INTERVIEW WITH FREDERICK REIKEN

by Eric Wasserman

In his remarks to the McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales, *editor Michael Chabon asserts that the contemporary short story has become "plotless and sparkling with epiphanic dew." The current backlash against traditionalist stories presenting the quiet power of hope is part of a growing contempt for MFA programs and the type of fiction graduate students often produce. Ironically, some of the most vocal opponents to such works are prominent MFA graduates.*

Photo credit: Nancy Crampton

Frederick Reiken

It is true that modern fiction on domestic themes—much of it produced by MFA graduates—has occasionally degraded into over-stylized intellectualization that abandons the emotional engagement of the genre's masters, ranging from canonized minimalist staples like Raymond Carver to free-form naturalists better known within literary circles such as Alistair Macleod. Yet writing programs are

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attracting greater numbers of applicants than ever, and the domestic story remains a vital presence in the American literature that has been defined by everyday magic for more than the past two decades.

In the face of the current debate stands a fresh generation of writers who continue to build nurturing academic communities where aspiring writers are encouraged to develop their own stories rather than conform to the current trend of slick, narcissistic sensibilities dominating the literary market. Students who are still drawn to the transformation of the individual rather than the revelation of plot can look to these writers for assurance that there is no illegitimacy in the longstanding impulse to explore human connection, and that doing so within the temporary environment of academia has benefits.

Frederick Reiken, who teaches at Emerson College, is among the many writers who still believe in stories that emphasize the struggles of ordinary people placed in extraordinary situations, and who uphold the merits of writing programs. Likewise, he has not been adversely affected by or compelled to respond to the recent criticism of work like his own with defensiveness, but acknowledges that the new wave of literary domestic fiction must accept that pop culture inevitably influences the identity of contemporary characters, whether it be the music they cherish or the sports teams they hold allegiance to.

The tradition of depicting characters that do not necessarily find definitive answers to life's complications, but are instead left with the acquisition of hope when they come out the other end of adversity, is still held sacred by Reiken. His characters continually face an imperfect world on their own terms, just as the most memorable voices in American fiction—from Tom Sawyer to Nathan Zuckerman—have always done. Whether it be a young boy discovering more about himself than he ever expected when the details of his brother's disappearance never materialize, or a woman having the chance to say one last goodbye to the great love of her life whom she could never tell a soul about, Reiken has set himself among the documenters of everyday life with the conviction that perseverance produces hope in the most surprising and often most meaningful ways. It is a sensibility that is not isolated to the written page but is carried into his classroom, where the difficulty of defining oneself as a writer is as crucial as the process

of coming to know who we are as people. While the MFA critics banter about the state of modern fiction with indignation, Reiken and others politely strive for the positive choice, fostering writing programs to assist students in exploring how we relate to each other, where we come from, and where we're going as writers and individuals.

A Princeton Legacy and University of California at Irvine MFA recipient, Reiken published his first novel, The Odd Sea *(Harcourt), in 1998. It won the Hackney Literary Award for first fiction and was selected by both* Booklist *and* Library Journal *as one of the best first novels of the year. This was followed by the publication of his more ambitious second novel,* The Lost Legends of New Jersey *(Harcourt), which became a bestseller and is described by Charles Baxter as "a miraculous balancing of tone and theme." Reiken's choice to stay true to his own particular Garden State vision appears sound, even when musing in the* New York Times *op-ed section about the anti-mystique of the New Jersey Nets.*

When we spoke, his recent story, "The Ocean," was appearing in the New Yorker, *and was being received with similar praise to his lengthier fiction. He expressed that he was "madly" working to complete his newest novel, due for publication in 2006, and, not surprisingly, he wasn't flinching in his chosen course of literary outlook.*

Cynthia Ozick once said that while Michael Chabon is Jewish and also a writer, that he isn't a "Jewish writer." Have you been witness or victim to this bantering over ethnic literary legitimacy?

So far I haven't, but to me it seems a moot point. While it's clear that there are some brilliant specialists—Cynthia Ozick, for instance—who have built important bodies of excellent work on the basis of writing about Jewish themes, the notion that such a path is more legitimate than the writing of someone like Michael Chabon is in my mind like saying that an Olympic athlete who specializes in, say, the high jump is more legitimate than someone who does the high jump and the long jump and the hurdles. I don't know the context in which Cynthia Ozick made this statement, so it's unfair to guess at what she was insinuating, but so far as my own path as a

writer goes, I don't foresee myself being considered a "Jewish writer" so much as simply a writer who is Jewish, and my own particular sensibility is much more suited to the range and flexibility that comes with the latter.

Regardless of specific ethnicity, people tend to hold their cultural icons up on pedestals, but parents are not exactly known for being enthusiastic about their children pursuing careers in the arts.

Actually, my father's opposition to my choice of becoming a writer was something I grappled with for a long time. And it was not as if he was a tyrant about it, nor did he do anything to stop me. But he has always been a very persuasive man, and he simply could not fathom why, when I announced at the age of twenty-two that instead of applying to medical school I was going to pursue becoming a fiction writer, I would choose something that would not guarantee me a predictable income. In all earnestness, he would say things to me like, "Most doctors play golf on Wednesdays. You could write on Wednesdays." The day I graduated from my MFA program, we were talking on the phone, and he asked me what I was going to do now. I said I had applied for several teaching positions and was also considering a work-exchange position at an artist's colony in western Massachusetts. He said, "Why don't you think about getting an MBA?" and I said, "Hello, Dad. It's me on the phone—Rick, your son."

