Old Hollywood lore, themes of migration and ambition.

I could give you the publicity rollout description of the novel, which is that *Celluloid Strangers* tells the story of four brothers who have left their native northeast and converge in Los Angeles just after WWII ends. A lawyer, a mobster, a screenwriter, and a shopkeeper, each of these men makes a profound impact on the emerging landscape of postwar California as they deal with the impact that their shared history—and our nation's history—has had upon them. Old Hollywood, studio era union struggles, and recreated House Un-American Activities Committee investigations into supposed communist subversion in the motion picture industry abound. Etc. etc. etc.

However, I have been thinking about this question a lot, especially as I begin to prepare for my spring 2012 graduate seminar, American Novel Today. In the end, I think *Celluloid Strangers* is about dreams, and often those the dreams you grab for are not the dreams that matter most in your life. I recently saw Martin Scorsese's brilliant new film *Hugo*, which is based off of Brian Selznick's beautiful novel, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. My wife and I were devastated by the picture. It swept us into the world of dreams we both cherish so much and, as she put it, we stayed until the credits were over because we didn't want to leave that world.

Celluloid Strangers is a bigger book than most novels you see today, 400 pages. But it is my hope that it appeals to any reader who wants to dream and explore both the exhilarating and admittedly the sometimes painful world of dreams and not want to leave that world I have created after they turn the final page.

What's been the most surprising discovery on your journey to becoming a novelist?

Celluloid Strangers certainly wasn't the first novel I attempted to write. It was actually the fourth! I think the biggest surprise is how pleased I am with the final version, that aspects of the book that did not make the final cut and had to be eliminated in the drafting process that caused me so much anguish just aren't that important to me anymore. When making some of those brutal editorial decisions I was beside myself and really thought I was relinquishing the spirit of the novel and the narrative I was creating. But reading the published version now, I wouldn't return those abandoned sections to the book even if you paid me. I am sure that like my first book I will eventually look back on *Celluloid Strangers* and think there are parts that I could have rendered better, but I doubt I would want to beg my publisher to allow a rerelease of a director's cut of the novel with all those moments that really never needed to be there in the first place, most of which my wife was telling me to cut years before I brought myself to do so.

What advice do you have for aspiring novelists?

Stephen King's advice for aspiring writers in general is to read a lot and to write a lot. I stand by that, too. But I would encourage young novelists to ask themselves if they really want it. And when I say want it, I mean just that! Do you really want to be a novelist? Are you willing to stick with a certain story, sometimes for years, until you get it right? This has absolutely nothing to do with the publication process. There are probably uncountable unpublished brilliant novel manuscripts around the world. That's not the point. You need to want it, you need to be unflinching in your want to put your story to the page regardless of whether it's ever published or even ever read by another human being. I could easily give young novelists advice on disciplining themselves, branching out from what they usually read and challenging themselves, considering studying writing formally, etc. But I can't tell a young novelist to want it. It's there or it isn't. So my advice is to ask yourself if wanting it is in you, and if it is the possibilities are endless.

What novelists have influenced your writing?

Well, I think a more appropriate question might be which novelists influenced my writing "when?" I say this because, as a writer, I recognize that I am not the same reader or artist I was twenty years ago as a sixteen year-old mesmerized by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. I adored that novel and that writer then, but I am not that reader any longer. That novel will always have a special place in my heart, but I have no need to read it again. I tried a few years ago and couldn't get past the first few pages. In my twenties Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*, and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* were my literary bibles, but I seem to only revisit them these days when I teach them. But there are novelists and novels I always return to. I continually come back to J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Putting those two authors together may seem strange, but they both force me to confront the world in ways that challenge my own values and belief

system to greater understand why I believe what I do. And I would hope that that sensibility is seen in *Celluloid Strangers*, that those kinds of novelists have influenced its story. Two of my absolute favorite contemporary novelists, Jonathan Franzen and Glen David Gold are always doing that for me.

I would like to say that I don't know any serious novelist who has just been influenced by other novelists. I can't speak for others, but I have quite an eclectic bag of influences. I was raised in a household where my brothers and I were taught to appreciate lots of different kinds of things life offers, whether it was camping with our scouting troop or building Lego sets. My parents took us to the theater to see prize-winning plays but also to action movies. We were all encouraged to play sports and I think some of my discipline as a writer stems from that, but my father's enormous vinyl record collection was also mine to dig through; I was probably the only guy on the varsity wrestling team or in Drama Club who loved Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis and Bill Haley and the Comets just as much as I worshipped Nirvana. I loved comic books just as much as I loved reading Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. I think a wide range of influences is probably seen in the character Simon in *Celluloid Strangers*. He doesn't care if a film is independent or commercial; he just loves great movies. And I just love great novels.

Last, do you have any thoughts on the explosion of young adult fiction, particularly young adult novels? The YA market is just huge these days.

This is really my wife's department, but I do have something to say about it. I think young adult fiction is a much broader category than it ever was before. Admittedly, I sort of passed this period when I was growing up. I was not a kid who read seriously until high school. I went from children's books to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* with no between-point. Before high school I dreamed at the movies and at Rock concerts. But in the past few years my wife has been encouraging me to look at young adult novels in new ways. For instance, right now at her suggestion I am halfway through Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy and I can't put it down. It's that good and that well written! Yeah, it can get a bit silly in moments and the overuse of adverbs is simply a YA language device I have to accept, but the books are wonderful. Some think YA popularity is a fad but I don't see it that way. The fact that the genre is so much broader than when I was an adolescent is wonderful. Sure, some of it pushes to the line and I can admit *The Hunger Games* is not what every parent wants their kid reading, but YA can be so inventive at times that I am dazzled as an adult reader.

I'd like to close by saying that we tend to be dismissive about aspects of popular art in our culture. I remember in graduate school watching the news with a friend and he was calling all the kids standing in line at midnight with their parents to buy whichever new Harry Potter book that was being released "saps." I was dumbfounded. I stood in line at midnight in high school to get the new Van Halen and RUSH albums being released. Here were parents letting their children stay up after their bedtimes dressed up in costumes as characters from the books they loved to stand in line to get the next book they wanted to read! Those kids weren't saps. Those kids were readers! And I hope they still are.