If you think about his perspective, however, it isn't that illogical. He was that classic second-generation American. He grew up in Jersey City, a poor Jewish kid who won a scholarship to Princeton. He went on to law school and, as they say, made good. As the classic third-generation American, I grew up in the suburbs, lived a comfortable upper middle-class life, which, even if fraught with domestic dramas, was one in which I was always provided for monetarily. I simply did not grow up with the fear of being poor, and so even as I followed in my father's footsteps and went to Princeton, I was never fixated on monetary wealth as an objective.

It was only after I finished my MFA program that I began to understand just what it felt like not to have enough money to fix my car or afford health insurance. It was during that period, circa 1993,

that I had my last real crisis of faith with regard to being a writer. I had written a novel as my MFA thesis and thought it was, of course, the best book in the history of Western letters, and around that time it became clear that it was never going to get published. Surprisingly enough, my father read it and loved it—though he still thought I should get an MBA. In late winter of 1993, I took a little trip, motivated by a desperate romantic impulse, and went to find a woman I had known during the year I'd lived in Israel, right after college, and had worked as a wildlife biologist in the Negev Desert. There had been a lot of attraction between us, but I never acted on it due to the fact that at the time I was intending to marry my girlfriend from college—only to find, upon returning, that she didn't share the intention. So three years later I went back to Israel, quickly learned that my attempt to execute a romantic fairy tale was deluded, briefly considered hanging around and trying out for the soon-to-be-formed Israeli national ice-hockey team, but ultimately decided to return after a month and "make good."

The month I returned, and without telling my father, I registered to take the MCATs, visited the UMass medical school in Worcester, and began an intensive review of chemistry, biology, and physics. I had taken the MCATs as a college senior, but the five-year expiration had just passed, and so I had to take them again. I've always done well on standardized tests, and on the practice tests I was pretty much nailing the scores I needed, so I figured it was just a matter of getting through this ordeal, applying to UMass, and then I could call up my father and surprise him.

About two weeks before the test date, I started having a sort of existential crack-up. I did most of my studying in the Forbes Library in Northampton, and one day I happened to lay eyes on the *New York Times Book Review*, picked it up and, for the first and only time in my life, read it from cover to cover. Then I walked down to a nearby bookstore, purchased two of the books that had been reviewed, and started reading them in a cafe, whereupon I woke from this little trance and went back to studying organic chemistry. More of the same continued over the next two weeks, and every day I would have mo-

ments of asking myself, "What am I doing? I'm a writer. I've spent the last five years apprenticing myself to this art. Now I'm going to just chuck the very essence of who I am, the identity it took me so many years to discover?" But I kept going. I covered all the material, all the while knowing that if I simply got through the MCATs I would have defeated my crazy notion of becoming a novelist, defeated the thing that was making me so miserable. That once I got those scores back in the mail, once I had been offered validation by my MCAT scores that I really was meant to be a doctor, the die would have been cast. I'd be off and running and the rest of my life would make sense.

As it turned out, I didn't sleep a minute the night before the MCATs. All night I tossed and turned and worried and thought and questioned. Around five I got up, drank coffee, and decided that, sleep or no sleep, I was going to get through it. I'd operated many times on no sleep, and while I'd never taken an eight-hour test without having slept a minute, I told myself I would do it.

So I drove to Westfield State College, aced the first of the four sections—reading aptitude and comprehension, which was the easiest—and began to feel pretty confident. The second section was the organic-chemistry/physics section, and of the two science sections this was the one on which I tended to score higher, so I knew I had to nail it. I got about halfway through the section without a hitch, but then I came to a set of problems that I couldn't figure out. That is, I didn't see what concept it was addressing, and had no idea how to calculate the answers to the next seven or eight questions. I stared at it for five minutes and suddenly the words were rising off the page. I closed my eyes, took a breath, and reluctantly went on to the next set of questions, only to find that I had lost my ability to read words. Whether some divine protective spirit or mischievous imp had cast a spell on me, or whether I was just having a sleep-deprivation-induced anxiety attack, I'll never know. But after trying unsuccessfully for another ten or fifteen minutes to just read through and comprehend a single problem, I gave up, put my pencil down, waited in a state of shock until time was called, then got up and had my scores cancelled. I walked out of Westfield State College feeling a deep sense of failure,

but on the drive home I started to have an idea for a novel, which I began six months later, and which became *The Odd Sea.*

One uncanny little addendum to this story is that a committee at Westfield State College chose *The Odd Sea* as their "campus book"—intended to promote a campus-wide dialogue regarding the novel's various issues, and required reading for all faculty and students—for the 2000–2001 academic year, and then called to invite me to come give a ninety-minute talk, for which they paid me a nice amount. So just about seven years after my MCAT fiasco, I returned to Westfield State College for the first time since then and told this story to a filled auditorium. Afterward, someone asked me the obvious question—Was I now certain that I had made the right choice in becoming a writer? And I said that no, I still had lingering doubts. It's only now, at the age of thirty-seven, that I'm starting to understand that I never wanted to be a doctor at all. When I finished writing "The Ocean," though, I began to have the nagging sense that I should have become a marine biologist.

You are direct about the ethnic identities of the characters in Lost Legends. *One thing that separates it from the majority of Jewish-American novels is that you frame the religious identities with an equal attachment to specific geography. Was this important when you initially began the project, or did it evolve?*

Place is where everything seems to start for me as a novelist. Before I can even begin to think about my characters, they usually have to be attached to a specific place, which is the first step in activating my imagination. In fact, a strong sense of place is crucial to my writing process, precisely because it gives me something to attach imaginatively to long before I know all the quirks and habits of my characters. One of the biggest discoveries I made while writing *Lost Legends* was that with New Jersey I had more archetypal places to choose from than I could even make use of. You can't get any more archetypal than the Meadowlands, and even without Bruce Springsteen, the Jersey Shore has a mythology all its own. As the book evolved I became conscious that I was carving out a landscape that for me was as resonant as Arthurian Camelot, and in most cases a lot more interesting, since I had lived there.

A sense of place certainly crosses over ethnic boundaries and even different artistic forms of expression. Bruce Springsteen says that he felt a great sense of accountability to the people he had grown up alongside when writing Darkness on the Edge of Town. *Did you experience anything similar when writing* Lost Legends?

Absolutely. I felt it throughout the writing process. I would go so far as to say that what I felt was far more than accountability. I grew up in Livingston, New Jersey, where the book is set. All through grade school I was part of a very close group of friends, but after my parents separated, I began attending a private school and then moved away in eighth grade. Over the next six years I would live in the towns of Summit, Short Hills, West Orange, and South Orange. Since I was, of course, preoccupied with simply trying to succeed in my adolescence, I didn't think about how much I'd lost when I left that town and that group of friends behind.

While I was writing the book, it was as if I was going back to that lost world, where all of my life's "legends" seem to have sprung from. In my imagination I would visit those streets, see all those places, and I did feel a strong compulsion to get every last detail correct—not only street names and landmarks, but even stores that have not existed for twenty years. It seemed imperative that I double-check everything, though I rarely found that I'd made any sort of mistake. In fact, the only mistake I know of is that the yak cage is apparently not next to the penguin cage at the Turtle Back Zoo, and I learned this from someone I'd never met who wrote to suggest that I check my facts next time.

Why do these things matter so much? Well, this was our world, and this book was very much written for all those guys I grew up with. One of my grade-school friends who read *Lost Legends* commented to me that he loved reading the scene that takes place at the Little League field, had forgotten that the main field was called the Treat Field, and wondered how I had remembered that since they renamed it sometime in the eighties. In general, all of my friends from Livingston were amazed by how much of that landscape I remembered. As I explained, though, this world was etched inside my brain and body in a way that it

would never have to be for someone who had continued living there, gone through high school with the same people they'd always known, and experienced the kind of continuity I did not have.

When *Lost Legends* came out, I did a reading at a bookstore in Livingston. A lot of those guys were there, as well as other people I'd gone to grade school with. My former next-door neighbor was there with her parents, and asked if I'd based the character of Juliette Dimiglio on her—I hadn't. My fifth-grade teacher was there. My first girlfriend's parents were there. It struck me then that writing *Lost Legends* was very much my way of going back to that lost world, of telling a story that would represent all these people, as well as a story that would—in some oblique, metaphorical way—apologize for having left. Without devolving into sentimentality, I'll tell you honestly that I feel a great loss from having fallen out of that context and losing the immediacy of those friendships. Almost amazingly, many of those guys I grew up with continued to stay the best of friends through college and beyond. They've all been the groomsmen at each other's weddings. Two of them live on the same block in Short Hills now, and put each others' kids to bed. Although I get together with them all once or twice a year now, it's not the same as if our lives had continued to be intertwined.

Youth is a continual theme in all of your work. "The Ocean" revisits your interest in the complications of adolescent romance. There is always the danger of portraying first love as idealized. How do you avoid the cliché?

Most adolescent romances are very self-centered and overblown, which may be natural and feel true for a thirteen year old, but tends to make for trite fiction. I initially considered letting Jordan and Dara begin experimenting sexually—as a response, in a sense, to what's going on with their parents—but I realized that the power of the story rests with Jordan's innocence and naivete, and his everpresent but unacknowledged reality—that his life is about to get, as his soon-to-be-adoptive mother Beverly states, "very, very hard." Dara is much more worldly, and much more angry than Jordan. I think the differences between them made for nicely counterpointed characterization, and a lot of the story's energy arises out of their differing views on things, which also had the effect of making their relationship seem very singular and

distinct. My sense is that in avoiding the cliché of idealized first love, the key is creating characters who are distinct enough, in themselves, and whose particular relationship is specific enough to avoid those clichés, regardless of what's happening.

In "The Ocean" you implied the sexual content, but with The Odd Sea *you made the choice to graphically depict sexuality. Has your sensibility changed since your first novel?*

While writing *The Odd Sea*, my standpoint was that I was dealing with adolescent boys and that naturally adolescent boys think about sex a lot, and hence a very frank—I certainly wouldn't call it graphic—exploration of sexuality seemed a legitimate approach. Looking at it now, I still don't think there are any gratuitous scenes. But in hindsight there are definitely some things I would cut, one or two images that to me now seem excessive—that is, moments where the novel itself lapses into a bit of adolescent behavior. So, yes, I'm now trying to deal with sexuality in a more subtle way, and that will probably continue.

Many contemporary writers have a tendency to justify infidelity. You simply present the situation. For example, in "The Ocean," Dara knows that her mother is promiscuous and says so almost factually. How then do you construct the reality that these betrayals still hurt people emotionally?

I try not to make judgments in my novels, because I think a well-told story will leave a reader with a very clear sense of the consequences of any action, from which they can make judgments for themselves. In the case of the story "The Ocean," I was intentionally presenting certain loaded questions such as, What are a person's moral obligations in the face of life-threatening illness? If you happen to be in remission from leukemia, does that make infidelity okay? But in asking these questions, it was not my intention to propose answers. I think some readers will come away from that story thinking that the protagonist's father's behavior was abominable, while others will find it perfectly acceptable. What interested me was that it seemed such a complicated situation, and such a complex question.

I'll tell you a secret about that story, though. I started writing it simply because I was attracted to the idea of writing about coral reefs and that particularly wondrous Caribbean landscape, where, at age twenty,

I spent a summer taking a course in marine biology. This is a case of my attaching imaginatively to the landscape before I even knew what the story was. I think the reason that the story ultimately worked was that I happened to come up with an external situation—a young boy's last summer spent with his marine biologist father who is in remission from leukemia—that meshed well with the whole undersea world that the protagonist, Jordan, spends so much time elucidating. In my mind, this was very much a story about a soon-to-be-orphaned boy who turns literally to the ocean for refuge, and in this sense it was for me a very spiritual story.

A lot of the new plot-driven, pop-culture-saturated fiction today tends to avoid spirituality. Aren't all memorable stories spiritual on some level? One can't help but think that even a blatantly political novel like J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace *hinges on redemption.*

I think *Disgrace* is a great book, and it's because Coetzee is willing to make his protagonist Lurie, in the end, a human being. Obviously, it's a book with large political dimensions, but what I remember most are those euthanized dogs that he takes such care with as he's loading them onto the conveyer belt. To me, that really was a redemptive moment, and I agree with you that most, if not all, memorable stories hinge on such moments. Perhaps this is where my writing will always seem "unhip" to a certain type of reader, but I personally could not even sustain the interest necessary to complete a short story if it didn't incorporate deeply emotional and/or transcendent moments. For me, however, the spiritual is usually not tied to religion or anything of that sort. Often it's tied to nature, but sometimes it's tied to a rotting clarinet found in a landfill in the Meadowlands, as was the case in one chapter of *Lost Legends.*

You teach at Emerson College now. Have writing programs become institutionalized, the antithesis of art?

I think a common mistake that young would-be writers make is the belief that an MFA program is going to be like law school, that you can go through your two or three years and come out a "writer." Many find out the hard way that this isn't true, that unlike law school, there is no cause-effect relationship between going to an MFA program and

getting a book contract, though it certainly can help. I also think that because of this misperception, writing programs now have a certain marketability, and so naturally they'll play into this idea—that by getting an MFA you'll legitimize yourself as a writer. That's the biggest problem, that the perception exists and is reinforced by the institutions, and that many students are surprised or alarmed to find that one's evolution as a writer to the point where you're creating truly artistic fiction that is also publishable generally takes a lot longer than two or three years. Some writers do land book contracts after three years of an MFA program, but they're usually the ones who had been at it for years already when they began the program.

Still, I would say that writing programs are not the antithesis of art. In any group of fifty people who call themselves writers, there might be two you can consider genuine artists. Those writers are probably not going to be adversely affected by spending three years in a stimulating academic environment, getting feedback from established authors as well as peers, and being part of that particular school's writing milieu. In fact, they're probably going to gain a lot from it.

A lot of instructors at such programs refrain from brutal criticism. Students aren't always told what they need to hear, even when it's the painful truth. Do you feel that writing programs should weed people out, as is done at medical programs, put commitment to the test?

My sense is that writers need to hear straight and honest criticism, in a respectful, nurturing atmosphere. I personally see no reason for a teacher to look a student in the eye and tell them their story is a piece of shit, even if it is. Most writers who I've seen go on to succeed have done so because they are intelligent enough to learn from the feedback they receive, smart enough not to listen to most of it, and determined enough to keep writing.

In fact, most successful writers are successful because—through some mix of talent, perseverance, self-reflectiveness, and egomania—they are capable of continuing even though many people have suggested they do otherwise. My first fiction workshop was with Paul Auster during the fall of my senior year at Princeton. He was a very hands-off teacher, who gave us an assignment each week, and then would offer

five or ten minutes or so of feedback to each student. It was exactly what I needed, and in that semester I went from writing work that was basic undergraduate drivel to work that was promising undergraduate drivel. At the end of the year, when I was trying to decide whether to go to med school or apply to MFA programs, I dropped by Paul's office and asked him what he thought. He said, "You know I admire your writing, but you should probably go to med school. You'll have a much nicer life."

I reminded him of this when I ran into him at the Miami Book Fair last year, and he noted that although in my case it may have been the wrong advice, it was good advice—and I agree. Anyone who would respond to that advice by going to med school probably should go to med school. But I'll point out that what Paul gave me was not brutal advice. Brutal advice would be more along the lines of "Your writing stinks. Don't waste your time." The fact was, my writing was quite unformed at the time, and the odds of my succeeding as a writer would have seemed slim to anyone. But thankfully no one gave me any brutal advice. It probably wouldn't have deterred me in the long run, but in the short run I would have felt that much more embarrassment and shame.

You've mentioned that you see only twenty percent of MFA students continue to write after earning a degree and that eighty percent who enter a program romantically committed will not be by the end. Publications such as McSweeney's *have an open disdain for writing programs. What is the argument in favor of sustaining them?*

It's hard to be a writer. Unless you happen to have a trust fund, you have to wait tables or work some tedious day job in order to make your rent, and finding quality time to write is very difficult. The best contribution of writing programs to any writer or would-be writer is that they provide a focused time in which you've put aside everything for two years because you've made the decision to write. It also gives you a community of support, which is again why I'm not a fan of the brutal-criticism school. In a predatory environment, it's hard to feel supported.

In my case, an MFA program gave me a sort of jumpstart since I'd

been so focused on the sciences. UC Irvine provided me with structure and taught me what I'd eventually need to do on my own—i.e., when I no longer had the luxury of workshops and fellow writers all around me. And frankly, I had no need for workshops after two years. I'd pretty much internalized all the workshop ideas and was ready to move on.

It's true that only twenty percent or less will continue writing once the program ends, but for that eighty percent who quit, at least they gave it the old college try and hopefully had a decent social life while doing so. *McSweeney's* hates writing programs because most writing programs are traditional and *McSweeney's* stated objective is, more or less, to undermine anything traditional. I think it's great that *McSweeney's* has created another niche—a sort of hip anti-niche, aspects of which are quite brilliant—but it's just a different position and perception.

So I think the whole thing should be taken with a grain of salt. Writing programs won't make you into a writer, but they're useful as a stepping stone for people who have, in one way or another, been writers and/or potential writers their whole lives, and who feel like such an environment would be productive. But there are also people for whom writing programs will be a waste of time. Unfortunately, some of those people come to writing programs anyway, and perhaps that's one bad aspect of the establishment part of MFA programs—that people think they can't become a legitimate writer without having an MFA.

I'd also say for anyone who attends a writing program, it's important not to hang around in that MFA environment for too long. Once you're done, get out and figure out who you are. In the end, writing is a self-starting, solitary endeavor, and to continue as a writer you need to find a way to build this into your real life. MFA programs provide structure and can be helpful, but they are not real life. In terms of real-life credentials, the only thing an MFA degree will do is help you get a teaching job, assuming you've already published a book or two.

A criticism of writing programs is that students are quite impressionable and are in danger of imitating a certain type of story. Many students are drawn to imitating domestic writers such as Raymond Carver and Alice Munro. Isn't

there a risk of promoting a specific kind of literature if instructors refuse to challenge students?

I recently saw folksinger/guitar virtuoso Leo Kottke play in Northampton, Massachusetts. He told a little story about his mentor, John Fahey, and how at one point he said to Fahey something like, "You know, I have this fear that I'm going to sound a lot like you." Fahey's response was, "Well, everybody has to go through someone."

My sense is that this is true for all artists, and is particularly applicable to writing. That is, I think most if not all writers must go through a phase of assimilating and emulating their favorite writers if they're to have any chance of finding their own voice. Simply put, all writers need models of form and technique, and any writer worth his or her salt will go through various authors and come out the other side.

It's true that Raymond Carver and Alice Munro tend to be MFA-program staples everywhere, and this is because they're two of the most important North American writers of the late twentieth century. In the thirties you had Hemingway, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. In the fifties and sixties you had Cheever, Roth, Bellow, Salinger, O'Connor, Welty. Who do you have of that caliber to come out of the seventies and eighties? Carver and Munro. They've both, in certain ways, modernized the tenets of Anton Chekhov. And whereas Carver might be thought of as the heir to Hemingway, Munro might be thought of in some ways as an heir to Faulkner. No matter how you look at it, and whatever labels you try to put on them, their work has affected our modern literary tradition. To be a contemporary American literary writer, you need to understand the understatement and scene-by-scene movement of a Carver story, just as you need to understand the elliptical expository methods of Munro. That's not to say one should try to write like Carver or Munro—in fact, Carver and Munro imitations have the same parody-like quality as an emulation of Hemingway or Faulkner, simply because their voices are so distinct. From what I can see in the programs I've been part of, most MFA students are going to be exposed to a wide range of contemporary fiction, ranging from formalists like Jhumpa Lahiri to satirists like George Saunders, so it's not as if there's really a risk involved in focusing on these two masters

of the form for a short while, particularly since their stories become a good and useful model for so many people. And whether or not Lahiri or Saunders gets assigned in your grad class, those books exist, and it's any writer or would-be writer's job to read and read and read.

As far as influences go in general, I've always held the belief that a writer can be influenced for the wrong reasons or the right ones. The wrong reasons are that, as you've suggested, they feel pressure to conform with the thing that is being celebrated at the present moment—and such impressionability typically comes with a lack of emotional maturity. Being influenced for what I'm calling the right reasons means being influenced by a writer whose work resonates with you because you share some aspect of that writer's sensibility. In finding a book that speaks to you, you've usually found a writer who in some way shares your own sensibility, and who has already taken ideas and impressions about form or content that are still inchoate for you, and transmuted them into something tangible and fully realized. In reading a work that influences you, you're essentially reading a work by someone who has mastered some aspect of what you hope to master, and so by reading that work you are embarking on the process of going through a mentor.

Like most writers, I went through a period of impressionability in which I was unconsciously emulating writers for precisely the wrong reasons. Just after I graduated from college, I took a night course at the New School and had a teacher who despised everything I wrote, and perhaps me personally. He was a big fan of Carver, and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" was one of his favorite stories. Toward the end of the semester I finally wrote a story he liked. I included it with my MFA applications, and when I got to UC Irvine and sat down the first week with my advisor there, he pulled out the story and said, "Now here's an interesting little piece. I think you should change the title to 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Hockey.'" This is the kind of risk I think you're talking about, but I would say that it was ultimately my responsibility to recognize what I was doing. Thankfully, I did.

That was the same fall I had what I think of as my one and only

prophetic dream, which I'll be so bold as to relate, since I think it relates to this discussion. In the dream I came to a bookstore window and found that the entire window was displaying copies of what was apparently my first book. But the book, instead of being pages bound by a cardboard cover with dust jacket, was, in each little wooden bookstand, a bunch of celery, complete with leaves and stalks. When I awoke, I likened the dream to a Magritte painting, said to myself something like, "Neat," and didn't think much of it. But later, the dream's meaning hit me full force. What I was writing was the equivalent of celery. I didn't care what it was so long as it would be published, and so it really was interchangeable with celery or radishes or whatever. I would say it took me almost two years after that realization to start writing fiction that I could honestly say was not the equivalent of celery. And I would say to any would-be writer of literary fiction that there are thousands of much easier ways to achieve notoriety and/or make money than by being a writer. So if you're going to do it, you have to give over to what is meaningful and authentic, for both your readership and for yourself. And that means letting go of your need to be like any other writer. The best writers' writing does not remind you of anyone else.

Since you don't think much about what readers are comfortable with, would you also say that the author's original intention doesn't matter once a book is placed into the public arena? Philip Roth, Nikos Kazantzakis, and Salman Rushdie all had to deal with this in unpleasant ways. Likewise, J.D. Salinger certainly had no intention of speaking for generations of young people.

We've all heard of the "intentional fallacy," and as you point out, intention certainly didn't matter much for Salman Rushdie with regard to the public response to *The Satanic Verses*. But I would say, and strongly, that while it will often be disregarded or prove irrelevant in the public arena, an author's intention is of the utmost importance. That's what I was talking about, to some extent, when I mentioned my celery dream. In deciding not to write celery, you're deciding to write something that you can stand by, whether or not it's a bestseller, and whether or not someone wants to kill you as a result of it. Many people, including authors themselves, seem to forget that an author is

a person who has to live with whatever he or she has created, and in the extreme case in which someone issues a *fatwa* after reading your book, it seems to me important to be clear that what you wrote possesses both aesthetic and moral integrity—which is not to say one shouldn't, if so inclined and for legitimate reasons, write a book about an amoral protagonist. If a book gets wrongly interpreted by the public, well, that's always been one of the risks of the profession. Usually such misinterpretation will just result in the book being dismissed, but occasionally there will be a backlash of the type Rushdie experienced, as has been the case throughout history.

There's one more tricky part of this, though, and something that I don't want to believe, but find that I do. That is, I think writers have a responsibility to be smarter and more aware than the average person. Anything you write is going to have political or psychological implications, and it is necessary to be aware, at least intuitively, of those implications, and, to some extent, to be able to anticipate the reaction to what you're doing—because if you don't think you'll be able to stand by your own work in the face of an unfavorable reaction, you're probably writing celery. I'd say that the worst writers I know are invariably those who are completely unconscious of their subtexts, often to the point that the subtexts themselves conflict with what's ostensibly being said. That's something you see all the time in movies. But this type of thing is more acceptable in movies, as movies, with some exceptions, tend not to be high art and tend to be put together by a committee. A literary writer, who is the sole author of his own book, simply can't afford such a gaffe, because it undermines his or her credibility.

Of course, some reactions are impossible to anticipate, and there is a point where you just have to let go. But if you're going to write, say, *Lolita*, you have to know that there are going to be people who won't appreciate it, may want to ban it, and may attempt to discredit you as an author. And in knowing that, you need to be doubly clear about what you're doing, so that if those unappreciative people dismiss your book, you can still feel at least a modicum of peace about what you've written.

Likewise, it's important to get beyond or at least compensate for one's own narcissistic impulses. Surely, most writers or artists of any kind possess a strain of narcissism, even if a polite one. I recently read a book in which John Berger was discussing the life of Rembrandt. As Berger points out, the difference between his early work, which is largely a celebration of his own talent and good fortune, and his last self-portrait, in which his expression seems only to hold unanswerable questions, is the difference between a young virtuoso and a master. If you look at the work of Philip Roth, you'll see a similar pattern. His work through the 1960s and '70s, good as it was, did not approach the richness and resonance of his recent work.

Roth has become a master of portraying the character as writer. Both of your own novels possess characters who have blatant writer personalities: Philip finds a bit of a writer in himself, Anthony sees everything around him as a legend, and his cousin Timmy expresses a desire to write books someday. However, you are fairly rigid in drawing boundaries between author, character, and narrator. Are there lines that shouldn't be crossed without good reason?

I think it all depends on your sensibility, your aesthetic, and what it is you're trying to do. Philip Roth, for instance, has invented Nathan Zuckerman as an alter ego, and at times is so merged with Zuckerman's identity that there's an odd flatness to his prose, in which it does not feel imaginatively projected, and hence doesn't feel like fiction at all. The first hundred pages of *American Pastoral* are like that, but Roth is such a good storyteller that it doesn't matter. Even if Zuckerman gets self-indulgent at times, Roth is always looking outward, at the big story. That's his secret and it generally works.

Many other writers who play with the boundary between author and character are doing so simply out of authorial narcissism, and I have read many books in which the subtext is simply: Here's how I see it and I'm right, so please adore me. Most young writers simply don't know any better, which is why as a teacher of writing I'm always stressing the need to see your protagonist as an "other," even if the protagonist is in fact based on yourself. Some people have the capacity to do this naturally; others don't. Another strategy, and one that Roth makes use all the time, is to focus the story on some larger-than-life

character who is rendered through the point-of-view of the authorial stand-in. For instance, the place where *American Pastoral* starts to come alive is precisely the place where Zuckerman stops talking about himself and begins to project instead the story of Swede Levov. This is more or less the same strategy used by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*. As a narrator, Nick Carroway is a cipher because he's basically a stand-in for Fitzgerald, and hence Fitzgerald never really envisions him. But the book works because its focus becomes the larger-than-life, if enigmatic, Gatsby. I'd say the same thing about Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Marlowe is a cipher, but the book works because Marlowe mostly stays focused on Kurtz.

At the other end of the spectrum, a book like Nabokov's *Lolita* demonstrates a very clear separation between author Nabokov and narrator-protagonist Humbert Humbert, as is made apparent by the fact that Humbert fails to recognize the point at which he's lost the reader's sympathy, even as author Nabokov seems to have crafted it this way with very conscious intention. I'd go so far as to say that this is why, in my mind, *Lolita* is in no way pornographic, whereas many attempts to emulate it are nothing but pornography. This occurs for the same reason that writers trying to emulate Nick Hornby usually wind up with pretentious displays of their knowledge of pop culture. That is, the author hasn't envisioned the protagonist as an "other," and so what you get is an author acting out perverse sexual fantasies, or an author simply demonstrating his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of rock and roll.

One of the problems, as I see it, is that crossing the line and having a protagonist act essentially as a stand-in for the author is that the reader often winds up being asked to become complicit with whatever the character is involved in. Occasionally this approach works—for example I would point to the racial issues raised by Roth's technique in *The Human Stain*. In not knowing for the first eighty-eight pages that Coleman Silk is really an African-American, Roth essentially tricks us into becoming complicit with the same racial stereotyping that becomes the thematic focus of the book. But Roth is so acutely aware of what he's doing and hence maintains such a balanced perspective on the

matter—placing us alternately on either side of the argument—that it never feels as if he is asking us to share his own beliefs, but rather is asking us to explore various perceptions by looking at the situation through the eyes of various characters.

More often—and usually due to a lack of conscious intention—an approach that asks the reader to become complicit fails because the writer starts to use his characters as mouthpieces for his or her own myopic arguments or beliefs. A common and generally uncomfortable occurrence in undergraduate workshops is a situation where a student accidentally turns in a blatantly sexist story in which we are asked to be complicit with the sexism, rather than simply observing a sexist character. It is certainly possible to write a compelling story about a sexist person, but often what I see is a sexist author, unconsciously merged with his or her protagonist, who is asking the reader to join in. What results ranges from a clunky, disturbing psychological stance to elegant pornography along the lines of *The Story of O*—a book that is endlessly adored by those who find in it validation for their own misogynistic and sadomasochistic fantasies.

The thing about *Lolita* is that Nabokov never asks us to become complicit in the actions of Humbert Humbert, and in fact sets it up so that while at times we are in fact charmed by Humbert, we also recognize him for the pedophile that he is.

Pop culture has been given a prominent position in literature over the past few years. It used to be taboo to admit these influences unless they were artists such as Bob Dylan who possess intellectual credibility. One thing that Irvine graduates have in common is incorporating non-literary influences. Did Irvine encourage this, or is it a generational departure?

I wasn't aware of anything like that going on at Irvine, but I'm very much of the opinion anyway that it is a generational departure. As much as I was profoundly influenced by Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Munro, Chekhov, García Márquez, and many other writers, I can equally say that I was profoundly influenced by the Beatles, Pink Floyd, Yes, the Grateful Dead, the Doors, Simon & Garfunkel, Bruce Springsteen, Rush, CSN, Neil Young, Led Zeppelin, and many other rock groups that I would consider literary, or at least of having literary pretensions.

I would say the same is true for most writers of my era, and the reason seems pretty obvious to me. Literary rock music—which now tends to fall under the heading classic rock—more or less started in 1967, when the Beatles put out *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and it was only when groups like Pink Floyd and Yes followed suit in the late sixties that this kind of literary influence started to become available. I was not the kind of kid who sat home and read *Moby Dick* for fun, and so the books I read were only those that were assigned for English classes—and I was usually speed-reading them on the bus. Now and then, I would have strong reactions to a book—as was the case with *Huckleberry Finn*, which I recall having vivid dreams about, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Great Gatsby*, and even *Wuthering Heights*—but equally as important to my understanding of literature were those Saturday night parties where we'd sit around analyzing the dark metaphors lurking in Pink Floyd lyrics, or feel the mystical elevation that comes from listening to an exalted, grandiose Yes song such as "And You and I" or "Siberian Khatru."

Music is such a dominant definition of generation identity, but it's often used ineffectively in literature. What would be your advice in avoiding some of those problems?

I think music is, as you say, a dominant definition of generational identity, because music has the capacity to represent aesthetically the emotions of a particular era in a way that writing or any other art form simply can't. It's a visceral response that has been proven scientifically. And when a recording artist gets it right, the fusion of music and the lyrics it's been united with becomes a medium into which we can sublimate or channel ourselves. That's why the explosive indignation of a song like "Ohio" can stand for so much in the Vietnam era, why more escapist/romantic songs like "Born to Run" and "Thunder Road" hold the post-war mid-seventies, why the cryptic and resonant ambiguity of REM takes over in the eighties, and why moody, explosive angst-driven groups like Smashing Pumpkins and Nirvana rule the nineties. Like most people, there are certain songs I have trouble listening to because it feels like half of me is in there. Somehow or other we sublimate parts of ourselves into music, whether it's Frank Sinatra or Queen.

Naturally, writers are going to want to bring that same kind of channeled emotion into their writing, but it's a mistake to think that throwing down references like "It took me four days to hitchhike from Saginaw" is going to do anything more than invoke nostalgia, for those who do get the reference, and it's certainly not going to convey all the involuntary memories that come with it and make it meaningful to you in that nonverbal, musical sense. It can be fun to throw in cryptic little things. For instance, the phrase "Sit you down, father; rest you" shows up a few times in my new novel, and for that one out of five hundred readers who knows instantly what I'm referring to, it should be a fun little revelation.

But it seems to me that ineffective use of music references usually results when writers try to give a particular line from a song or reference to a band too much weight. Likewise, basing a story's mood around, say, the trippy atmosphere at a Grateful Dead concert often becomes a cliché or an unintentional parody. We have a whole set of associations with the Dead, and because the writing usually can't hold the multidimensional effects of actual music, a writer is reduced to those hackneyed associations. My advice to writers would be to use music references with a light touch and not to depend too much on them for weight and meaning, in the same way you don't want to depend on dream sequences for causality, though they can be quite nice when they're dropped in to provide texture.

So many writers say they wish they had been in a band, and so many musicians say they really wanted to be writers. A lot of writers have a secondary artistic outlet. You play hockey. The writers I know who had at one time been athletes tend to be the most disciplined. How has your love of hockey found its way into your writing process?

It's true that often former athletes are among the most self-disciplined writers. Athletes learn a certain level of discipline at a young age, and most who have any success at all do so in part because they are coachable, meaning that they can assimilate suggestion and criticisms, and in the process even learn to tolerate a lot of judgment and, at times, verbal abuse. I think a lot of athletes also have an understanding that just as developing a decent slapshot takes years, learning to

write a decent short story may take years, and former athletes often seem more willing to practice writing in the form of apprenticing themselves to it in the same way they'd give over to the demands of being on a team. That was certainly the case for me. I attribute a lot of my drive and focus to the hardwired skills I developed as a very young boy on the ice rink or soccer field. I learned that everyone begins as a novice, and that if you stick with something long enough, your level of talent and potentiality will start to become clear. The trouble with sports, however, is that the maniacal focus many kids give to it—which is supported and deeply encouraged by our culture—often becomes problematic, since unless you're truly a superstar and can make the pros, your sports career typically ends at the end of college, if not sooner. And yet, for all those years of dedication, it's been almost a vocation. Had you put that kind of time into the violin or oboe, you'd probably have a very good chance at going pro. This is due in part to the fact that our culture is not as supportive of and enthusiastic about the violin or oboe, so those who stay with it typically do so because it's clear they possess substantial talent and hopefully they enjoy it. Meanwhile, it's very possible to dedicate your whole childhood to soccer or basketball or hockey or competitive swimming and then find yourself at a dead end due to talent limitations and very often physical/genetic limitations.

I played hockey and soccer through high school and, following a serious knee injury, I played a couple years of college soccer. But the knee injury had slowed me down a lot, and after my junior year, I made the decision to quit the team. Not surprisingly that's when I started writing. I needed some place to put all that focus and obsession and day-to-day intensity, and even then I realized that my mindset, when I sat down to write, was very much the mindset I had each time I got on the ice or on the soccer field. However, I will say this. All the published books in the world would not compare to ten seconds on the ice during, for instance, my high-school hockey team's run when we won the state prep-school championship during my sophomore year. I've heard Bill Bradley say something similar—that his whole political career didn't compare to one game with the Knicks. There's

something about sports that is so immediate, so instantly gratifying, and so euphoric, that it really is like a drug.

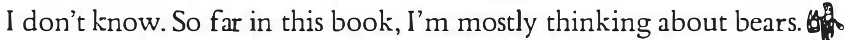
One last thought on this. It seems to me that the most naturally gifted athletes may not in fact make good writers. The most naturally gifted athletes do not always develop that level of self-reflection that is so crucial for someone like me, who, despite whatever gifts I had, was always considered very good but not a truly great player. Players like me learned that getting ice time meant, at least to some extent, following our instructions, whereas Wayne Gretzky, at least until he went pro, probably never had much need to think about instructions. Nor did he ever have any need to become a writer.

Hemingway was not a very talented athlete but he did love sports, and for all the stories of his alcoholism, he was known to write sober with incredible discipline. Steinbeck said that Hemingway saw other writers as competitors. Is the athlete within a writer a mixed blessing?

I think it's true that being an athlete naturally leads to a sense of competitiveness as a writer, and in many ways this is a good thing. I know that at times it certainly motivated me. The older I get, though, the more I've let go of it.

Without asking you to give away a surprise, is "The Ocean" a sign of the direction you intend to pursue with this new novel you have almost completed?

I don't know. So far in this book, I'm mostly thinking about bears.



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